# PART 1

## *Jumping In*

# 1

# The Writer as Reader: Reading and Responding

## Learning Objectives

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

- appreciate the link between reading and writing about your reading;
- gather ideas and make inferences about your reading that will help you write about it;
- mark up a text to help you write about it;
- recognize the links between your own interpretation, the writer's purpose, and the responses of your audience; and
- see writing as a collaboration.

Learning to write is in large measure learning to read. The text you must read most carefully is the one you write, an **ESSAY** you will ask someone else to read. It may start as a jotting in the margin of a book you are reading or as a brief note in a journal, and it will go through several drafts before it becomes an essay. To produce something that another person will find worth reading, you yourself must read each draft with care, trying to imagine the effect your words are likely to have on your reader. In writing about literature, you will apply some of the same critical skills to your reading; that is, you will examine your responses to what you are reading and will try to account for them.

Let's begin by looking at a very short story by Gilles Vigneault (1928– ). Vigneault was born in the village of Natashquan on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. He has published two volumes of short-short stories, or as they are sometimes called, "postcard" stories. The title of the first collection is translated by Paul Allard as *Tales on Tiptoe* (Press Porcépic, 1972). The second collection, *Contes du coin de l'oeil* (which means "stories from the corner of the eye") has not yet been translated. This story is translated by Jacqueline de Puthod.

### The Wall
*Gilles Vigneault*

A former mason, sentenced to twenty years' hard labour, was repairing with surprising care the exterior wall of his prison. He was, of course, closely guarded, and although the work was compulsory and under scrupulous surveillance, the taste for perfection he exhibited at it was a source of amazement to passers-by and

even to his two guards. Someone expressed his surprise, and the former mason, without lifting his eyes from his work, replied as if he had expected the question all along. "What pleasure would there be in escaping from a prison that was poorly built?"

Then, before the anxious prison guards who had become more watchful than ever, he went on as though talking to himself: "When you've put your own hand to the making of a wall, it tells you more about human freedom than all the philosophers put together."

This saying spread far and wide until it reached the ears of a monk. The monk came to visit the mason. They talked together at length. And the mason, without disturbing a soul, left the prison by the main gate, wearing a habit and a rope belt.

The prison director, a subtle man though he didn't show it, recently asked a professional burglar to repair a window sash. The work was so well done that one feels something is bound to happen, despite the formal order issued that day forbidding anyone to speak to a prisoner at work.

## READING AS RE-CREATION

If we were Vigneault's fellow Québecois, we would be very familiar with his **POEMS** and his songs, lyrics that made him the most popular *chansonnier* of the vital period of the "quiet revolution" in Québec in the 1960s. Indeed, his song *"Mon pays n'est-ce pas un pays; c'est l'hiver"* ("My country isn't a country; it's the winter") became almost an anthem in Québec during this period. But we are not Vigneault's original readers, and we are reading the story in translation, so inevitably we read "The Wall" in a somewhat different way. This difference gets us to an important point about writing and reading. A writer writes, sets forth his or her **MEANING**, and attempts to guide the reader's responses, as we all do when we write a letter home saying that we are thinking of dropping a course or asking for money or trying to get a commitment. To this extent, the writer creates the written work and puts a meaning in it.

The reader, whether reading as an assignment or for recreation, *re*-creates it according to his or her experience and understanding. For instance, if the letter-writer's appeal for money is indirect, the reader may miss it entirely or may sense it but feel that the need is not urgent. If, on the other hand, the appeal is direct or demanding, the reader may feel irritated or imposed upon, even assaulted. "Oh, but I didn't mean it that way," the writer later protests. Still, that's the way the reader took it. The letter is "out there," between the writer and the reader, but the *meaning* is something the reader, as well as the writer, makes.

Since all readers bring themselves to a written work, they bring something individual. For instance, although many of Vigneault's original readers were familiar with the European folk tradition within which tales of this type fit, and people in Québec were familiar with stories in which monks and priests play a role, they must have varied in their attitudes to the memories and to the iconographic figures that populate this story. For younger Québecois, the story (then as now) seems old-fashioned. The monk who visits the prison is a type, not a real man. But to older readers, the monk might seem like the local parish priest, a man who played an important role in early Québec social

history. Before they read a story like this, many of today's readers do not know anything about the subject. For readers from the Prairies and the Pacific coast, in fact, it may seem to be set in a foreign land. Prisons are imagined from television depictions, and they are much more violent and much less personal than this cozy jail. Inmates are more likely to be seen as gang leaders or violent criminals than as homely philosophers. Moreover, even if a present-day reader in Hamilton, Burnaby, or St. John's knows something of Québec folk history, he or she may assume that "The Wall" depicts a way of life still current; a reader from Québec may see in the work a depiction of a lost way of life, a depiction of the good old days (or perhaps of the bad old days, depending on the reader's **POINT OF VIEW**). Much depends, we can say, on the reader's storehouse of experience.

To repeat: Our reading is a *re*-creation; the author has tried to guide our responses, but inevitably our own experiences, including our ethnic background and our education, contribute to our responses. You may find useful a distinction that E. D. Hirsch makes in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). For Hirsch, the *meaning* in a **TEXT** is the author's intended meaning; the *significance* is the particular relevance for each reader. In this view, when you think about meaning you are thinking about what the author was trying to say and to do—for instance, to take an old **THEME** and treat it in a new way. When you think about significance, you are thinking about what the work does for you—enlarges your mind, offends you by its depiction of women, resonates with **IMAGES** with which you are familiar as a Canadian, or whatever.

## MAKING REASONABLE INFERENCES

If when we read and especially when we talk of significance we are re-creating, is there really no use in talking (or in writing) about literature since all of us perceive it in our relatively private ways, rather like the seven blind men in the **FABLE**? One man, you will recall, touched the elephant's tail (or was it his trunk?) and said that the elephant is like a snake; another touched the elephant's side and said the elephant is like a wall; a third touched the elephant's leg and said the elephant is like a tree; and so on. Notice that each of the blind men *did* perceive an aspect of the elephant—an elephant is massive, like a wall or a tree, and an elephant is (in its way) remarkably supple, as you know if you have given peanuts to one.

As readers, we can and should make an effort to understand what the author seems to be getting at; that is, we should make an effort to understand the words in their context. We shouldn't look up every word we don't know, at least on the first reading, but if certain unfamiliar words are repeated and thus seem especially important, we will probably want to look them up. (And if we are later writing about the text we will need to look up all words that we don't already know.) It happens that in "The Wall" the word *mason* appears: The word names a skilled worker who builds in stone or a related material, like brick or concrete. This word is crucial, but the context probably makes it

clear. Had any reader thought the word referred to a member of the Freemasons' Lodge, for example, he or she would quickly realize that Vigneault is using it in its original meaning. The point is this: The writer is pitching, and he expects the reader to catch. A reader who does not know that a monk's habit (or costume) is traditionally belted with a humble rope, for instance, will miss the subtlety of the escape plan. Although writers tell us a good deal, they do not tell us everything. We know that the prison director is a subtle man, but we don't know exactly what he plans by allowing a burglar to repair a window. Further, Vigneault tells us nothing of the monk's reason for participating in the escape—or whether he does so willingly. It rather *sounds* as though the mason convinces the monk to assist him by his philosophical musings, but readers may disagree. One reader may argue that the monk is impressed by this clever mason and thinks he deserves to be free; another may say that the monk comes to accept a new understanding of freedom and chooses to remain in the prison as a hermit. In short, a text includes **INDETERMINACIES** (passages that careful readers agree are open to various interpretations) and **GAPS** (things left unsaid in the story, such as why the mason is in prison in the first place). As we work our way through a text, we keep re-evaluating what we have read, pulling the details together to make sense of them in a process called **CONSISTENCY BUILDING**.

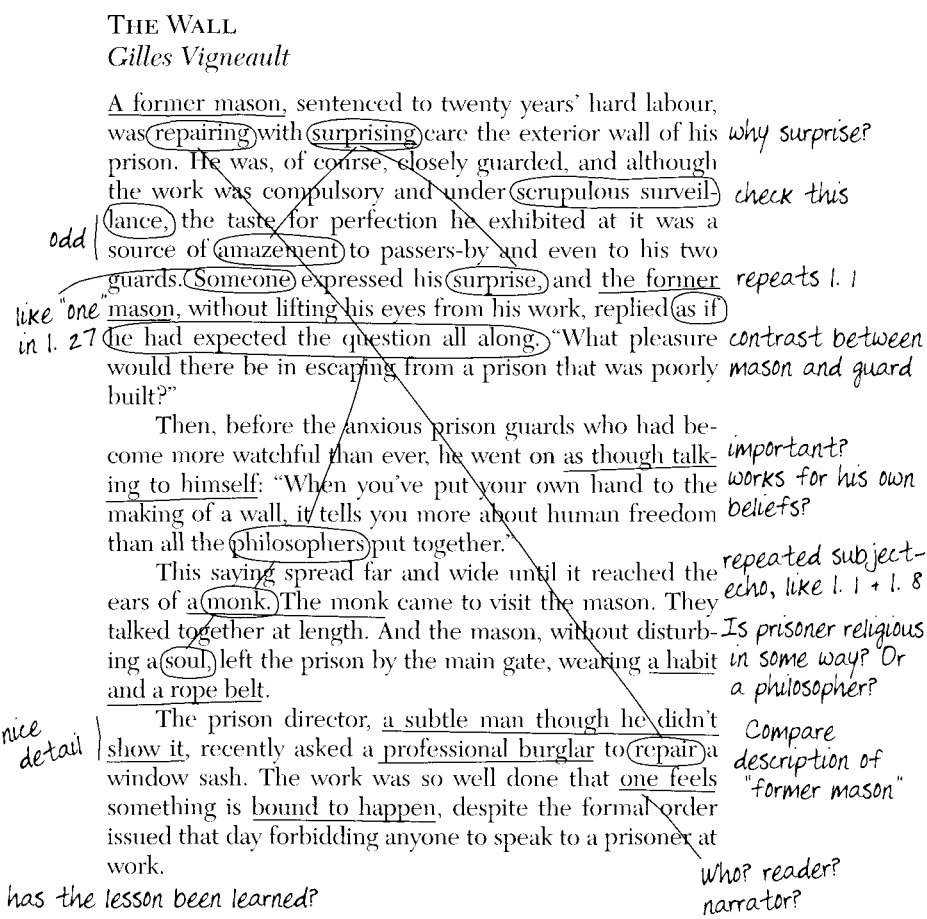
Whatever the gaps, careful readers are able to draw many reasonable inferences about the mason. We can list some of them:

- He works with "surprising care" even though he has been sentenced to twenty years' punishment.
- He has a taste for "perfection."
- He seems to accept a challenge: "what pleasure would there be in escaping" if it is easy?
- Given this last point, he is patient and thorough.
- He is able to see that his own "hand" is involved in his imprisonment and in his freedom and sees this personal truth as more profound than any philosophy.

You may at this point want to go back and reread "The Wall" to see what else you can say about the mason. And now, what of the monk, or the director, or the burglar? At this point you may want to make a list like the one for the mason for each of these **CHARACTERS**.

## READING WITH A PEN IN HAND

Perhaps the best way to read attentively is to mark the text, underlining or highlighting passages that seem especially interesting, and to jot notes or queries in the margins. Here is the work once more, this time with the marks that a student added after a second reading.




## RECORDING YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS

After you annotate your text, another useful way of getting at meanings is to write down your initial responses to the story, jotting down your impressions as they come to you in any order—almost as though you are talking to yourself. Since no one else is going to read your notes, you can be entirely free and at ease. You can write in sentences or not; it's up to you. Write whatever comes into your mind, whatever the story triggers in your own imagination, whatever rings true or reminds you of your own experiences.

Here is the response of the student who annotated the text.

> I like the way the burglar seems to be duplicating the mason's action. And I like the way the prison director seems to know what is going on and tries, on the one

hand, to prevent it by "forbidding anyone to talk to a prisoner at work" but, on the other hand, may cause it to happen again when he "asks" a burglar to work on another escape route. I like the mason's attitude to doing his best work and his idea that success is only sweet if earned. I can see these people even though there is so little personal description. I'd like to meet this mason after he leaves prison and ask him what his "freedom" feels like.

Here is another student's first response to "The Wall."

This is a very short story. I didn't know stories were this short, but I like it because you can get it all quickly and it's no trouble to reread it carefully. The shortness, though, leaves a lot of gaps for the reader to fill in. So much is not said. Your imagination is put to work.

But I can see the mason working at his wall--quietly powerful and precise--no one you would want to argue with. He's formal and distant and asks serious questions. He seems to be building a wall to give himself satisfaction in a job well done, but maybe he's just planning his escape. Maybe he only says these clever things in order to attract the monk to visit, not because he really means them. Maybe he is clever in a different way; he plots to appear philosophical just so he can trap the guards and the monk. Maybe I can develop this idea.

Another thing. I can see that these people are in a prison but it isn't full of serious criminals. It seems more like a small town, or a club. The prisoners are at "hard labour" but they work at their professions. The thief is a "professional burglar," but the mason seems to be more a professional craftsman. This contrast might be important to what the story is saying, or what the prison director is planning. But I don't know enough about this kind of old-fashioned prison to go into this. Their life is different from mine; no one I know is a burglar and no one I know is this patient!

## AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Suppose you are beginning the process of writing about "The Wall" for someone else, not for yourself. The first question to ask yourself is: For whom am I writing? In other words, Who is my *audience*? (Of course, you probably are writing because an instructor has asked you to do so, but you still must imagine an audience. Your instructor may tell you, for instance, to write for your classmates or for the readers of the college newspaper.) If you are writing with people who are familiar with some of Vigneault's other work, you will not have to say much about the author; certainly if you are writing in Québec you won't. If you are writing for an audience that is interested in the tradition of the folk **TALE** in Québec (or comparing it to the strong folkloric tradition of the Maritimes), you may want to mention stories by, say, Jacques Ferron or Roch Carrier.

In a sense, as we said at the outset, the audience is your collaborator; your reader helps you decide what you will say. You are helped also by your sense of *purpose*. If your aim is to introduce readers to Vigneault, you will make certain points. If your aim is to tell people what you think "The Wall" means about freedom, or the human sense of accomplishment, you will say different things. If your aim is to have a little fun and to entertain an audience that is familiar with "The Wall," you may write a **PARODY** (a humorous imitation). If you are working from a particular critical perspective, you will select details that develop that approach.

