

STARPATH SERIES



STARPATH SERIES

Thinking and Writing About Literature

Edgar V. Roberts

...the world
...was coming to
Stephen walked
stories he heard
of the scattered
comparisons of his
school in his heart
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and bloody good honest I
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The essay was
chief labor of his week
Tuesday, as he marched
home to the school, he
late in the m
thing himself, had of

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Thinking and Writing About Literature

Edgar V. Roberts

Herbert H. Lehman College
The City University of New York

Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

THINKING AND WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

(Adapted from *Writing Themes About Literature*)

Edgar V. Roberts

Supplementary: Teacher's Guide

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Thinking and Writing About Literature

The Story of **Starpath** Books

Starpath books are selected Prentice-Hall texts that have been specially adapted to meet the needs of high school students.

As originally published by Prentice-Hall's College Division, these books have been widely used not only in colleges but in high schools as well. Now, in response to suggestions from many educators, Prentice-Hall's Educational Book Division has prepared Starpath editions of these titles, revised and rewritten for use at the high school level.

The result is a series of widely acclaimed texts, carefully adapted on the basis of extensive evaluation by high school educators and specifically designed to appeal to today's high school students.

For Nanette

To the Teacher

This book provides a tested but fresh approach to writing themes on literary topics; it concentrates on literary problems *as* they bear on writing themes. I have tried to keep in focus the needs of students faced with difficult assignments, and I have emphasized how the assignments may be treated within the confines of a theme. This approach has worked; it has the virtue of making the theoretical discussion of a technique of literary criticism immediately vital to students. If they can see a literary problem in the light of their necessity to write about it, they are more likely to learn their lesson well. This book might be called a rhetoric of practical criticism for students.

Students need guidance before they write a theme about literature. It is a common complaint among teachers that students' papers on literary topics are not really to the point. The reason is simple: the majority of students asked to "analyze the structure of X play, or Y poem, or Z short story" do not really understand what structure is or how to go about analyzing it. Students asked to discuss "point of view in X literary work" are similarly handicapped, and so on. Under these conditions, teachers either take valuable time explaining theme assignments or else continue to receive inadequate student writing about literature. This book is offered as a solution. Its aim is to free teachers from the drudgery and lost time of making assignments and to help students by explaining and illustrating many approaches to literary technique in order to provide a sound basis for analysis. The practical aim of the book is to aid students in improving their reading and writing skills.

It has been many years since the first edition of this book was published in 1964. During the interval a number of books on the same general topic have appeared, evidence of a widening use of lit-

erature in composition exercises, and also evidence that professional literary criticism does not offer practical guidance for students who are about to write on literary topics. It no longer seems necessary, therefore, to justify the need for the approach found in *Thinking and Writing About Literature*.

Nevertheless, I should like to re-assert that each of the assignments in this book has been worked out in the classroom and has demonstrably helped students improve their themes about literature. Even though the assignments can stand alone, they may be used as bases for discussions before assignments are due or as supplements to the discussions. Of course, the assignments may be modified if you desire.

Each chapter is devoted to the consideration of a separate literary approach that creates a problem in composition. The method is to go from precept to example, in the belief that both will benefit a student more than each can separately. The first part of each chapter is thus a discussion of the problems raised by a particular assignment, and is followed by one or two sample themes illustrating a way of handling the problems in a theme-length form. The discussions are always focused on critical techniques as they bear on writing assigned to students. The sample themes show how the students themselves might handle the various assignments. Although some students will follow the patterns closely, others will wish to adapt the discussions and samples to their own needs.

The sample themes have been written in the belief that the word *imitation* does not have to be preceded by adjectives like *slavish* or *mere*. There is an additional question of how best to liberate the minds of our students. My belief is that liberation best occurs when students are freed from uncertainties about how to approach the problems they face. In other words, if students must search for the proper forms of expression, they will dissipate their energies and fail to devote themselves fully to the real problems at hand. But if they already know the forms in which to present their thoughts, they can focus directly on reading and interpreting the texts at hand. An immediate result should be superior themes about literature, and a longer-term result should be a step toward that goal we all seek: liberal education.

