

WRITING THEMES ABOUT LITERATURE

erature . genre . drama . narrative . poetry . nonfiction
erary analysis . imagination . invention . prewriting
ral idea . brainstorming . thesis sentence . outlining
ence . keeping to your point . growth . development
rate, forceful language . precise or abstract . detail
ary . plot . idea . limiting details . introduction
clusion . character . action . point of view . setting
sphere . ideas and values . imagery . symbolism . a
e . metaphor . personification . fable . myth .

t, Frost . Nathaniel Hawthorne . Guy de Maupassant
O'Connor . Eudora Welles . Anton Chekov

Edgar V. Roberts

brief edition

Writing Themes About Literature

ROBERTS, EDGAR V.

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To the Instructor

I am presenting this shorter version of *Writing Themes About Literature* after many years of deliberation. Advisers have pointed out the need for just such a book designed for the one-semester composition course based on literary subject matter. At the same time they have indicated that the full edition of *Writing Themes About Literature* is too comprehensive for such a course. This shorter version has been designed to meet this need. Containing ten chapters from the forthcoming fifth edition, it is short enough to fit the one-semester composition course but still lengthy enough to provide for a wide variety of theme-writing topics.

This selection, slightly more than half of the full version, represents a balanced blend of topics. Some are general, some more literary in scope. Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9 are grounded specifically in the study of literature, while 1, 2, 7, 8, and 10 are of a general nature. All the assignments are designed to develop writing skills that may be carried over to any course in the college curriculum. The more general techniques, such as the study of ideas and problems, can be used directly. The more literary techniques have various special applications for topics in other disciplines (e.g., the use of point of view in the analysis of political speeches; the study of imagery, such as Plato's cave, in philosophy). An additional value is that students handling them may go to other disciplines with confidence in their developing writing strengths.

In offering this shorter edition of *Writing Themes About Literature*, I have tried to keep and strengthen those qualities that have occasioned so much support from so many of you over the years. As always, my approach is not based on genres from which theme assignments are to be somehow determined, but instead each chapter is designed to produce full-length student themes on any assigned work, regardless of genre. The chapters, naturally, may also be used as the basis for study and classroom discussions about the various approaches. In addition, they may be used for paragraph-length assignments. The result is that the book offers great scope and variety—with the possibility of complete or close-to-complete use—for a one-semester composition course.

The chapters are still arranged in an order of difficulty, going from simpler to more complex matters as students progress. 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 broader in scope, with Chapter 3, on likes or dislikes, being new in this edition. The next three are designed primarily for narrative (both prose and poetry) and drama. Applicable to any of the genres are the final four chapters (including one about imagery, a “literary” subject that is essential to the study of just about all writing). These provide a number of reading and writing techniques that build to the comparison-contrast theme. This theme could suitably employ any analytic technique that students have acquired up to that point in the course. The theme of extended comparison could be an assignment that might be made as the long theme for the one-semester course.

Although you might wish to assign the chapters in order throughout the course, you are at liberty to assign them as you choose, in any order you wish. One instructor, for example, might choose to omit the first two chapters and repeat certain assignments such as those on character and setting. Another might prefer not to use the longer comparison-contrast theme, but might repeat the shorter one for a number of separate assignments such as comparative studies of imagery, character, personal likes, or point of view. Still another might wish to use just a few of the chapters, assigning them two or more times until it seems clear that the students have overcome all problems with the materials. The book offers the possibility for such uses according to your needs.

As in each past edition of *Writing Themes About Literature*, the chapters are composed of two parts. The first is a discussion of the problems raised by a particular literary approach, and the second is a sample theme (or two) showing how the problems may be treated in a theme.

I have designed all changes in the descriptive sections to emphasize the process of writing itself. Most of these sections are extensively revised; some have been almost entirely rewritten. I had always planned these

sections as instruction in the process of understanding literary concepts, preparing materials for a theme, and writing the theme. My changes bring this process into even stronger focus. All discussions of analytical concepts have the thrust of enabling students to know what to look for and what to do in the invention-prewriting stages of their themes. I have minimized references to critical problems that are of interest mainly to the student of literature. Generally, I have cut discussions of exceptions, qualifications, and "pitfalls" in favor of including these at the appropriate places in the Instructor's Manual.