## A WORD ON DISCOURSE

Writers have always known that audience and purpose are important to the pre-writing process. Today, in Canada, writers are interested in the relationships among audience, purpose, and the style of writing they adopt (even the **GENRE** they employ). Discourse Theory and what is called "The New Rhetoric" argue that the interplay among writer, reader, and style of writing helps to create genres that can then be repeated. Further, these theories suggest that such repetition is part of social process and that genre is part of a complex social construction in which literature (and related forms) play an important role. (See the discussion of **CULTURAL MATERIALISM** in Chapter 5.) These ideas suggest just how important it is to think carefully about who will read your text and why you want to write it.

## A WRITING ASSIGNMENT ON "THE WALL"

### The Assignment

Let's assume that you are trying to describe "The Wall" to someone who has not read it. You probably will briefly summarize the **ACTION,** such as it is, will mention where it takes place and who the characters are (including their

relationships), and what, if anything, happens to them. Beyond that, you will probably try to explain as honestly as you can what makes "The Wall" appealing or interesting or boring or whatever.

Here is an essay that a student wrote for this assignment.

## A Sample Essay

Finding Freedom

Gilles Vigneault's "The Wall" describes an escape from prison. This escape is not a daring breakout, nor is it the real reason Vigneault is writing. Instead, the story asks the reader to consider what freedom really means and how we can become free in ourselves.

A mason is sent to prison; we don't know why. He is set to work by the Warden to build a wall which he does with surprising care because there would be "no pleasure [. . .] in escaping from a prison that was poorly built." He also comments that building a strong wall makes him think about freedom and what it means. These sayings--which seem to define his pride in his craft and also his challenge to the authorities--become famous. A monk visits. We don't know what the men discuss, but the monk either allows the mason to borrow his habit as a disguise, or the mason takes it from him and escapes. Since Vigneault notes that the mason leaves "without disturbing a soul," it seems that the monk agrees to the switch. Later, in a strange decision, the Warden puts a thief to work repairing a window. Is the Warden setting up another escape? Or is he encouraging the "professional burglar" to ponder the nature of freedom and his role in making himself free?

The story is comic, in an understated way, but it asks important questions. The mason committed some crime, so he must accept a role in his own imprisonment. At the same time, he is free within himself even in jail, because he has pride in his own accomplishment. That sense of self-worth seems to convince the monk that the mason deserves to be physically free because he is already psychologically free. Perhaps the monk decides that committing himself to jail will allow him to free himself mentally or spiritually (as hermits tried to do in medieval times). The burglar, in turn, is challenged

to determine whether his pride lies in being a "professional" criminal, or in being sure enough of himself to make good his escape. The Warden is, indeed, a "subtle man."

These are questions which we are forced to ask ourselves because the author gives us so little plot and no real answers. Because so much is left to us to fill in, the reader is invited to face important questions in a very intimate way.

## Other Possibilities for Writing

Of course, one might write a paper of a very different sort. Consider the following possibilities:

1. Write a sequel, describing what happens to the burglar. Or describe the mason's life outside prison.
2. Write a letter from the monk to the mason, or to the prison director.
3. Imagine that the monk is now an old man, writing his memoirs. What does he say about the mason and their secret conversation?
4. Write a narrative based on your own sense of what freedom means and how you have obtained it, or how you hope to become free in your life.
5. Write an expository essay about freedom in another country from which you came to Canada; how is freedom different here?
6. Write an expository essay considering how reading this story and writing about it may make someone rethink his or her own freedom. Will the *act* of writing change this person? (This is an essay related to Discourse Theory.)

## Suggestions for Further Reading

Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (1994), especially Carolyn R. Miller's essays, "Genre as Social Action" (23–42) and "Rhetorical Community: The Cultural Basis of Genre" (67–78) and Richard Coe's essay, "'An Arousing and Fulfilment of Desires': The Rhetoric of Genre in the Process Era—and Beyond" (181–90).

# 2

# *The Reader as Writer: Drafting and Writing*

**Learning Objectives**

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

- use various pre-writing techniques to help you begin to write, in order to find a thesis;
- consider keeping a journal to help you generate ideas, in order to find a thesis;
- understand the concept of thesis and how to write a thesis;
- outline a draft;
- help yourself and your colleagues through peer review; and
- revise your first draft into a more exact and polished essay.

## PRE-WRITING: GETTING IDEAS

How does one "learn to have ideas"? Try reading with a pencil or a set of coloured highlighters in hand so that (as we have already seen) you can annotate the text, or keep a journal in which you jot down reflections about your reading, or talk with others about the reading. Let's take another look at the first method, annotating.

### Annotating a Text

In reading, if you own the book do not hesitate to mark it up, indicating (by highlighting or underlining, or by marginal notes) what puzzles you, what pleases or interests you, and what displeases or bores you. Of course, later you'll want to think further about these responses, asking yourself if, on rereading, you still feel this way, and if not, why not, but these first responses will get you started.

Annotations of the sort given on page 15, which chiefly call attention to contrasts, indicate that the student is thinking about writing some sort of **ANALYSIS** of the story. An analysis is an essay in which the parts are examined to see how they relate to each other or in which a part is examined to see how it relates to the whole. Later on, while rereading, you may be able to annotate more fully. One method is to choose a different colour of marker for

different aspects you notice. Then, when you go back over the text you quickly see repetitions and patterns, and you can quickly find examples.

## More about Getting Ideas: "Marrying the Hangman" by Margaret Atwood

Let's look at a story that is a little longer than "The Wall," and then we'll discuss how, in addition to annotating, one might get ideas for writing about it.

MARRYING THE HANGMAN
*Margaret Atwood*

She has been condemned to death by hanging. A man may escape this death by becoming the hangman, a woman by marrying the hangman. But at the present time there is no hangman; thus there is no escape. There is only a death, indefinitely postponed. This is not fantasy, it is history.

. . .

To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self. She is living selflessly, she finds a hole in the stone wall and on the other side of the wall, a voice. The voice comes through darkness and has no face. This voice becomes her mirror.

. . .

In order to avoid her death, her particular death, with wrung neck and swollen tongue, she must marry the hangman. But there is no hangman, first she must create him, she must persuade this man at the end of the voice, this voice she has never seen and which has never seen her, this darkness, she must persuade him to renounce his face, exchange it for the impersonal mask of death, of official death which has eyes but no mouth, this mask of a dark leper. She must transform his hands so they will be willing to twist the rope around throats that have been singled out as hers was, throats other than hers. She must marry the hangman or no one, but that is not so bad. Who else is there to marry?

. . .

You wonder about her crime. She was condemned to death for stealing clothes from her employer, from the wife of her employer. She wished to make herself more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal.

. . .

She uses her voice like a hand, her voice reaches through the wall, stroking and touching. What could she possibly have said that would convince him? He was not condemned to death, freedom awaited him. What was the temptation, the one that worked? Perhaps he wanted to live with a woman whose life he had saved, who had seen down into the earth but had nevertheless followed him back up to life. It was his only chance to be a hero, to one person at least, for the others would now despise him. He was in prison for wounding another man, on one finger of the right hand, with a sword. This too is history.

My friends, who are both women, tell me their stories, which cannot be believed and which are true. They are horror stories and they have not happened to me, they have not yet happened to me, they have happened to me but we are detached, we watch our unbelief with horror. Such things cannot happen to us, it is afternoon and these things do not happen in the afternoon. The trouble was, she said, I didn't have time to put my glasses on and without

them I'm blind as a bat, I couldn't even see who it was. These things happen and we sit at a table and tell stories about them so we can finally believe. This is not fantasy, it is history, there is more than one hangman and because of this some of them are unemployed.

. . .

He said: the end of walls, the end of ropes, the opening of doors, a field, the wind, a house, the sun, a table, an apple.

She said: nipple, arms, lips, wine, belly, hair, bread, thighs, eyes, eyes.

They both kept their promises.

. . .

The hangman is not such a bad fellow. Afterwards he goes to the refrigerator and cleans up the leftovers, though he does not wipe up what he accidentally spills. He wants only the simple things: a chair, someone to pull off his shoes, someone to watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible, someone in whom to plunge himself for rest and renewal. These things can best be had by marrying a woman who has been condemned to death by other men for wishing to be beautiful. There is a wide choice.

. . .

Everyone said he was a Fool.

Everyone said she was a clever woman.

They used the word *ensnare.*

. . .

What did they say the first time they were alone together in the same room? What did he say when she had removed her veil and he could see that she was not a voice but a body and therefore finite? What did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another? They talked of love, naturally, though that did not keep them busy forever.

The fact is there are no stories I can tell my friends that will make them feel better. History cannot be erased, although we can soothe ourselves by speculating about it. At that time there were no female hangmen. Perhaps there have never been any, and thus no man could save his life by marriage. Though a woman could, according to the law.

. . .

He said: foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife.

She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth, belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood.

They both kept their promises.

"After 29 April 1752, all trace of him and his wife is lost." ("Corolère, Jean," *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography,* Vol. 3).

## Brainstorming for Ideas for Writing

Unlike annotating, which consists of making brief notes and small marks on the printed page, *brainstorming*—the free jotting down of ideas—requires that you jot down whatever comes to mind, without inhibition. Don't worry about spelling, about writing complete sentences, or about unifying your thoughts;

just let one thought lead to another. Later, you will review your jottings, deleting some, connecting with arrows others that are related, amplifying still others. For now, you want to get going, and so there is no reason to look back. Thus, you might jot down something about the title:

> Title--marriage and a hangman. Weird to put the two together.

And then, perhaps prompted by "marriage," you might happen to add something to this effect:

> Is this history true? Could a woman save herself this way? What does that say about the institution of marriage?

Your next jotting might have little or nothing to do with this issue; it might simply say:

> Enjoyed "Marrying" more than "The Wall" partly because "Marrying" is so shocking.

And then you might ask yourself:

> By shocking, do I mean "improbable," or what? Come to think of it, maybe it's not so improbable. A lot depends on what the marriage was like.

## Focused Free Writing

Focused free writing, or directed free writing, is a related method that some writers use to uncover ideas they want to write about. Concentrating on one issue, such as a question that strikes them as worth puzzling over (What kind of person is this woman?), they write at length, non-stop, for perhaps five or ten minutes. They don't pause, or think: they just write.

Writers who find free writing helpful put down everything that has bearing on the one issue or question they are examining. They do not stop at this stage to evaluate the results, and they do not worry about grammar or spelling. They just explore ideas in a steady stream of writing, using whatever associations come to mind. (Fiction is sometimes written in **STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS**, but this is not, as it may appear, free writing. An author has carefully crafted the work to resemble spontaneous association.)

After the free-writing session, these writers usually go back and reread what they have written, highlighting or underlining what seems to be of value. Of course, they find much that is of little or no use, but they also usually find that some strong ideas have surfaced and have received some development. At this point, the writers are often able to make a scratch outline and then begin a draft. Some writers look for a central idea in what they've written, repeat it as the first sentence of a new paragraph, and then free write again. This is called "looping," and it sometimes helps to refine general ideas down into specific ones that lead to an essay.

Here is an example of one student's focused free writing:

What do I know about the woman prisoner? What can I figure out from what Atwood tells me? When she finds herself in prison she has no mirror. This woman was "condemned to death for stealing clothes," for wanting to be beautiful. So she talks to the voice through the wall and he becomes her mirror. Is that good? She perceives that she has to "create" a hangman in order to marry him in order to escape her "particular death" which she describes as pretty gruesome. To do so is to surrender her power to him even though she's created him in some way. So it's a power issue but it's also a feminist one. When she makes him she must accept him sexually and watch him "with admiration and fear." A woman has to accept these things from a man if she needs him for his power or if she can only "see" herself in a mirror that is him. Why can't she see herself for herself? To do so would mean she was hanged. Is this the connection with the narrator's friends and their stories? I wonder what these friends are telling. They are horror stories. Are they about having no power? Are these women talking together?

## Listing

In your preliminary thinking, you may find it useful to make lists. In the previous chapter, we saw that listing the traits of characters was helpful in thinking about Vigneault's "The Wall." For "Marrying," you might list the woman's traits, or you might list the stages in her story. (Such a list is not the same as a summary of the **PLOT**. The list helps the writer see the sequence of psychological changes.)

She is living "selflessly" ("condemned to death"
  "indefinitely postponed")
lives alone--comes to use voice as mirror
"Who else is there to marry?"
"She uses her voice like a hand [. . .] stroking and
  touching."
He says words that signal freedom and domestic life
She says words that signal sexuality and domestic life
"They both kept their promises"
" [. . .] she had left one locked room for another"
"History cannot be erased"

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His words change to words of domination and pain--"fist,
  boot, knife"
Her words describe woman's concerns and cycles--"water,
  open, blood"
No trace of them exists--she disappears into a
  historical note.
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Of course, unlike brainstorming and annotating, which let you go in all directions, listing requires that you first make a decision about what you will be listing—traits of character, images, puns, or whatever. Once you make the decision, you can then construct the list, and, with a list in front of you, you will probably see patterns that you were not fully conscious of earlier.

## Asking Questions

If you feel stuck, ask yourself questions. (You'll recall that the assignment on "The Wall" asked you to ask yourself questions about the work—for instance, a question about the relationship between the characters—and about your responses to it: "You will probably try to explain as honestly as you can what makes 'The Wall' appealing or interesting or boring or whatever.")