For illustrative purposes, the sample themes are slightly long, yet they are within the approximate lengths of many high school themes. Although the various lengths cannot always coincide with the word limits set by individual teachers, the organization and method of the sample themes should be, and have been demonstrated to be, helpful. These samples should be regarded both as goals toward which average students can work and as guides for more advanced students.

New in this edition are commentaries on each of the sample themes, for use as additional study guides. These have been added at the suggestion of many students. It is my hope that they will help students make the connection between the precepts in the first part of the chapter and the examples in the second part.

Some of the sample themes have been rewritten for this edition, and many new ones have been added. In some chapters I have included two sample themes when two different approaches have been clearly mandated by the theme types. Thus Chapter 12, on imagery, presents sample themes on imagery in a poem and symbolism in a story, and Chapter 1, on précis writing, presents themes on a story and on an article.

An important addition, in Chapter 10, is a sample theme on the technique of extended comparison and contrast. This example provides one way out of the pitfalls of plagiarism which are often encountered in the research paper. As an alternate long paper, the theme offers both the challenge of handling many sources—here mainly primary—and the requirement of dealing with documentation. In this theme there is an example of how reference works may be used for factual information, but the use of critical secondary sources has been avoided. If this approach is not followed, there is still Appendix C, which provides a perspective on research and which, if taken in conjunction with the chapter assignments, offers guidance for extensive research work.

An additional word seems necessary about the completeness of the various sample themes, for it has been suggested that an in-class impromptu theme cannot come anywhere near the scope and detail of the samples. The themes are guides, and as such they represent a *full* treatment of each of the various topics. If students are preparing their themes outside of class, they can readily approximate the scope of the sample. Even though the samples usually treat an average of three aspects of particular topics, there is nothing to prevent the assigning of only one, either for an impromptu theme or for an outside-class theme. If the subject is tone, for example, students may be asked to discuss only how the tone is shown through selected diction in the work assigned. This method of assigning papers would make for short, well-focused themes, and it could also be applied to paragraph-length assignments. On a day-to-day basis, the assignment of paragraphs can prove most useful, both as a method of assuring preparation for classroom discussions and as a means of keeping students in practice for longer assignments. If the sample themes are used in these ways—as a guide in a flexible system of assignments rather than as hard-and-fixed goals—their purpose will have been realized.

In the introduction to this edition of *Thinking and Writing About Literature* I have included a short description of the various genres; it

seems necessary here to refer to the applicability of most of the chapters to the genres. Obviously, a few of the themes are more appropriate to some of the genres than to others. Thus Chapter 4, on character analysis, is most applicable to drama and narrative, where characterization is preeminent, but generally not to poetry and the essay. Chapters 5 and 6, on point of view and setting, are useful primarily for narrative but not for the other genres. One may readily grant that Chapter 14, on prosody, is exclusively the domain of poetry, while Chapter 15, on prose style, is designed for the other genres. (Even so, most of the approaches to studying prose style can also be applied to poetry.) Chapter 18, on film, is designed exclusively for writing themes about movies. All the other chapters, however, are useful for the study of any one of the genres. While imagery (Chapter 12) is probably best studied in poetry, it is an element in all literature and can profitably be analyzed in a story, essay, or play (the second sample theme is an analysis of symbolism in a story). The structure of anything (Chapter 11) can be studied, and anything written has some quality of tone (Chapter 13) that can be analyzed and described. Ideas may be found in all the genres (Chapter 7), just as a common element in any of the genres may be set up as the common ground for comparison and contrast (Chapter 10). The other chapters are equally applicable to all the genres.