If you are thinking about a work of **FICTION**, ask yourself questions about the plot, any **SUBPLOT**, and the characters: Are they believable? Are they interesting? What does it all add up to? What does the story mean *to you?* (The chapters on the ESSAY, FICTION, **DRAMA**, **POETRY**, and **FILM** include questions on each form.) One student found it helpful to jot down the following questions:

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Plot
  Ending satisfying?  What is the relationship of the
  stories of the friends to the history?
Character
  Is the woman unfeeling?  Immoral?
  Is she a "clever woman?"  Does she "ensnare?"
  What might her marriage have been like?  No details.
  (Can we tell what her husband was like?)
  And yet they "both kept their promises"
Symbolism
  Cut with stories from present day.  Do the words from
  the historical relationship suggest something to the
  women telling their contemporary "horror" stories?
```

You don't have to be as tidy as this student is. You may begin by jotting down notes and queries about what you like or dislike and about what puzzles or amuses you. What follows are the jottings of another student, Amy Wong. They are, obviously, in no particular order—the student is brainstorming, putting down whatever occurs to her—though it is equally obvious that one note sometimes led to the next:

Title sums up the whole story. Too much? What might be a better title?
Could a woman be so calculating?
Is she heartless? Did she love him?
Why does he agree to her plan?
Why wasn't she allowed to be beautiful? Because she was a servant?
Are all women servants?
Could this story happen today? Feminist interpretation?
Tricky ending--but maybe it shouldn't end with realistic details.
What happens when couples stop talking about love--"that did not keep them busy forever"?
Irony: her imprisonment repeats itself. She trades one "locked room" for another.

These jottings will help the reader-writer think about the story, find a special point of interest, and develop a thoughtful argument about it.

## Keeping a Journal

A journal is not a diary, a record of what the writer did during the day ("today I read Atwood's 'Marrying.' Weather damp."). Rather, a journal is a place to store some of the thoughts you may have inscribed on a scrap of paper or in the margin of the text, such as your initial response to the title of a work or to the ending. It is also a place to jot down further reflections, such as thoughts about what the work means to you, and what was said in the classroom about writing in general or specific works.

You will get something out of your journal if you write an entry at least once a week, but you will get much more if you write entries after reading each assignment and after each class meeting. You may, for instance, want to reflect on why your opinion is so different from that of another student, or you may want to apply a concept such as CHARACTER or **IRONY** or "plausibility" to a story that you may later write about in an essay. Comparisons are especially helpful: How does this work (or this character, or this **RHYME** scheme) differ from last week's reading?

You might even make an entry in the form of a letter to the author or from one character to another. You might write a dialogue between characters in two works or between two authors, or you might record an experience of your own that is comparable to something in the work.

A student who wrote about "Marrying the Hangman" began with the following entry in his journal. In reading this entry, notice that one idea stimulates another. The student was, quite rightly, concerned with getting and exploring ideas, not with writing a unified paragraph.

Seems clever rather than real, not plausible. The woman's decision is so businesslike--maybe some women might respond like this, but probably not most.

Does literature deal with unusual people, or with typical people? Shouldn't it deal with typical? Maybe not. (Anyway, how can I know?) Is "typical" same as "plausible"? prob. not.

Anyway, whether this woman is typical or not, could she talk the guy into becoming a hangman? Think more about this.

Husband dominated her life but he wanted a decent life and he "is not such a bad fellow." Is it a crime to want a partner to admire you? I guess he just couldn't see how he denied her a private space. Do men allow women space today? Is this why the friends have horror stories to tell?

## Critical Thinking: Arguing with Yourself

In our discussion of annotating, brainstorming, free writing, listing, asking questions, and writing entries in a journal, the emphasis has been on responding freely rather than in any highly systematic or disciplined way. Something strikes you (perhaps an idea, perhaps an uncertainty), and you jot it down. Maybe even before you finish jotting it down you begin to question it, but probably not; at this early stage it is enough to put down on paper some thoughts, rooted in your first responses, and to keep going on.

The almost random play of mind that is evident in brainstorming and in the other activities already discussed is of course a kind of thinking, but the term **CRITICAL THINKING** is reserved for something different. When you think critically, you sceptically scrutinize your own ideas, for example by searching out your underlying assumptions, or by evaluating what you have quickly jotted down as evidence. We have already seen some examples of this sort of analysis of our own thinking in the journal entries, where, for instance, a student wrote that literature should probably deal with "typical" people, and then wondered if "typical" and "plausible" were the same, and then added "prob[ably] not."

Speaking broadly, critical thinking is rational, logical thinking. In thinking critically,

- you scrutinize your assumptions, and
- you test the evidence you have collected, even to the extent of looking for counterevidence.

Let's start with assumptions. If, for instance, I say that a story is weak because it is improbable, I ought at least to think about my assumption that improbability is a fault. I can begin by asking myself if all good stories—or all of the stories that I value highly—are probable. I may recall that among my favourites is *Star Wars* (or *Gulliver's Travels* or *Animal Farm*)—and so I probably have to withdraw my assumption that improbability in itself makes a story less than good. I may of course go on to refine the idea, and decide that improbability is not a fault in science fiction, or in satiric stories, but is a fault

in other kinds, but that is not the same as saying bluntly that improbability is a fault.

The other aspect of critical thinking that we have isolated—searching for counterevidence within the literary work—especially involves rereading the work to see if we have overlooked material or have taken a particular detail out of context. If, for instance, we say that in "Marrying the Hangman" the condemned woman talks the man into marrying her, can we be sure he didn't want a domestic life himself all along? Or a job, even if it was as hangman? Perhaps the original observation will stand up, but perhaps on rereading the story we may come to feel, as we examine their actions and words, that both characters are unconsciously living out roles already prepared for them by "the law."

Of course, different readers may come to different conclusions; the important thing is that all readers should subject their initial responses to critical thinking, testing their responses against all of the evidence. ***Remember:*** your instructor probably expects you to hand in an essay that is essentially an *argument*, a paper that advances a **THESIS** of your own. The thesis might be that the story is improbable, or is typical of Atwood, or uses history to illustrate contemporary feminist thinking. Whatever your thesis, it should be able to withstand scrutiny. You may not convince every reader that you are unquestionably right, but you should make every reader feel that your argument is thoughtful. If you read your notes and then your drafts critically, you probably will write a paper that meets this standard.

Just as your first jottings probably won't be the products of critical thinking, your first reading of the literary work probably won't be a critical reading. It is entirely appropriate to begin by reading simply for enjoyment. After all, the reason we read literature (or, for example, listen to music) is to derive pleasure. It happens, however, that in this course you are trying to deepen your understanding of literature, and therefore you are *studying* literature. On subsequent readings, therefore, you will read the work critically, taking careful note of (for instance) the writer's view of human nature, and of the writer's ways of achieving certain effects.

We will discuss critical thinking again, on pages 83–84, in talking about interpretations of literature.

## Arriving at a Thesis, and Arguing It

If you think critically about your early jottings and about the literary work itself, you probably will find that some of your jottings lead to dead ends, but some will lead to further ideas that hold up under scrutiny. What the THESIS of the essay will be—the idea that will be asserted and developed or argued (supported with evidence)—is still in doubt, but there is no doubt about one thing: A good essay will have a thesis, a point, an argument. You ought to be able to state your point in a **THESIS SENTENCE**. Note that a thesis is a *full sentence*, not simply a subject waiting for a verb to complete it. When you have thought out the verb or verbs you need, you will have determined what you want to develop. It is the process of creating a full and accurate thesis sentence that helps you organize the whole essay in your mind.

Consider these candidates as possible thesis sentences:

1. The condemned woman convinces a man to marry her in order to live.

True, but scarcely a point that can be argued or even developed. About the most the essayist can do with this sentence is amplify it by summarizing the plot of the story, a task not worth doing unless the plot is unusually obscure. An essay may include a sentence or two of **SUMMARY** to give readers their bearings, but a summary is not an essay.

2. The shift from history to the present makes the story universal.

Here is a thesis. The writer will probably suggest that the sketchy details of the historical story illustrate the kinds of emotions and actions that govern men and women and that these can, therefore, serve as examples for the troubles of the modern women telling their "horror" stories.

3. The story is clever but contrived because it is based on an unreal character.

Here, too, is a thesis, a point of view that can be argued. Whether this thesis is true is another matter. The writer's job will be to support it by presenting evidence. Probably the writer will have no difficulty in finding evidence that the story is "clever"; the difficulty probably will be in establishing a case that the **CHARACTERIZATION** of the condemned woman is "unreal." The writer will have to set forth some ideas about what makes a character real and then will have to show that the woman is an "unreal" (unbelievable) figure. And the writer will have to deal with the historical footnote telling us that a woman like this one actually did live, though we don't know details of her biography. (See glossary entries for **ROUND** and **FLAT CHARACTERS**.)

4. The lack of detail of the ending is believable partly because it is a story about all women, not just this historical figure.

It happens that the student who wrote the essay printed on pages 23–24 began by drafting an essay based on the third of these thesis topics, but as she worked on a draft she found that she could not support her assertion that the character was unconvincing. In fact, she came to believe that the woman summed up very believable characteristics of many women. So she shifted to the second thesis topic.

In creating a final thesis, it is a good idea to remember the suggestion by the psychologist and educator, Jean Piaget, that a good thesis should have *resonance* or *dissonance* within it. That is, one part should establish a given against which the other part acts. Often this can be well expressed by using a thesis in the form "Although *a*, then *b*," or "Despite *a*, *b* [ . . . ]," (dissonance), or "Given *a*, then *b*," or "Because of *a*, *b* [ . . . ] (resonance).

Numbers 3 and 4 use the form "*a* because *b*," which is another version of the suggested model. Here are some examples. Notice that these put the topics into specific, thesis form:

> "Although the condemned woman in Margaret Atwood's 'Marrying the Hangman' convinces a man to marry her in order to live, she trades one prison for another."

"Although the woman in Margaret Atwood's 'Marrying the Hangman' seems unreal, the dilemma in which she finds herself is real for many women."

"Because men and women have been taught how to act out their lives, they trap one another in emotional and legal prisons."

"Despite the changes to women's legal status since 1752, the plight of the historical figure in Margaret Atwood's 'Marrying the Hangman' is real for women today."

***Remember:*** Your thesis needn't slavishly follow this exact formula; these examples show models of an approach to writing a good, dynamic thesis.

***Remember:*** It's not likely that you will quickly find a thesis. Annotating, making entries in a journal, and writing a first draft are *ways of finding* a thesis.

## WRITING A DRAFT

After jotting down notes, and further notes stimulated by rereading and further thinking, you probably will be able to formulate a tentative thesis. At this point, most writers find it useful to clear the air by glancing over their preliminary notes and by jotting down the thesis and a few especially promising notes—brief statements of what they think their key points may be, such as key quotations that may help support the thesis.

Here are the selected notes (not the original brainstorming notes, but a later selection from them, with additions) and a draft that makes use of them:

```
title?  Prison for Women (?)  Ironical Freedom (?)
  Ironies for Women (?)
thesis: although the woman escapes hanging, ironically
  she continues a life in prison
chief irony: woman can only get out by marrying and
  being subservient to a man
other ironies:
     1. desire "to make herself more beautiful" is her
        crime and is needed to capture him
     2. woman can only "see" herself in him as a mirror
     3. modern women hearing story are also trapped
```

These notes are in effect a very brief *outline.* Some writers at this point like to develop a fuller outline, but probably most writers begin with only a brief outline, knowing that in the process of developing a draft from these few notes additional ideas will arise. For these writers, the time to jot down a detailed outline is *after* they have written a first or second draft. The outline of the written draft will, as we shall see, help them to make sure that their draft has an adequate organization, and that main points are developed.

## A Sample Draft: "Ironies for Women"

Now for the student's draft—not the first version, but a revised draft with some of the irrelevancies of the first draft omitted and some evidence added.

The digits within the parentheses refer to the page numbers from which the quotations are drawn, though when writing about a short work page references are hardly necessary. Check with your instructor to find out if you must always give citations. (Detailed information about how to **DOCUMENT** a paper is given in Chapter 15.)

Ironies for Women

After we know how Margaret Atwood's short story, "Marrying the Hangman," turns out, we find irony at the very start. The story is about a woman who has been condemned to hang because she stole some clothes, because she "wanted to make herself more beautiful" (50). She can only escape by marrying a hangman. So she must first convince a man in the next cell to become the hangman. Then he has to marry her. She does convince him and she is released from prison.

An irony is that she discovers immediately that she has "left one locked room for another" (52). She is now his wife and she must obey him and keep his house. And she discovers that love "did not keep them busy forever" (52). Although he "is not such a bad fellow," and wants only a simple life, he also wants her to "watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible" (51).

A deeper irony is the fact that the woman's crime was wanting to be beautiful. Being beautiful was how she knew herself. It is ironic that she is condemned by the very things that made her clever enough to convince the man and to seduce him. Also, she has to give up her image of herself. She can no longer see her own beauty. She uses him as a mirror. In the prison she uses his voice through a hole in the wall to mirror back to her a sense of her identity. But when she is free, she must continue to use him as her mirror. If she resists, his words become harsh: "foot, boot," "fist," "knife" (52). This is her real imprisonment.

The saddest irony in the story is the outer story. Some friends tell the narrator stories about abuse. If we are right that one speaker has been raped, it is horrible that she didn't have "time to put my glasses

on" (50) so she couldn't see her attacker. She is like the woman speaking through the hole in the wall who was unable to see the man she had to marry. Atwood tells this ironic historical anecdote to point out the similarity to the contemporary women's lives. "These things happen" (51), she says. The irony is that history repeats itself.

Work Cited

Atwood, Margaret. "Marrying the Hangman." Two-Headed Poems. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1978.

## Revising a Draft

The draft is not yet a finished essay. The student went on to improve it in many small but important ways. First, the draft needs a good paragraph that will let the *audience*—the readers—know where the writer will be taking them. (Chapter 14 discusses introductory paragraphs.) Doubtless you know, from your own experience as a reader, that readers can follow an argument more easily and with more pleasure if early in the discussion the writer alerts them to the gist of the argument. (The title, too, can strongly suggest the thesis.) Second, some of the paragraphs could be clearer.

In revising paragraphs—or, for that matter, in revising an entire draft—writers unify, organize, clarify, and polish. Writers are assisted in revising if they imagine that they are readers. It helps to read the draft aloud. They try to put themselves into the mind of the imagined audience, asking themselves, "Is this clear?" "Will a reader need another example?" Or, on the other hand, "Will a reader feel that I am talking down, giving more examples than are needed?"

1. **UNITY** is achieved partly by eliminating irrelevancies. Notice that in the final version, the writer has deleted "an unnecessary transition in the story."
2. ORGANIZATION is a matter of arranging material into a **SEQUENCE** that will help the reader grasp the point.
3. CLARITY is achieved largely by providing concrete details and quotations to support generalizations and by providing helpful **TRANSITIONS** ("for instance," "furthermore," "on the other hand," "however").
4. POLISHING is small-scale revision. For instance, you should delete unnecessary repetitions. Similarly, in polishing, combine choppy sentences into longer sentences and break overly long sentences into shorter sentences. (In the third paragraph of the draft, many short sentences repeat the pronoun "she" and the idea of being beautiful. In the final draft, these are combined; secondary thoughts are made subordinate to major thoughts.)

Later, after producing a draft that seems close to a finished essay, writers engage in yet another activity. They edit.

5. EDITING is concerned with such matters as checking the accuracy of quotations by comparing them with the original, checking a dictionary for

accurate spelling, and consulting a grammar handbook for correct punctuation—for instance, whether a comma or a semicolon is needed in a particular sentence.

## Outlining a Draft

Whether or not you draw up an outline as a preliminary guide *to writing a draft*, you will be able to improve your draft if you prepare an outline *of what you have written*. For each paragraph in your draft, jot down the gist of the TOPIC SENTENCE or **TOPIC** idea, and under each of these sentences, indented, jot down key words for the idea(s) developed in the paragraph. Thus, to create an outline of the first two paragraphs of the draft we have just looked at you might make these jottings:

```
story ironic from start
```

- `woman wanted to be beautiful`
- `must convince man in the next cell to marry her to escape hanging`

```
central irony
```

- `she is still in prison of marriage`
- `love can't last forever`
- `he wants her to be grateful and to serve him`

An outline of what you have written will help you to see if your draft is adequate in three important ways. The outline will show you

1. the sequence of major topics
2. the degree of development of these topics
3. the argument, the thesis

By studying your outline you may see (for instance) that your first major point (probably after an introductory paragraph) would be more effective as your third point, and that your second point needs to be developed further.

An outline of this sort is essentially a brief version of your draft, perhaps even using some phrases from the draft. But consider making yet another sort of outline, an outline indicating not what each paragraph says but what each paragraph *does*. An attempt at such an outline of the four-paragraph draft of the essay on "Marrying" might look like something like this:

1. she must escape by convincing the man to marry her
2. explains "central irony"
3. relates this irony to "deeper irony" of her wanting to be beautiful
4. shows "saddest irony" that modern women can share same prison

You ought to see a red flag here. The aim of this sort of outline is to indicate what each paragraph *does*, but the jotting for the first paragraph does not tell us what the paragraph does; rather, it more or less summarizes the content of the paragraph. Why? Because the paragraph does not *do* much of anything. Certainly it does not (for example) clearly introduce the thesis, or

define a crucial term, or set the story in the context of Atwood's other work. An outline indicating the function of each paragraph will force you to see if your essay has an effective **STRUCTURE**. We will see that the student later wrote a new opening paragraph for the essay.

## Peer Review

Your instructor may encourage (or even require) you to discuss your draft with another student or with a small group of students; that is, you may be asked to get a review from your peers. Such a procedure is helpful in several ways. First, it gives the writer a real audience, readers who can point to what pleases or puzzles them, who make suggestions, who may disagree (with the writer or with each other), and who frequently, though not intentionally, *misread*. Though writers don't necessarily like everything they hear (they seldom hear "This is perfect. Don't change a word!"), reading and discussing their work with others almost always gives them a fresh perspective on their work, and a fresh perspective may stimulate thoughtful revision. (Having your intentions *misread* because your writing isn't clear enough can be particularly stimulating.)

The writer whose work is being reviewed is not the sole beneficiary. When students regularly serve as readers for each other, they become better readers of their own work and consequently better revisers. As we stated in Chapter 1, learning to write is in large measure learning to read.

If peer review is a part of the writing process in your course, the instructor may distribute a sheet with some suggestions and questions. An example of such a sheet is shown on page 27.

## Final Checks

After you have revised the draft in response to comments by your reviewer, print it out or read it very carefully on the screen. Read with a critical eye: you will probably find that you can improve even this version. Even at this late date you may think of a better title, or you may sense that a quotation doesn't sound quite right, or you might catch a grammar error. You can make small changes by hand, in ink, but if you make a substantial number of changes, print out a clean copy. (Don't worry too much about making the final paper "pretty." It is important that it look professional, but a few hand-written corrections are better than an inaccurate paper. Your instructor is looking for good thought and good writing, not a "neat" paper.)

You may get some help from the computer even at this last stage: use the spelling and grammar checkers. Word processors alert you to **CLICHÉS,** split infinitives, overuse of the passive voice, troublesome pairs of words (like *affect/effect*), certain kinds of grammatical errors, and words and phrases that are potentially sexist. But be careful: Computers are not yet good at understanding language, and you must know the grammar yourself to evaluate suggestions made by the computer. (This can be particularly troublesome for ESL students, who often make more mistakes by misunderstanding the grammar checker than by trusting their own ability.)

QUESTIONS FOR PEER REVIEW

Read each draft once, quickly. Then read it again, with the following questions in mind.

1. What is the essay's topic? Is it one of the assigned topics, or a variation from it? Does the draft show promise of fulfilling the assignment?
2. Looking at the essay as a whole, what thesis is stated or implied? If implied, try to state it in your own words. Should it be clearly stated at the outset?
3. Is the thesis reasonable? How might it be strengthened?
4. Looking at each paragraph separately:
   a. What is the basic point? (If it isn't clear to you, ask for clarification.)
   b. How does the paragraph relate to the essay's main idea or to the previous paragraph?
   c. Should some paragraphs be deleted? Be divided into two or more paragraphs? Be combined? Be put elsewhere? (If you outline the essay by jotting down the gist of each paragraph, you will get help in answering these questions.)
   d. Is each sentence clearly related to the sentence that precedes and to the sentence that follows?
   e. Is each paragraph adequately developed?
   f. Are there sufficient details, perhaps brief supporting quotations from the text?
5. What are the paper's chief strengths?
6. Make at least two specific suggestions that you think will help the author to improve the paper.

***Remember:*** Set your spell checker to "English (Canadian)" or "English (United Kingdom)." Do not leave the default setting of "English (United States)."

***Remember:*** Machines break down, so you need to allow time before your deadline for possible computer and printer glitches.

## THE FINAL VERSION

Here is the final version of the student's essay. The essay that was submitted to the instructor was typed, but here, so that you can easily see how the draft has been revised, we print the draft with the final changes written in by hand.

History Repeats Itself
~~Ironies for Women~~

A rereading of Margaret Atwood's short story, "Marrying the Hangman," reveals layers of irony. The story is about a woman who has been condemned to hang because she stole some clothes, because she wanted to make herself more beautiful (13). She can only escape by marrying a hangman and she must first convince a man in the next cell to become the hangman, then to marry her. She does convince him, by promising him sexual favours ("nipple," "belly," "thighs") (14). She is released from prison. Although the woman escapes hanging, ironically she continues to live in prison and so, it seems, do many women today.

After we know how Margaret Atwood's story, "Marrying the Hangman," turns out, we find irony at the very start. The story is about a woman who has been condemned to hang because she stole some clothes, because she "wanted to make herself more beautiful" (13). She can only escape by marrying a hangman. So she must first convince a man in the next cell to become the hangman. Then he has to marry her. She does convince him and she is released from prison.

"Everyone said she was a clever woman," but by clever everyone meant manipulative or sneaky: "They used the word ensnare" (14). It is ironic that she is condemned by the very things that made her clever enough to convince the man and to seduce him.

The central irony
~~An irony~~ is that she discovers immediately that she has "left one locked room for another" (14). She is now a wife who must obey her husband ~~his wife and she must obey him~~ and keep his house. And she discovers that love "did not keep them busy forever" (14). Although he "is not such a bad fellow," and wants only a simple life, he also wants her to "watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible" (14).

A deeper irony, perhaps, is the fact that the woman's crime was wanting to be beautiful. Atwood suggests that her desire for beauty was a way for her to know herself, to give herself worth.

~~Being beautiful was how she knew herself.~~ Now, ~~Also,~~ she has to give up her image of herself. She can no longer see her own beauty, but must use her husband ~~She uses him~~ as a mirror. In the prison she uses his voice through a hole in the wall to mirror back to her a sense of her identity. But when she is free, she must see herself through him. continue to ~~use him as her mirror~~. If she resists, his words become harsh: "foot, boot," "fist," "knife" (14). This is her real imprisonment.

The saddest irony ~~in the story~~ is in the outer story. The women who are telling the narrator horror stories are also ~~Some friends tell the narrator stories about abuse.~~ afraid, and also can't see themselves properly. If we are right that one speaker has been raped, it is horrible that she didn't have "time to put my glasses on" so she couldn't see her attacker. In some ways, s She is like the woman speaking through the hole in the wall who was unable to see the man to whom she had to give herself. ~~she had to marry.~~ Atwood tells this ironic historical anecdote to point out the similarity to the lives of contemporary women ~~the contemporary women's lives~~. "These things happen" she says (13). The irony is that history repeats itself.

Work Cited

Atwood, Margaret. "Marrying the Hangman." Two-Headed Poems. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1978.

## A Brief Overview of the Final Version

Finally, as a quick review, let us look at several principles illustrated by this essay.

- The *title of the essay* is not merely the title of the work discussed; rather, it gives the reader a clue, a small idea of the essayist's topic. Because your title will create a crucial first impression, make sure that it is interesting.
- The *opening or introductory paragraph* does not begin by saying "In this story [ . . . ]." Rather, by naming the author and the title it lets the reader know exactly what story is being discussed. It also develops the writer's thesis so that readers know where they will be going.
- The *organization* is effective. The more obvious irony is discussed and then the deeper irony and then the more subtle connection to modern women. The essay does not dwindle but builds up. (Again, if you outline your draft you will see whether it has an effective organization.)
- Some *brief quotations* are used, both to provide evidence and to let the reader hear—even if only fleetingly—Margaret Atwood's writing.
- The essay is chiefly *devoted to analysis, not to summary*. The writer, properly assuming that the reader has read the work, does not tell the plot in great detail. But, aware that the reader has not memorized the story, the writer gives helpful reminders.
- The *present tense* is used in narrating the ACTION: "She does convince him"; "Atwood tells this historical anecdote [ . . . ]."
- Although a *concluding paragraph* is often useful—if it does more than merely summarize what has already been clearly said—it is not essential in a short analysis. In this essay, the last sentence explains the chief irony and, therefore, makes an acceptable ending.
- *Documentation* is given according to the form set forth in Chapter 15.
- There are no typographical errors. The author has *proofread* the paper carefully.

# 3

# *Two Forms of Criticism: Explication and Analysis*

**Learning Objectives**

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

- explicate a text;
- analyze a text;
- compare or contrast two aspects of a text;
- organize evidence as you plan your essay; and
- plan, draft, revise, and edit your essay.

## EXPLICATION

A line-by-line or episode-by-episode commentary on what is going on in a text is an **EXPLICATION** (literally, unfolding or spreading out). It takes some skill to work one's way along without saying, "In line one [ . . . ] in the second line [ . . . ]; in the third line [ . . . ]." One must sometimes boldly say something like, "The next stanza begins with [ . . . ] and then introduces [ . . . ]." And, of course, one can discuss the second line before the first line if that seems to be the best way of handling the passage.

An explication does not deal with the writer's life or times, and it is not a **PARAPHRASE**, a rewording—though it may include paraphrase. Rather, it is a commentary revealing your sense of the meaning of the work. To this end it calls attention, as it proceeds, to the implications of words, the function of rhymes, the shifts in point of view, the development of contrasts, and any other contributions to the meaning.

### A Sample Explication: George Bowering's "Forget"

The following short poem is by George Bowering (1935– ), who was born in Penticton, BC and was educated at the University of British Columbia. At UBC he was one of the editors of *Tish*, an influential poetry magazine that published a group of writers influenced by the Black Mountain poetry of Charles Olsen and others. Bowering has taught or been writer-in-residence at a number of Canadian universities. He appears regularly on television and radio.

FORGET

We forget those
apartment blocks
were made step-
by-step by
human hands.

The glue on this
envelope too
it tastes like
a pear.

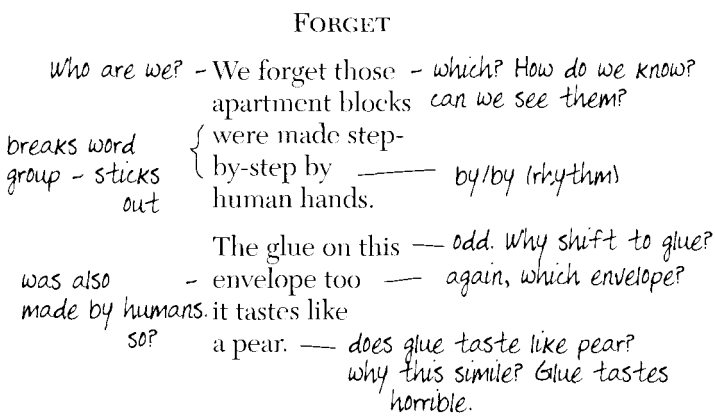
Different readers will respond at least somewhat differently to any particular work. On the other hand, since writers want to communicate, they try to control their readers' responses, and they count on their readers to understand the denotations of words as they understand them. Thus, Bowering assumes that his readers know what large apartment buildings look like, even if they don't know Vancouver's West End, about which he may be writing. Explication is based on the assumption that the poem contains a meaning and that by studying the work thoughtfully we can unfold the meaning or meanings. (This opinion—which has been disputed—will be brought up again at the end of this discussion of explication.)

Let us assume that the reader understands that Bowering is talking about bland or ugly apartment buildings in large cities, and that we forget that real people designed and built them even though they look so impersonal. But Bowering does not say "did not know," he says "forget," and when he shifts to an image of the envelope, he uses the word "glue." You might ask yourself exactly what differences there are between the ideas of ignorance and of forgetting, or what the word *glue* implies. Next, after you have read the poem several times, you might think about which expressions are better in the context, and why.

## Working toward an Explication of "Forget"

In preparing to write an explication, type or write by hand the complete text of the work—usually a poem but sometimes a short passage of prose—that you will explicate. Don't photocopy it; the act of typing or writing it will help you to get into the piece, word by word, comma by comma. Type or write it *double-spaced*, so that you will have plenty of room for annotations as you study the piece. It's advisable to print a few copies (or make a few photocopies) before you start annotating, so that if one page gets too cluttered you can continue working on a clean copy. Or you may want to use one copy for a certain kind of annotations—let's say those concerning imagery—and other copies for other kinds of notes—let's say those concerning metre, or wordplay. If you are writing on a word processor, you can highlight words, boldface them, put them in capitals, and so forth.

Let's turn to an explication of the poem, a detailed examination of the whole. Here are the preliminary jottings.




These annotations chiefly get at the structure of the poem, the relationship of the parts. The student notices that the poem speaks from the point of view of "we" and wonders who "we" is, and he also wonders which apartments and which envelope is being discussed. Further, he indicates that the making "step-by-step" is emphasized by breaking up the lines. He questions how glue tastes and asks if the "pear" taste means something important.

## Some Journal Entries

The student who made these annotations later wrote an entry in his journal:

> Feb. 18. Since the title is "Forget," it's obvious that something that was once known is no longer realized. Also, obvious that Bowering thinks it important that stuff is made by "human hand." I think the glue thing is weird (maybe because I like pears). What's the relationship between an apartment building and glue and a pear. Seem totally different things to me.
>
> Feb. 21. Prof. McCabe said to think of structure or form of a poem as a sort of architecture, a building with a foundation, floors, etc., topped by a roof--but since we read a poem from top to bottom, it's like a building upside down. Title is foundation (even though it's at top); last line is roof, capping the whole. As you read, you add layers. Foundation of poem is the idea of forgetting, or the command "to forget." Then,

set back a bit from foundation, a tall room (5 lines high); then, on top of this room, built on white space, another room (4 lines, two statements). Funny; I thought that in poems all stanzas are the same number of lines. Then final cap is the unexpected pear taste.

Feb. 21, pm. I get it; one kind of made thing at start, another in the middle, natural thing at end; so the contrast with natural things, which taste good, like pears, and man-made things which seem ugly or impersonal or taste horrible, like glue. But what we shouldn't forget is that even functional, impersonal looking things are also made and someone cares, someone designed the apartment or dreamed up the glue recipe and took the trouble to put fake pear taste in it.

Feb 22 am. Thinking about the making of medieval cathedrals we discussed in History. Those guys made things step-by-step over generations. We seem to remember their careful, hard work. Don't we pause to think of modern workpeople? Don't we notice small things? What I don't understand is the title. Is it a comment that we forget or a command to forget? Why would Bowering tell us to forget when the poem seems to be asking us to remember, to notice. I'm going to have to assume it means we forget but we shouldn't.

Drawing chiefly on these notes, the student jotted down some key ideas to guide him through a draft of an analysis of the poem. (The organization of the draft posed no problem; the student simply followed the organization of the poem.)

9 lines; short, but powerful; elusive
Order or comment that we forget
examples of what we forget
pause to realize that buildings are made step-by-step
emphasis on the slow process of building
emphasis on HUMAN hands
white space draws attention to shift to a new application of the idea
Again, "this" suggests we can see the object
use of pear taste: artificial? natural taste worth noticing in made object?

## The Final Draft

Here is the final essay:

George Bowering's "Forget"

"Forget" is a poem that is only nine lines long, but it has power because it draws clear pictures of particular objects. It makes us look at them from a new perspective. It shows close attention to detail. It makes directive comments on the man-made objects it names, but the purpose of the poem seems not only to describe things. Instead, it challenges the reader's own ability to see connections and asks the reader if he or she realizes the human element in what is manufactured around us. The poem starts out by describing an apartment building. In urban centres, such buildings are often ugly. They are almost always impersonal and cold. We live in cities full of such buildings and we learn to ignore them, to "forget." Perhaps we are almost ordered to forget them. Certainly Bowering's title can be read as an order to forget just as it can be read as a comment on our tendency to forget. Poems can often be read more than one way, and this title seems to ask the reader to consider it in two ways: "You forget" with a "you" understood--that's a command--or the simple verb, forget--something we all do.