In addition to the extensive changes already mentioned, the present edition contains many significant alterations and improvements. There is new material on documentation in Appendix B, and there are extensive changes in the discussion sections of the chapters. My general plan in revising has been to make things better wherever my experience, together with the helpful advice of many obliging users of the book, has discovered the need for improvement. Almost no chapter has remained untouched, and many have undergone great change. This edition also reflects a number of decisions about basic changes that were proposed but not accepted. In their effect, these decisions have significantly determined the shape of the book, although they must remain "unseen" to everyone but myself and a few advisers.

There are frequent references throughout the book to many literary works, and it is unlikely that any student will yet have encountered all. Because references cannot be justified unless they clarify, I have tried to make each one self-explanatory and have included enough details to achieve this end. Lack of familiarity with the particular work being discussed therefore should not deter a student from understanding the point of the reference. In addition, I have tried to refer to works that high school students are likely to encounter, if not in a general English class, then in a survey or honors course, or even, let us hope, in their own independent reading.

The chapters have been arranged in an order of increasing difficulty and technicality. With the *précis* theme in Chapter 1, students may begin with the simplest form of writing about any of the genres. The first three themes become progressively broader in scope. The next three are designed primarily for courses offering students an introduction to the study of narrative fiction. The next four, again applicable to any of the genres, provide a number of reading techniques that reach a climax in the comparison-contrast theme, a theme which could suitably focus all the various techniques that students have acquired to that point in the course. The remaining chapters are admittedly more difficult and in some cases more specifically "literary." They are nevertheless useful for students in basic courses, and I have been pleased to learn that many teachers have assigned them there with considerable success.

Although a full-year course could be devoted to the progression of themes from beginning to end, quite often only part of the class time is available. Whatever your situation, flexibility should always be your guide. For example, you may wish to assign the same type of theme on different works of literature until students show a mastery over that type, or you may assign separate types on the same work to show how compatible the different approaches are; you might also base theme assignments on single aspects of any one chapter. In addition, I believe that students beyond average ability will continue to find the book useful, because the advanced assignments here are on a level of difficulty and technicality suitable for upper-level courses.

The book offers a practical solution to a very real problem with many composition assignments. Composition is frequently regarded as a service, for it teaches writing techniques essential in all high school work. This need has forced the content in composition to cover too wide a range of subject matter. There can be little unity when students write themes on topics derived from many unrelated fields. All this material is usually taught by teachers who have been prepared by years of literary study. Here is the rub: although you yourself may want to teach literature as a discipline and as a pleasure, you know that your students must have intense work in composition for all their other high school work. One purpose of this book is to reconcile this conflict by unifying the course and making it challenging to you as well as to the student. Using assignments here, you can satisfy the needs of your course by teaching composition while you satisfy your own discipline by teaching literature and literary techniques. Although these assignments attempt to integrate the teaching of literature and composition, many have residual effect on other courses, and in this edition I have emphasized these relationships. Thus, Chapter 1 has a beneficial effect on study methods for

any course. Chapter 2 contains a basic thematic method for assembling any body of material. The theme in Chapter 10 can be applied to any course where comparisons and contrasts are required, such as the heredity-environment controversy in science or social studies. In this way, I hope that the usefulness of the chapters will extend far beyond the immediate course.

An almost foolproof solution to another difficulty in teaching composition—plagiarism—is offered. During one year, for example, you might assign a theme about the main idea in “The Garden Party,” whereas during the next you might assign a theme about the main idea in *Macbeth*, and so on. In high schools where a common syllabus is used in all yearly English courses, the same procedure could be followed uniformly. This plan, whereby the form of each theme is preserved while the subject matter is changed, could prevent students from copying papers written in the past. The possibilities for varied assignments are virtually endless.

Most important of all, however, is that the book is aimed at the appreciation of good literature. Literature is the property of all; its appeal is to all. But literature, as an art, employs techniques and offers problems that can be understood only through analysis, and analysis means work. The immediate aim is to help the student in this work, but the primary object of the book is to promote the pleasurable study and, finally, the love of literature.

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