The possibility of two ways to read the title is not surprising in a poem that says very little and yet implies so much. It asks us not to forget, urging us to look more closely. Often, imagist poems like this one ask us to pause and look at small details. This poem does. It makes us slow down, in fact, by its rhythm in lines three to five. The reader would normally say the apartments "were made step-by-step." But Bowering breaks the sentence up, drawing attention to it and making the reader stop, think, and go

step-
by-step by

Not only must we slow down, but Bowering stresses the word by. He reminds us that these buildings did not just appear, but were built by someone. When we see a huge building we forget that individual men and women designed the building, financed it, and built it. We forget that some of them actually cared about how the

building looks or that it might house many people. Sometimes buildings are just slammed up for profit, but even then the workers and decorators and tradespeople tried to do the best job they could in the circumstances. Like the medieval cathedrals, these new buildings were build "step- / by-step by / human hands." The humanity is Bowering's point.

That is why he moves to a new image of glue on envelopes. This is a very small image of a dull thing. We never notice the glue, except that it usually tastes bad. But this glue tastes good, like "a pear." So we are asked again to pause and consider that someone made this glue and tried to make it taste like a real thing, a natural thing. Bowering makes us stop in our urban lifestyle and look at things. He reminds us that people live in these blocks of apartments and make things and try their best to make them as close to nature as they can. There might be a negative comment here about how far our manufactured world is from the real world (perhaps the boyhood world of Bowering in the orchards of the Okanagan Valley), but there is also a call for us to appreciate the humanity that still surrounds us.

This poem doesn't call for earth-shaking change; it deals with small attention to details. But it reminds us of an important fact: that we are human and we must make the best we can of our world.

***Topics for Discussion***

The student's explication suggests that even though we have made a world of manufactured things, we can still find humanity in our world. In class, another student suggested that Bowering may be ironic. Fake pear taste isn't the same as real fruit in a natural world. Which explanation do you prefer, and why? What do you think of combining the two?

Does some method or principle help us decide which interpretation is correct? Can one, in fact, talk about a "correct" interpretation, or only about a plausible or implausible interpretation and an interesting or uninteresting interpretation? ***Note:*** Another explication (of W. B. Yeats's "The Balloon of the Mind") appears in Chapter 12.

## ANALYSIS: THE JUDGMENT OF SOLOMON

EXPLICATION is a method used chiefly in the study of fairly short poems or brief extracts from essays, stories, novels, and plays. Of course, if one has world enough and time one can set out to explicate all of Richler's *The*

*Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* or Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs;* more likely, one will explicate only a paragraph or at most a page of the novel, and a speech or two of the play. In writing about works longer than a page or two, a more common approach than explicating is ANALYZING (literally, separating into parts in order better to understand the whole). An analysis of, say, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* may consider the functions of the **SETTING**, or the uses that certain minor characters serve; an analysis of *Les Belles Soeurs* may consider the theatrical rhythms, or the Roman Catholic imagery, or the repression of the women shown in their **MONOLOGUES**.

Analysis is not a process used only in talking about literature. It is commonly applied in thinking about almost any complex matter. Steffi Graf plays a deadly game of tennis. What does her serve do to her opponent? How does her backhand contribute? And so it makes sense, if you are writing about literature, to try to examine one or more of the components of the work, in order to see how they contribute to the whole, either as part of an aesthetic pattern or as part of the meaning. In Chapter 5 we will see, for example, how the line breaks of a poem by Phyllis Webb affect the various ways it may be understood.

A brief analysis of a very short story about King Solomon, from the Bible, may be useful here. Because the story is short, the analysis can consider all or almost all of the story's parts, and therefore the analysis can seem relatively complete. ("*Seem* relatively complete" because the analysis will in fact be far from complete, since the number of reasonable things that can be said about a work is almost as great as the number of readers. And a given reader might, at a later date, offer a rather different reading from what the reader offers today. Recall the discussion in Chapter 1.)

The following story about King Solomon, customarily called "The Judgment of Solomon," appears in what is often termed the Hebrew Bible, in the latter part of the third chapter of the book called 1 Kings or First Kings, probably written in the mid-sixth century BCE. The translation is from the King James Version of the Bible (1611). Two expressions in the story need clarification. (1) The woman who "overlaid" her child in her sleep rolled over on the child and suffocated it; (2) it is said of a woman that her "bowels yearned upon her son," that is, her heart longed for her son. (Among the early Hebrews, the bowels were thought to be the seat of emotion.)

> Then came there two women, that were harlots, unto the king, and stood before him. And the one woman said, "O my lord, I and this woman dwell in one house, and I was delivered of a child with her in the house. And it came to pass the third day after that I was delivered, that this woman was delivered also, and we were together; there was no stranger in the house, save we two in the house. And this woman's child died in the night, because she overlaid it. And she rose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while thine handmaid slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to give my child suck, behold, it was dead; but when I considered it in the morning, behold, it was not my son, which I did bear."
>
> And the other woman said, "Nay, but the living son is my son, and the dead is thy son." And this said, "No, but the dead is thy son, and the living is my son." Thus they spoke before the king.

> Then said the king, "The one said, 'This is my son that liveth, and thy son is dead.' And the other said, 'Nay, but thy son is the dead, and my son is the living.'" And the king said, "Bring me a sword." And they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, "Divide the living child in two and give half to the one, and half to the other."
>
> Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, "O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it." But the other said, "Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it."
>
> Then the king answered and said, "Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. She is the mother thereof."
>
> And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged, and they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment.

Let's begin by analyzing the *form*, or the shape, of the story. One form or shape that we notice is this: The story moves from a problem to a solution. We can also say, still speaking of the overall form, that the story moves from quarreling and talk of death to unity and talk of life. In short, it has a happy ending, a form that (because it provides an optimistic view of life and also a sense of completeness) gives most people pleasure.

In thinking about a work of literature, it is always useful to take notice of the basic form of the whole, the overall structural pattern. Doubtless you are already familiar with many basic patterns, for example **TRAGEDY** (joy yielding to sorrow) and **COMEDY** (angry conflict yielding to joyful union). If you think even briefly about verbal works, you'll notice the structures or patterns that govern songs, episodes in soap operas, political speeches (beginning with the candidate's expression of pleasure at being in Lethbridge, and ending with "God bless you all"), detective stories, horror films, and so on. And just as viewers of a science fiction film inevitably experience one sci-fi flick in the context of others, so readers inevitably experience one story in the context of similar stories, and one poem in the context of others.

Second, we can say that "The Judgment of Solomon" is a sort of detective story: There is a death, followed by a conflict in the testimony of the witnesses, and a solution by a shrewd outsider. Consider Solomon's predicament. Ordinarily in literature characters are sharply defined and individualized, yet the essence of a detective story is that the culprit should not be easily recognized as wicked, and here nothing seems to distinguish the two petitioners. Solomon is confronted by "two women, that were harlots." Until late in the story—that is, up to the time Solomon suggests dividing the child—they are described only as "the one woman," "the other woman," "the one," "the other."

Does the story suffer from weak characterization? If we think analytically about this issue, we realize that the point surely is to make the women as alike as possible, so that we cannot tell which of the two is speaking the truth. Like Solomon, we have nothing to go on; neither witness is known to be more honest than the other, and there are no other witnesses to support or refute either woman.

Analysis is concerned with seeing the relationships between the parts of a work, but analysis also may take note of what is *not* in the work. A witness

would destroy the story, or at least turn it into an utterly different story. Another thing missing from this story is an explicit editorial comment or interpretation, except for the brief remark at the end, that the people "feared the king." If we had read the story in the so-called Geneva Bible (1557–60), which is the translation of the Bible that Shakespeare was familiar with, we would have found a marginal comment: "Her motherly affection herein appeareth that she had rather endure the rigour of the lawe, than see her child cruelly slaine." Would you agree that it is better, at least in this story, for the reader to draw conclusions than for the storyteller explicitly to point them out?

Solomon wisely contrives a situation in which these two claimants, who seem so similar, will reveal their true natures: The mother will reveal her love, and the liar will reveal her hard heart. The early symmetry (the identity of the two women) pleases a reader, and so does the device by which we can at last distinguish between the two women.

But even near the end there is a further symmetry. In order to save the child's life, the true mother gives up her claim, crying out, "Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it." The author (or, rather, the translator who produced this part of the King James Version) takes these very words, with no change whatsoever, and puts them into Solomon's mouth as the king's final judgment. Solomon too says, "Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it," but now the sentence takes on a new meaning. In the first sentence, "her" refers to the liar (the true mother will give the child to "her"); in Solomon's sentence, "her" refers to the true mother: "Give her the living child [ . . . ]." Surely we take pleasure in the fact that (1) the very words by which the mother renounces her child are the words that reveal to Solomon the truth, and that (2) Solomon uses these words to restore the child to its mother.

This analysis has chiefly talked about the relations of parts, and especially it has tried to explain why the two women in this story are *not* distinct, until Solomon finds a way to reveal their distinctive natures: If the story is to demonstrate Solomon's wisdom, the women must seem identical until Solomon can show that they differ. But the analysis could have gone into some other topic. Let's consider several possibilities.

A student might begin by asking this question: "Although it is important for the women to be highly similar, why are they harlots?" (It is too simple to say that the women in the story are harlots because the author is faithfully reporting an historical **EPISODE** in Solomon's career. The story is widely recognized as a folktale (a kind of **PARABLE**) found also in other ancient cultures.) One possible reason for making the women harlots is that the story demands that there be no witnesses; by using harlots, the author disposed of husbands, parents, and siblings who might otherwise be expected to live with the women. A second possible reason is that the author wanted to show that Solomon's justice extended to all. Third, perhaps the author wished to reject or at least to complicate the **STEREOTYPE** of the harlot as a thoroughly disreputable person. He did this by introducing another (and truer?) stereotype, the mother as motivated by overwhelming maternal love.

## Other Possible Topics for Analysis

Another possible kind of analytic essay might go beyond the structure of the individual work, to the relation of the work to some larger whole. For instance, one might approach "The Judgment of Solomon" from the point of view of GENDER CRITICISM (discussed in Chapter 8): In this story, one might argue, wisdom is an attribute only of a male; women are either deceitful or emotional. From this point one might set out to write a research essay on gender in, say, certain books of the Hebrew Bible. We might also analyze the story in the context of other examples of what scholars call Wisdom Literature (the Book of Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, for instance). Notice that Solomon's judgment leads the people to *fear* him—because his wisdom is seen as great, formidable, and God-inspired.

We do not know who wrote "The Judgment of Solomon," but the authors of most later works of literature are known, and therefore some critics seek to analyze a given work within the context of the author's life. For some other critics, the larger context would be the reading process, which includes the psychology of the reader. (Biographical criticism and reader-response criticism are discussed in Chapter 8.)

Still another analysis—again, remember that a work can be analyzed from many points of view—might examine two or more translations of the story. You do not need to know Hebrew in order to compare this early seventeenth-century translation with a twentieth-century version such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the Revised English Bible. One might seek to find which version is, on literary grounds, more effective. Such an essay might include an attempt, by means of a comparison, to analyze the effect of the archaic language of the King James Version. Does the somewhat unfamiliar language turn a reader off, or does it add mystery or dignity or authority to the tale, valuable qualities perhaps not found in the modern version?

***Topics for Discussion***

In the New Revised English Bible, Solomon does *not* exactly repeat the mother's plea. The mother says, "Give her the living child," and Solomon then says, "Give the living child to the first woman." In the New Jerusalem Bible, after the mother says "Let them give her the live child," Solomon says, "Give the live child to the first woman." If you prefer one version to the other two, explain why. What is the literary value of Solomon repeating the exact words (as we discuss above)?

This story comes from the Christian Bible. Do you know a similar story from another religious tradition? If so, you might want to analyze that story to see how it is composed, how the writing affects its meaning. Or you might want to compare or contrast the two tales.

## Comparison: An Analytic Tool

Analysis frequently involves comparing and contrasting: Things are examined for their resemblances to and differences from other things. (We tend to use

the generic term *comparing* for such analysis, but remember that sometimes this actually implies contrasting.)

Although your instructor may ask you to write a **COMPARISON** or **CONTRAST** of two works of literature, the *subject* of the essay is the works; comparison is simply an effective analytic technique to show some of the qualities in the works. You might compare Atwood's use of a prison in "Marrying the Hangman" (pages 13–14) with the use of a prison setting in Vigneault's "The Wall" (pages 3–4) in order to reveal the subtle differences between the stories, but a comparison of works utterly unalike can hardly tell the reader or the writer anything.

Something should be said about organizing a comparison, say between the settings in two stories, between two characters in a **NOVEL** (or even between a character at the end of a novel and the same character at the beginning), or between the **SYMBOLISM** of two poems. Probably, your first thought after making some jottings would be to discuss one half of the comparison and then go on to the second half. Instructors and textbooks often urge students away from such an organization (sometimes called the A + B MODEL), arguing that the essay breaks into two parts and that the second part involves a good deal of repetition of categories set up in the first part. Usually, they recommend that you organize your thoughts in related pairs or groups. (This is often called the ALTERNATING MODEL.) Here is an example:

1. First similarity
   a. first work (or character, or characteristic)
   b. second work
2. Second similarity
   a. first work
   b. second work
3. First difference
   a. first work
   b. second work
4. Second difference
   a. First work
   b. Second work

and so on, for as many additional differences as seem relevant. If you wish to compare "Marrying the Hangman" with "The Wall," you may organize the material thus:

1. First similarity: the hero is in prison
   a. The mason
   b. The condemned woman
2. Second similarity: both escape
   a. He by convincing a monk to help him
   b. She by convincing a man to become the hangman and marry her
3. First difference: the way in which each convinces the helper
   a. He lays out a philosophical argument that seems to attract help
   b. She must rely on her sexuality to seduce

Another way of organizing a comparison and contrast:

1. First point: the hero is in prison
   a. similarities between the mason and the woman
   b. differences between the mason and the woman
2. Second point: the method of obtaining freedom
   a. similarities between the method of the man and of the woman
   b. differences between the method of the man and of the woman
3. Third point: the degree of success in obtaining real freedom
   a. similarities between the man and the woman
   b. differences between the man and the woman

A comparison need not employ either of these structures. There is even the danger that an essay employing either of them may not come into focus until the essayist stands back from the seven-layer cake and announces in the concluding paragraph that the odd layers taste better.

In your preparatory thinking, you may want to make comparisons in pairs (good-natured humour: the clown in *Othello,* the clownish grave-digger in *Hamlet;* social satire: the clown in *Othello,* the grave-digger in *Hamlet;* relevance to main theme: A and B; comments by other characters: A and B), but you must come to some conclusions about what these add up to before writing the final version. This final version should not duplicate the thought processes; rather, it should be organized so as to make the point—the thesis—clearly and effectively. After reflection, you may believe that although there are superficial similarities between the clown in *Othello* and the clownish grave-digger in *Hamlet,* there are essential differences; then, in the finished essay, you probably will not wish to obscure the main point by jumping back and forth from play to play, working through a series of similarities and differences. It may be better to discuss the clown in *Othello* and then to point out that, although the grave-digger in *Hamlet* resembles him in A, B, and C, the grave-digger also has other functions (D, E, and F) and is of greater consequence to *Hamlet* than the clown is to *Othello.* With some repetition in the second half of the essay ("The grave-digger's puns come even faster than the clown's [ . . . ].") she will bind the two halves into a meaningful whole, making clear the degree of similarity or difference. The point of the essay presumably is not to list pairs of similarities or differences but to illuminate a work or works by making thoughtful comparisons.

Although in a long essay you cannot postpone until page 30 a discussion of the second half of the comparison, in an essay of, say, fewer than 10 pages nothing is wrong with setting forth one half of the comparison and then, in light of it, the second half. The essay will break into two unrelated parts if the second half makes no use of the first or if it fails to modify the first half, but not if the second half looks back to the first half and calls attention to differences that the new material reveals. It is often preferable to plan a comparison with interwoven comparisons, but remember that a comparison may be written in other ways, too, and no rule says how you must plan your essay.

***Remember:*** The purpose of a comparison is to call attention to the unique features of something by holding it up against something similar but

significantly different. You can compare Macbeth with Banquo (two men who hear a prophecy but who respond differently), or Macbeth with Lady Macbeth (a husband and wife, both eager to be monarchs but differing in their sense of the consequences), or Hamlet and Duddy Kravitz (two people who see themselves as surrounded by a corrupt world), but you can hardly compare Duddy with Lady Macbeth—there simply are not enough points of resemblance to make it worth your effort to call attention to subtle differences. If the differences are great and apparent, a comparison is a waste of effort. ("Blueberries are different from elephants. Blueberries do not have trunks. And elephants do not grow on bushes.") Indeed, a comparison between essentially and evidently unlike things can only obscure, for by making the comparison the writer implies that significant similarities do exist, and readers can only wonder why they do not see them. Another danger is that essays that make uninstructive comparisons do break into two halves: The first half tells the reader about five qualities in "Marrying the Hangman," and the second half tells the reader about five different qualities in "The Wall," but no reasonable PRINCIPLE OF COMPARISON connects the two.

## FINDING A TOPIC

All literary works afford their own topics for analysis, and all essayists must set forth their own theses, but a few useful generalizations may be made. You can often find a thesis by asking one of two questions:

1. *What is this doing?* That is, why is this **SCENE** in the novel or play? Why is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in two acts, rather than one or three? Why is there Biblical **ALLUSION** in *Waiting for Godot?* Why does Hamlet delay? Why are these lines unrhymed? Why is this **STANZA** form employed? What is the significance of the parts of the work? If you don't know where to begin, think about the title, the first part of a work. Titles are often highly significant parts of the work: Ibsen explained that he called his play *Hedda Gabler* rather than *Hedda Tesman* because "She is to be regarded as her father's daughter rather than as her husband's wife." But of course there are other ways of beginning. If the work is a poem without a title, and you don't know where to begin, you may be able to get a start by considering the stanza form, or the chief images. If the work is a story or play, you may get a start by considering the relation between the chief character and the second most important character.

2. *Why do I have this response?* Why do I find this poem clever or moving or puzzling? How did the author make this character funny or dignified or pathetic? How did he or she communicate the idea that this character is a bore without boring me? Why am I troubled by the representation of women in this story? Why do I regard as sexist this lover's expression of his love?

The first of these questions, "What is this doing?" requires that you identify yourself with the author, wondering, for example, whether this opening scene is the best possible for this story. The second question, "Why do I have

this response?" requires that you trust your feelings. If you are amused or bored or puzzled or annoyed, assume that these responses are appropriate and follow them up, at least until a rereading of the work provides other responses.

## CONSIDERING THE EVIDENCE

Once your responses have led you to a topic ("The Clown in *Othello*") and then to a thesis ("Although he is an Elizabethan dramatic **CONVENTION**, the clown plays a key role in developing character"), be certain that you have all the evidence. Usually this means that you should study the context of the material you are discussing. For example, if you are writing about "Marrying the Hangman," before you argue that the woman should have escaped her marriage after she has used the man to escape prison, remember that this story is set in the eighteenth century—a historical period during which a woman needed to be married for social and financial status.

## ORGANIZING THE MATERIAL

"Begin at the beginning," the King of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* said very gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop." This is how your paper should seem to the reader, but it need not have been drafted thus. In fact, unless you are supremely gifted, you will (like the rest of us) have to work very hard to make things easy for the reader.

After locating a topic, converting it into a thesis, and weighing the evidence, a writer has the job of organizing the material into a coherent whole, a sequence of paragraphs that holds the reader's interest (partly because it sets forth material clearly) and that steadily builds up an effective argument. Notice that in the essay on irony in Atwood's "Marrying the Hangman" the student wisely moves from the historical ironies to the contemporary irony. To begin with the chief irony and end with the lesser ironies would almost surely be anticlimactic.

The organization of an essay will, of course, depend on the nature of the essay: An essay on **FORESHADOWING** in *Macbeth* probably will be organized chronologically (material in the first **ACT** will be discussed before material in the second act), but an essay on the character of Macbeth may conceivably begin with the end of the play, discussing Macbeth as he is in the fifth act, and then may work backward through the play, arriving at last at the original Macbeth, so to speak, of the beginning of the play. (This is not to suggest that such an organization be regularly employed in writing about a character—only that it might be employed effectively.) Or suppose you are questioning whether Macbeth is a victim of fate. You might state the problem, and then go on to outline one view and then the other. Which view should be set forth first? Probably it will be best to let the reader first hear the view that you will refute, so that you can build to a **CLIMAX**.

The important point is not that there is only one way to organize an essay, but that you find the way that seems best for the particular topic and argument. Once you think you know more or less what you want to say, you will usually, after trial and error, find what seems the best way of communicating it to a reader. A scratch outline will help you find your way, but don't assume that once you have settled on an outline the organization of your essay finally is established. After you read the draft that you base on your outline, you may realize that a more effective organization will be more helpful to your reader—which means that you must move paragraphs around, revise your transitions, and, in short, produce another draft.

If you look at your draft and you outline it, as suggested on page 25, you will quickly see whether the draft needs to be reorganized.

## COMMUNICATING JUDGMENTS

Because a critical essay is a judicious attempt to help a reader see what is going on in a work or in a part of a work, the **VOICE** of the critic usually sounds, on first hearing, impartial; but good criticism includes—at least implicitly—evaluation. The critic may say not only that the setting changes (a neutral expression) but also that "the novelist aptly shifts the setting" or "unconvincingly describes [ . . . ]" or "effectively juxtaposes [ . . . ]." These evaluations are supported with evidence. The critic has feelings about the work under discussion and reveals them, not by continually saying "I feel" and "this moves me," but by calling attention to the degree of success or failure perceived. Nothing is wrong with occasionally using "I," and noticeable avoidance of it in jargon such as, "it is seen that," "this writer," "the present writer," "we," and the like, suggests an offensive sham modesty; but too much talk of "I" makes a writer sound like an egomaniac.

Consider this sentence from the opening paragraph in a review of George Orwell's *1984*.

> I do not think I have ever read a novel more frightening and depressing; and yet, such are the originality, the suspense, the speed of writing and withering indignation that it is impossible to put the book down.

Fine—provided that the reviewer goes on to offer evidence that enables readers to share his or her evaluation of *1984*. Simply telling your reader your emotional response is not criticism.

One final remark on communicating judgments: Write sincerely. Any attempt to neglect your own thoughtful responses and replace them with fabrications designed to please an instructor will surely fail. It is hard enough to find the words that clearly communicate your responses; it is almost impossible to find the words that express your hunch about what your instructor expects your responses to be. George Orwell shrewdly commented on the obvious signs of insincere writing: "When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink."

## REVIEW: HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE ESSAY

All writers must work out their own procedures and rituals before writing (Clark Blaise has said "the first sentence of a story is an act of faith," and Desmond, the protagonist of "The Leper's Squint," by Jack Hodgins, waits for the words to run off the end "[ . . . ] like a fishing line pulled by a salmon."), but the following suggestions may provide some help. The writing process may be divided into four stages—Pre-writing, Drafting, Revising, and Editing—though, as the following discussion admits, the stages are not always neatly separate.

### 1. Pre-writing

Read the work carefully. You may, on this first reading, want to highlight or annotate certain things, such as passages that please or that puzzle, or you may prefer simply to read it through. In any case, on a second reading you will certainly want to annotate the text and to jot down notes either in the margins or in a journal. You probably are not focusing on a specific topic, but rather are taking account of your early responses to the work.

If you have a feeling or an idea, jot it down; don't assume that you will remember it when you get around to drafting your essay. Write it down so that you will be sure to remember it and so that in the act of writing it down you can improve it. Later, after reviewing your notes (whether in the margins or in a journal) you'll probably find that it's a good idea to transfer your best points to 10 x 15 cm cards (or paper torn in half), writing on one side only. By putting the material on cards, you can easily group related points later.

### 2. Drafting

After reviewing your notes and sorting them out, you will probably find that you have not only a topic (a subject to write about) but a thesis (a point to be made, an argument). Get it down on paper or into a computer file. Perhaps begin by jotting down your thesis and under it a tentative outline. (If you have transferred your preliminary notes to index cards, you can easily arrange the cards into a tentative organization.)

If you are writing an explication, the order probably is essentially the order of the lines or of the episodes. If you are writing an analysis, you may wish to organize your essay from the lesser material to the greater (to avoid anticlimax) or from the simple to the complex (to ensure intelligibility). If you are discussing the roles of three characters in a story, it may be best to build up to the one of the three that you think the most important. If you are comparing two characters, it may be best to move from the most obvious contrasts to the least obvious.

At this stage, however, don't worry about whether the organization is unquestionably the best possible organization for your topic. A page of paper with some ideas in some sort of sequence, however rough, will encourage you that you do have something to say. If you have doubts, by all means

record them. By writing down your uncertainties, you will probably begin to feel your way toward tentative explanations of them.

Almost any organization will help you get going on your draft; that is, it will help you start writing an essay. The process of writing will itself clarify and improve your preliminary ideas. If you are like most people, you can't do much precise thinking until you have committed to paper at least a rough sketch of your initial ideas. Later, you can push and polish your ideas into shape, perhaps even deleting all of them and starting over, but it's a lot easier to improve your ideas once you see them in front of you than it is to do the job in your head. On paper, one word leads to another; in your head, one word often blocks another.

Just keep going; you may realize, as you near the end of a sentence, that you no longer believe it. Okay; be glad that your first idea led you to a better one, and pick up your better one and keep going with it. By trial and error, you are pushing your way not only toward clear expression but also toward sharper ideas and richer responses.

Although we have been talking about drafting, most teachers rightly regard this first effort at organizing your notes and turning them into an essay not as a first draft but as a zero draft, really a part of pre-writing. When you reread it, you will doubtless find passages that need further support, passages that seem out of place, and passages that need clarification. You will also find passages that are better than you thought at the outset you could produce. In any case, on rereading the zero draft you will find things that will require you to go back and check the work of literature and to think further about what you have said about it. After rereading the literary work and your draft, you are in a position to write something that can rightly be called a first draft.

### 3. Revising

Try to allow at least a day to elapse before you start to revise your zero draft and another day before you revise your first draft. If you come to the material with a relatively fresh eye, you may see, for example, that the thesis needs to be announced earlier or more clearly or that certain points need to be supported by concrete references—perhaps by brief quotations from the literary work. Almost all student writing suffers from too little revision and a rush at the due date. If you can plan your schedule to allow some "down time," your mark will almost assuredly be higher. A review by your peers will give you a good sense of which things need clarification and of whether your discussion is adequately organized.

At this stage, pay special attention to the following matters.

***The Title*** If you haven't already jotted down some tentative title for your essay, now is the time to do so. Make sure that the title is interesting and informative. There is nothing interesting and there is very little that is informative in a title such as "On a Play by Joan MacLeod," or even in "On *Toronto, Mississippi.*" Such titles are adequate to get you going, but try, as you think about your draft, to come up with something more focused, such as "Man as Elvis in *Toronto, Mississippi*" (this title announces the topic). Avoid

announcing your approach too abruptly. "A Feminist Reading of *Toronto, Mississippi*" is not a good title. Better might be, "Choices for Women in *Toronto, Mississippi.*" Because you are still drafting your essay, of course you will not yet settle on a final version of the title, but thinking about the title will help you to write an essay that is focused.

***The Opening*** Try to make sure that your introductory sentences or paragraphs engage the reader's interest. It's usually desirable also to give the reader the necessary information concerning which work you are writing about, to indicate your thesis (this information itself may get the reader's interest), and to indicate what your organization will be. It is usually better to imply the organization than to say "I will point out," or "This essay will examine." Here is a sample that does all of these things:

> Joan McLeod's Toronto, Mississippi is not so much a play about a girl with a mental challenge, as it is a play about the choices open to women. The play shows two women, the challenged girl and her mother, but it shows them in relationship to men. The girl is attracted to a man on her bus with whom she cannot hope to have a relationship. She also loves her father, an Elvis impersonator. Her mother is attracted to a caring man but she is confused by old feelings for the father, her ex-husband. And, of course, she is caught in the myth of Elvis. Joan MacLeod shows that these women, because they live in a world which values the machismo of Elvis, must struggle to find ways to love without losing their own identities. Each of the women and men in the play and each of the relationships shows an aspect of this difficult contemporary struggle.

Again, this opening paragraph identifies the author and the work, and it also indicates the topic (women), the thesis (women must struggle to overcome sexual **MYTHS** to find love without losing their own identities), and the structure (the final sentence implies that the essay "will examine" each character and explore how the various characters interact). Perhaps because it is so informative, it is at least moderately interesting. Of course an opening need not do all of these things, but in revising your draft, be sure to ask yourself *what* your opening does, and if it does enough. Here is another possible opening, again for an essay on *Toronto, Mississippi.* This passage does less than the previous example, but it seeks to interest the reader by means of brief quotations from the play and by means of a question that hints at the thesis.

> In Joan MacLeod's Toronto, Mississippi, King, the Elvis impersonator, says he is "sick to death of everyone wanting what is bad for them." He says this "ties into the way I feel about women." Bill, the college

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instructor, calls himself "a voice for women."  Does
Joan MacLeod agree that women want what is bad for them,
or that they need men to speak for them?  Or does she
use these portraits to suggest that women can find what
is best for themselves and can find their own voices?
```

***The Thesis and the Organization*** In addition to announcing your thesis early—perhaps in the title, or in the opening paragraph—be sure to keep the thesis in view throughout the essay. For instance, if you are arguing that MacLeod's depiction of women is multisided, you will say so, and you will reaffirm the point during the essay, when you present supporting evidence. Similarly, even if you have announced the organization, you will keep the reader posted by occasionally saying such things as "One other minor character must be looked at," and "the last minor character that we will look at," and "With Janna, the younger woman in the play," and so on. And of course you will make the organization clear to your readers by using the appropriate lead-ins and transitions, such as "Furthermore," "On the other hand," and "The final example [ . . . ]."

***The Closing*** Say something more interesting than "Thus we see," followed by a repetition of the thesis sentence. Among the tested ways of ending effectively are these:

- glance back to something from the opening paragraph, thus giving your essay a sense of **CLOSURE**;
- offer a new bit of evidence, thus driving the point home;
- indicate that the thesis, now established, can be used in other investigations of comparable material, for instance in a discussion of MacLeod's later plays.

(For further discussion of concluding paragraphs see pages 277–78.)

## 4. Editing

Small-scale revision, such as checking the spelling, punctuation, and accuracy of quotations, is usually called *editing*. Even when you get to this stage, you may unexpectedly find that you must make larger revisions. In checking a quotation, for instance, you may find that it doesn't really support the point you are making, so you may have to do some substantial revising.

Time has run out. Type, write, or print out a clean copy, following the principles concerning margins, pagination, and documentation set out later in this book. If you have borrowed any ideas, be sure to give credit to your sources. Finally, proofread and make corrections as explained on page 281.

The whole process of writing about literature, then, is really a process of responding and of revising your responses—not only your responses to the work of literature but also to your own writing about those responses. When you jot down a note and then jot down a further thought (perhaps even rejecting the earlier note) and then turn this material into a paragraph and then revise the paragraph, you are in the company of Picasso, who said that in

painting a picture he advanced by a series of destructions. You are also following Mrs. Beeton's famous recipe: "First catch your hare, then cook it."

### The Dreaded Deadline

When someone asked Duke Ellington why he had not found time to complete a promised piece of music, Ellington replied, "I don't need time. I need a deadline!" When your instructors give you deadlines they are doing you a favour. But they assume that you will take the deadlines seriously *and* that you will begin reading, thinking, drafting, and revising several days—perhaps a week or more—before the deadline. Even a genius like Duke Ellington found that a deadline was a stimulus to creativity. But unless you are a genius, don't count on being able to produce excellent—or even good—work at the last minute. When instructors set deadlines, they assume that students will apportion their work over a period of days. They assume, that is, a process involving the stages outlined, and they will evaluate the final product in terms of that process, not in terms of a last-minute frenzy to meet the deadline.

## A WORD ABOUT TECHNICAL LANGUAGE

Literature, like the law, medicine, the dance, and, for that matter, cooking and hockey, has given rise to technical terminology. A cookbook will tell you to boil, or bake, or blend, and it will speak of a "slow" oven (150 degrees), a "moderate" oven (190 degrees), or a "hot" oven (215 degrees). These are technical terms in the world of cookery. In watching a hockey game, we find ourselves saying, "I think that's offside" or "It's a hat trick." We use these terms because they convey a good deal in a few words; they are clear and precise. Further, although we don't use them in order to impress our hearer, they do indicate that we have more than a superficial acquaintance with the game. That is, the better we know our subject, the more likely we are to use the technical language of the subject. Why? *Because such language enables us to talk precisely and in considerable depth about the subject.* Technical language, unlike jargon (pretentious **DICTION** that needlessly complicates or obscures), is illuminating—provided that the reader is familiar with the terms.

In writing about literature you will, for the most part, use the same general language that you use in your other courses, and you will not needlessly introduce the technical vocabulary of literary study. But you *will* use this vocabulary when it enables you to be clear, concise, and accurate. And you will use it when it is necessary to capture a technical point (there's no way to discuss the importance of a pause without words in a poem without using the term **WHITE SPACE**). And you won't use the technical language of another discipline (sociology, for example) except when it also illustrates a literary point (or unless you are using that discipline's methodology as part of your analysis; see Chapter 17).

## ✓ Editing Checklist: Questions to Ask Yourself

- ✓ Is the title of my essay at least moderately informative and interesting?
- ✓ Do I identify the subject of my essay (author and title) early?
- ✓ What is my thesis? Do I state it soon enough (perhaps even in the title) and keep it in view?
- ✓ Is the organization reasonable? Does each point lead into the next without irrelevancies and without anticlimaxes?
- ✓ Is each paragraph unified by a topic sentence or a topic idea? Are there adequate transitions from one paragraph to the next?
- ✓ Are generalizations supported by appropriate concrete details, especially by brief quotations from the text?
- ✓ Is the opening paragraph interesting and, by its end, focused on the topic? Is the final paragraph conclusive without being repetitive?
- ✓ Is the tone appropriate? No sarcasm, no apologies, no condescension?
- ✓ If there is a summary, is it as brief as possible, given its purpose?
- ✓ Are the quotations adequately introduced, and are they accurate? Do they provide evidence and let the reader hear the author's voice, or do they merely add words to the essay?
- ✓ Is the present tense used to describe the author's work and the action of the work ("Shakespeare *shows*," "Hamlet *dies*")?
- ✓ Have I kept in mind the needs of my audience, for instance by defining unfamiliar terms, or by briefly summarizing works or opinions that the reader may be unfamiliar with?
- ✓ Is documentation provided where necessary?
- ✓ Are the spelling and punctuation correct? Are other mechanical matters (such as margins, spacing, and citations) in correct form? Have I proofread carefully?
- ✓ Is the paper properly identified—author's name, instructor's name, course number, and date?

# 4

# Other Kinds of Writing about Literature

**Learning Objectives**

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

- write a summary and paraphrase;
- write a literary response;
- recognize parody and pastiche; and
- write a review of a dramatic production or other literary text.

## A SUMMARY

The essay on "Marrying the Hangman" in Chapter 2 does not include a summary because the writer knew that all of her readers were thoroughly familiar with Atwood's story. Sometimes, however, it is advisable to summarize the work you are writing about, thus reminding a reader who has not read the work recently, or even informing a reader who may never have read the work. A review of a new work of literature or of a new film, for instance, usually includes a summary, on the assumption that readers are unfamiliar with it.

A SUMMARY is a brief restatement or condensation of the plot. (In nonliterary writing, a summary is also often helpful; here, it is a condensation of the author's critical analysis, including a statement of his or her thesis.) Consider the following summary of Atwood's "Marrying the Hangman."

> A woman who has been condemned to death by hanging learns that while a man may escape hanging if he agrees to become the hangman, a woman can also save herself by marrying the hangman. There is no hangman for her to marry, so she convinces a man in the next cell--to whom she talks through a hole in the wall--to become the executioner and then to marry her. Once married, she realizes that she has "traded one locked room for another." Like the contemporary women who tell the narrator "horror stories," this woman has no identity outside the man who demands her "gratitude."

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Like them she is subject to abuse.  Her destiny is
caught up in words and those words show her
imprisonment.
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Here are a few principles that govern summaries:

1. A summary is *much briefer than the original.* It is not a paraphrase—a word-by-word translation of someone's words into your own. A paraphrase is usually at least as long as the original, whereas a summary is rarely longer than one quarter of the original and is usually much shorter. A novel may be summarized in a few paragraphs, or even in one paragraph.

2. A summary *usually achieves its brevity by omitting almost all of the concrete details of the original* and by omitting minor characters and episodes. Notice that the summary of "Marrying the Hangman" omits the reason the woman was in prison, omits the image of the mirror, and omits the comments on the character of the husband.

3. A summary is *as accurate as possible,* given the limits of space.

4. A summary is *normally written in the present tense.* Thus "A woman is condemned to hanging [ . . . ]; The friends tell the narrator [ . . . ]."

5. If the summary is brief (say, fewer than 250 words), it *may be given as a single paragraph.* If you are summarizing a long work, you may feel that a longer summary is needed. In this case, your reader will be grateful to you if you divide the summary into paragraphs. As you draft your summary, you may find *natural divisions.* For instance, the scene of the story may change midway, providing you with the opportunity to use two paragraphs. Or you may want to summarize a five-act play in five paragraphs.

Summaries have their place in essays, but remember that a summary is not an analysis; it is only a summary.

## A PARAPHRASE

A PARAPHRASE is a restatement—a sort of translation into the same language—of material that may in its original form be somewhat obscure to a reader. A native speaker of English will not need a paraphrase of "Thirty days hath September," though a non-native speaker might be puzzled by two things, the meaning of *hath* and the inverted word order. For such a reader, "September has thirty days" would be a helpful paraphrase.

Although a paraphrase seeks to make clear the gist of the original, if the original is even a little more complex than "Thirty days hath September" the paraphrase will—in the process of clarifying something—lose something, since the substitution of one word for another will change the meaning. For instance, "Shut up" and "Be quiet" do not say exactly the same thing; the former (in addition to asking for quiet) says that the speaker is rude, or perhaps it says that the speaker feels he can treat his listener contemptuously, but the paraphrase loses all of this.

Still, a paraphrase can be helpful as a first step in aiding a reader to understand a line that includes an obsolete word or phrase, or a word or

phrase that is current only in one region, or a word with multiple meanings. For instance, in a poem by Phyllis Webb, titled "Propositions," the following line appears:

> the just passion, just encountering

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *just* has 22 meanings! Even taking the most common, we realize that the word carries both the meaning of "only" (or "barely"), of "exactly," and of "fair, morally or legally right." So a paraphrase of the line might go thus:

> that which is only and exactly love—but is right—simply and precisely coming together in a fair manner.

(And the older definitions include the word as a form of *joust*, so there is also a notion of two lovers parrying with one another, a reading that fits with the theme and with images of the Four Horsemen elsewhere in the poem.) Rendering this beautiful line in such a clumsy paraphrase shows how concentrated poetic language can be, how much can be contained in a few words.

(It's worth mentioning, parenthetically, that you should have at your elbow a good desk dictionary, such as *Gage Canadian Dictionary*, *The Penguin Canadian Dictionary*, *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* or *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. Writers—especially poets—expect you to pay close attention to every word. If a word puzzles you, look it up.)

IDIOMS, as well as words, may puzzle a reader. The Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats begins one poem with

> The friends that have it I do wrong

Because the idiom "to have it" (meaning "to believe that," "to think that") is unfamiliar to many Canadian readers today, a discussion of the poem might include a paraphrase—a rewording, a translation into more familiar language, such as

> The friends who think that I am doing the wrong thing

Perhaps the rest of the poem is immediately clear, but in any case here is the entire poem, followed by a paraphrase:

> The friends that have it I do wrong
> When ever I remake a song,
> Should know what issue is at stake:
> It is myself that I remake.

Now for the paraphrase:

> The friends who think that I am doing the wrong thing when I revise one of my poems should be told what the important issue is; I'm not just revising a poem; rather, I am revising my own thoughts, my own feelings.

Here, as with any paraphrase, the meaning is not translated exactly; there is some distortion. If English is not your first language, you are very aware of how hard it is to capture true meaning in a paraphrase or translation. For instance, if "song" in the original is clarified by "poem" in the paraphrase, it is also altered; the paraphrase loses the sense of lyricism that is implicit in "song." Further, "Should know what issue is at stake" (in the original), is ambiguous. Does "should" mean "ought," as in (for instance) "You should know better than to speak so rudely," or does it mean "deserve to be informed," as in "You ought to know that I am thinking about quitting"?

Granted that a paraphrase may miss a great deal, a paraphrase often helps you, or your reader, to understand at least the surface meaning, and the act of paraphrasing will usually help you to understand at least some of the implicit meaning. Furthermore, a paraphrase makes you see that the original writer's words (if the work is a good one) are exactly right, better than any words we might substitute. It becomes clear that the thing said in the original—not only the rough "idea" expressed but also the precise **TONE** with which it is expressed—is a sharply defined experience.

## A LITERARY RESPONSE

Of course, anything that you write about a work of literature is a response, even if it seems to be as matter-of-fact as a summary. It's sometimes useful to compare your summary with that of a classmate. You may be surprised to find that the two summaries differ considerably—though when you think about it, this is not really surprising. Two different people are saying what they think is the gist of the work, and their views are inevitably shaped, at least to some degree, by such things as their gender, their ethnicity, and their experience (including, of course, their *literary* experience).

But when we talk about writing a response, we usually mean something more avowedly personal, something (for instance) like an entry in a journal, wherein the writer may set forth an emotional response, perhaps relating the work to one of his or her own experiences. (On journals, see pages 18–19.)

### Writing a Literary Response

You may want to rewrite a literary work, for instance by giving it a different ending, or by writing an epilogue in which you show the characters 20 years later. (We have already talked about the possibility of writing a sequel to Vigneault's "The Wall," or of writing a letter from the monk to the mason, or of writing the monk's memoirs.) Or you might want to rewrite a literary work, presenting the characters from a somewhat different point of view. A student who argues in an essay on Davies' *Fifth Business* that Boy Staunton *needs* someone very much like Dunstan Ramsay as a **FOIL** might well rewrite Davies' novel from Staunton's point of view. The fun for the reader would of course rest largely in hearing the story reinterpreted, in seeing the story turned inside out. It would be a challenge to rewrite "Marrying the Hangman"

from the point of view of the husband. What would he say of the voice through the wall and its sexual promises? And what would he say of the woman he subsequently found himself bound to marry? Is he guilty of abuse? Does he really want gratitude from his wife for saving her, or does he just want a "simple life"? Rewriting a story like this could be an entertaining exercise, and it certainly would help you come to understand the author's **STYLE** and use of detail. It is unlikely, however, that you will be asked to undertake such an exercise (except, perhaps, in a creative writing class).

## A PARODY

One special kind of response is the PARODY, a comic form that imitates the original in a humorous way. It is a caricature in words. For instance, a parody may imitate the style of the original—let's say, short, punchy sentences—but apply this style to a subject that the original author would not be concerned with. Thus, because Ernest Hemingway often wrote short, simple sentences about tough guys engaged in activities such as hunting, fishing, and boxing, parodists of Hemingway are likely to use the same style but for their subject they may choose something like opening the mail, or preparing a cup of tea.

Canadians have a great love of parody (as we do of **SATIRE**). One of the funniest books in early Canadian literature was *Sarah Binks*, a parody by Paul Hiebert of literary styles, literary criticism, and second-rate writing. Hiebert created a fictional poet named Sarah Binks (he called her a poetess and the Laureate of Saskatchewan which, today, adds to the humour) who wrote terrible poems in various derivative styles. She treated absurd subjects and had a funny, repressed relationship with the hired man, Ole. Hiebert made up her poems and then wrote literary criticism of them, lampooning professorial attitudes and vocabulary. Traditional parodies are critical, but they are usually affectionate, too. In the best parodies one feels that the writer admires the author being parodied. Canadians have come to love Sarah Binks, even though they see how foolish she is and how naïve.

Stephen Leacock, an early Canadian humorist, often used parody in his scathing satires. Popular TV shows like the very successful *SCTV*, *The Royal Canadian Air Farce*, and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* all use parody as one of their vehicles for humour. Not only can literature parody itself, but film and television can also exaggerate and poke fun at the clichés in which they operate. *SCTV*'s parodies of movie classics are hilarious, and characters on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* are often depicted watching the very programmes they satirize and mimicking the behaviour of characters on these shows. This sort of double parody is very sophisticated.

## POSTMODERN PASTICHE AND PARODY

In the last twenty years or so, a new attitude has developed that eclipses or "empties out" parody. Parody may take pieces from various existing literary, dramatic, and filmic sources and "glue" them together into a mixed form

that mimics (or satirizes) the individual styles or beliefs of each "piece." Fredric Jameson, in his influential essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," however, describes a contemporary condition in which styles or beliefs—and even language—is no longer seen as individual or living. The writer who takes segments of such empty allusions engages in what Jameson calls a "neutral" mimicry, creating "blank parody." Jameson calls this style of writing **PASTICHE** and argues that it does not have the same intention to correct, or the same affection for the source, as traditional parody. Many young, urban Canadian writers are creating pastiche.

## A REVIEW

A review, for instance of a play or of a novel, is also a response, since it normally includes an evaluation of the work, but at least at first glance it may seem to be an analytic essay. We'll talk about a review of a production of a play, but you can easily adapt what we say to a review of a book.

### A Review of a Dramatic Production

Your instructor may ask you to write a review of a local production. A review requires analytic skill, but it is not identical with an analysis. First, a reviewer normally assumes that the reader is unfamiliar with the production being reviewed and also with the play if the play is not a classic. Thus, the first paragraph usually provides a helpful introduction along these lines:

> Morris Panych's award-winning play, *7 Stories*, a satire of social, psychological and religious attitudes, shows us a man contemplating suicide. Having been unable to find a parking place, the Man decides he can no longer bear to live in his urban world and plans to leap off a building. On the ledge, he encounters the occupants of the building who slowly lead him to a self-revelation.

Inevitably some retelling of the plot is necessary if the play is new, and a summary of a sentence or two is acceptable even for a familiar play. The review will, however, chiefly be concerned with

describing,
analyzing, and
evaluating.

Some advice:

1. *Save the program*; it will give you the names of the actors, and perhaps a brief biography of the author, a synopsis of the plot, and a photograph of the set, all of which may be helpful.

2. *Draft your review as soon as possible*, while the performance is still fresh in your mind. If you cannot draft it immediately after seeing the play, at least jot down some notes about the setting and the staging, the acting, and the audience's response.

3. *If possible, read the play*—ideally, before the performance and again after it.

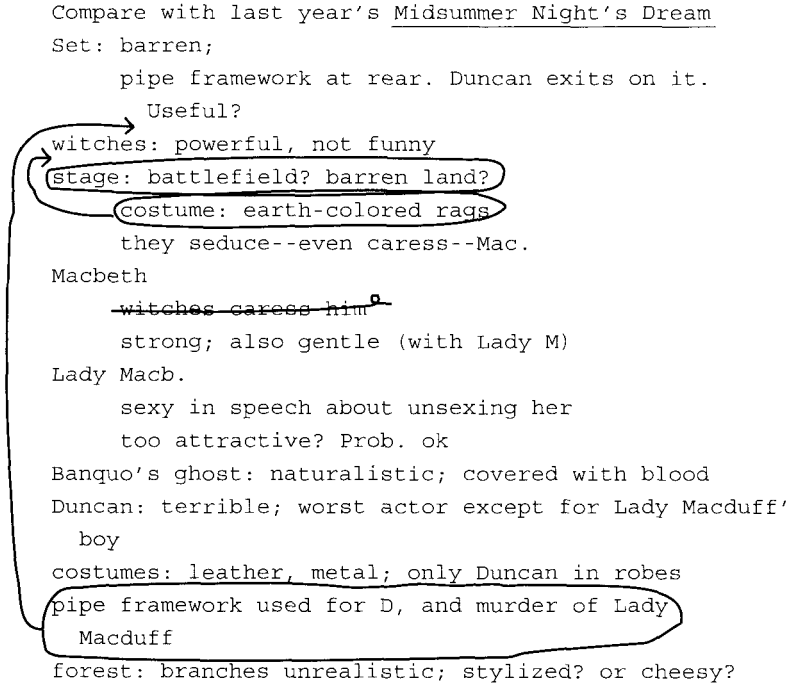
4. *In your first draft, don't worry about limitations of space*; write as long a review as you wish, putting down everything that comes to mind. Later, you can cut it to the required length, retaining only the chief points and the necessary supporting details; but in your first draft, try to produce a fairly full record of the performance and your response to it, so that later, when you revise, you won't have to trust a fading memory for details.

## A Sample Review: "An Effective *Macbeth*"

If you read reviews of plays in *Maclean's* or a newspaper, you will soon develop a sense of what reviews normally do. Newspaper reviews, however, are usually not as concerned with analysis as you might be in a critical review for class. The following example, an undergraduate's review of a production of *Macbeth*, is typical except in one respect. As has been mentioned, reviews of new plays customarily include a few sentences summarizing the plot and classifying the play (a tragedy, a **FARCE**, a rock musical, or whatever), perhaps briefly putting it into the context of the author's other works. Because *Macbeth* is so widely known, however, the reviewer need not tell her readers that the play is a tragedy by Shakespeare.

### *Preliminary Jottings*

During the two intermissions and immediately after the end of the performance, the reviewer made a few jottings, which she rewrote later:



### *The Finished Version*

The published review follows, accompanied by some marginal notes commenting on its strengths.

Sandra Santiago

An Effective Macbeth

*Title conveys information about thesis.*

Macbeth at the University Theater is a thoughtful and occasionally exciting production, partly because the director, Mark Urice, has trusted Shakespeare and has not imposed a gimmick on the play. The characters do not wear cowboy costumes as they did in last year's production of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

*Opening paragraph is informative, letting the reader know the reviewer's overall attitude. Note that this review is of a production in the US and the spelling is American, not Canadian.*

Probably the chief problem confronting a director of Macbeth is how to present the witches so that they are powerful supernatural forces and not silly things that look as though they came from a Halloween party. Urice gives us ugly but not absurdly grotesque witches, and he introduces them most effectively. The stage seems to be a bombed-out battlefield littered with rocks and great chunks of earth, but some of these begin to stir--the earth seems to come alive--and the clods move, unfold, and become the witches, dressed in brown and dark gray rags. The suggestion is that the witches are a part of nature, elemental forces that can hardly be escaped. This effect is increased by the moans and creaking noises that they make, all of which could be comic but which in this production are impressive.

*Reviewer promptly turns to a major issue.*

*First sentence of this paragraph provides an effective transition.*

The witches' power over Macbeth is further emphasized by their actions. When the witches first meet Macbeth, they encircle him, touch him, caress him, even embrace him, and he seems helpless, almost their plaything. Moreover, in the scene in which he imagines

that he sees a dagger, the director has arranged for one of the witches to appear, stand near Macbeth, and guide his hand toward the invisible dagger. This is, of course, not in the text, but the interpretation is reasonable rather than intrusive. Finally, near the end of the play, just before Macduff kills Macbeth, a witch appears and laughs at Macbeth as Macduff explains that he was not "born of woman." There is no doubt that throughout the tragedy Macbeth has been a puppet of the witches.

*Paragraph begins with a broad assertion and then offers supporting details.*

Macbeth (Stephen Beers) and Lady Macbeth (Tina Peters) are excellent. Beers is sufficiently brawny to be convincing as a battlefield hero, but he also speaks the lines sensitively, and so the audience feels that in addition to being a hero he is a man of insight and imagination, and even a man of gentleness. One can believe Lady Macbeth when she says that she fears he is "too full of the milk of human kindness" to murder Duncan.

*Reference to a particular scene.*

Lady Macbeth is especially effective in the scene in which she asks the spirits to "unsex her." During this speech she is reclining on a bed and as she delivers the lines she becomes increasingly sexual in her bodily motions, deriving excitement from her own stimulating words. Her attachment to Macbeth is strongly sexual, and so too is his attraction to her. The scene when she persuades him to kill Duncan ends with them passionately embracing. The strong attraction of each for the other, so evident in the early part of the play, disappears after the murder, when Macbeth keeps his distance from Lady Macbeth and does not allow her to touch him.

The acting of the other performers is effective, except for Duncan (John Berens), who recites the lines mechanically and seems not to take much account of their meaning.

*Description, but also analysis.*

The set consists of a barren plot at the rear on which stands a spidery framework of piping, of the sort used by construction companies, supporting a catwalk. This framework fits with the costumes (lots of armor, leather, heavy boots), suggesting a sort of elemental, primitive, and somewhat sadistic world. The catwalk, though effectively used when Macbeth goes off to murder Duncan (whose room is presumably upstairs and offstage) is not much used in later scenes. For the most part it is an interesting piece of scenery but it is not otherwise helpful. For instance, there is no reason why the scene with Macduff's wife and children is staged on it. The costumes are not in any way Scottish--no plaids--but in several scenes the sound of a bagpipe is heard, adding another weird or primitive tone to the production.

*Concrete details.*

*Summary*

This Macbeth appeals to the eye, the ear, and the mind. The director has given us a unified production that makes sense and that is faithful to the spirit of Shakespeare's play.

*Documentation*

Work Cited

Macbeth. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Mark Urice. Perf. Stephen Beers, Tina Peters, and John Berens. University Theater, Medford, MA. 3 Mar. 1990.

The marginal notes call attention to certain qualities in the review, but three additional points should be made:

1. The reviewer's feelings and evaluations are clearly expressed, not in such expressions as "furthermore I feel," and "it is also my opinion," but in such expressions as "a thoughtful and occasionally exciting production," "excellent," and "appeals to the eye, the ear, and the mind."
2. The evaluations are supported by details. For instance, the evaluation that the witches are effectively presented is supported by a brief description of their appearance.
3. The reviewer is courteous, even when (as in the discussion of the catwalk, in the next-to-last paragraph) she is talking about aspects of the production she doesn't care for.

## 🕮 Suggestions for Further Reading

Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983). Jameson's idea of pastiche is further discussed in "Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984).