The sample themes are presented in the belief that the word *imitation* does not have to be preceded by adjectives like *slavish* or *mere*. The purpose is to give students a concrete visualization of what might be done on particular assignments. Such examples, I believe, help them in their composing and writing. With the sample in mind, they have a construction that gives them something to aim for. Without such an example, they must add the task of creating their own form of expression to the already formidable need for understanding new concepts and interpreting a new work of literature. Although some students will follow the samples closely, others will wish to adapt the discussions and samples to their own needs or wishes. The samples thus encourage students to write at a more advanced level than they otherwise might be able to do.

Because the sample themes are guides, they represent a full treatment of each of the various topics. Nevertheless, in this edition they have been held within the approximate length of most assignments in freshman classes. If students are writing outside of class, they can readily create themes as full as the samples. Even though the samples treat an average of three aspects of particular topics (making for the traditional five-paragraph theme), there is nothing to prevent assigning only one aspect, either for an impromptu or for an outside-class theme. For example, using the chapter on setting, you might assign a paragraph about the use of setting in only the first scene of a story, or you might require a paragraph about interior settings, or about references to a particular color, or about the use of light and darkness. With such variations, not only the entire sample theme, but separate parts, may be used as a guide.

To make the sample themes more accessible to students, in this shorter version I have based them on the pieces included in Appendix C (many of the discussions are also based on these). This practice (except for longer works) was adopted in the second edition of *Writing Themes About Literature*, but critical response did not warrant its continuance in the third and fourth editions. Now, because of renewed recommendations, it is adopted systematically here. Thus the student studying point of view can compare the sample theme on that topic with the complete text of Frank O'Connor's "First Confession," which is printed in Appendix C. This story is also used

in the two comparison-contrast themes in Chapter 10, and in the sample theme on character developed extensively in the preliminary chapter on the writing process. It is my hope that the reliance on these anthologized works will give this shorter version a unity and coherence that will help students in understanding the nature of their assignments.

Following each sample theme is a commentary—a feature new in the fourth edition and continued in this one—presented to help students make the connection between the precepts in the first part of the chapter and the example in the second.

My hope is that all revisions and changes will be readable and clear. Throughout, I have tried to use an easy, “plain” style, to borrow a description from classical rhetoric. This has meant a general shortening of sentences and paragraphs and a preference for concrete words of the least number of syllables that correctness will allow. The success of my attempts will have to await the responses of students as expressed in their themes.

This shorter version brings into focus something that has always been true of *Writing Themes About Literature*. The book is to be used in the classroom as a practical guide for writing. It is also a guide to a number of literary approaches that are clarified for students because of the reinforcement of writing. The chapters are writing assignments and the goal is to improve student writing. The reading of literary works is introduced as the means of developing support for ideas during the invention-prewriting stage of themes. In short, the stress throughout the book is on the process of writing.

This method, which has been constant in my book since its first edition appeared in 1964, is designed to equip students to face the situations encountered in college. There, they are required to write about problems in other departments like psychology, economics, sociology, biology, and political science. Instructors in these departments present texts or ask their students to develop raw data, and they assign writing on this basis. Writing is on external, written materials, not on descriptions of the student’s own experiences or on opinions. Writing is about reading.

Yet we instructors of composition face the problem we have always faced. On the one hand the needs of other departments have caused a wide diversification of subject matter, creating both a strain on the general knowledge of the staff and also a certain thematic disunity. On the other, in programs where personal experiences or offhand topic materials are the subject matter, the course has little bearing on writing for other courses. As an institutional matter, recent emphasis on writing-across-the-curriculum has created a greater awareness of the disciplinary writing needs of other departments. But coordinators and instructors of composition still face the problem of content in the basic writing courses. With a background in literature, the English faculty has the task of meeting the service needs

of the institution without compromising their own disciplinary commitment.

The approach in this book deals with this problem. Teachers can work with their own discipline—literature—while also fulfilling their primary responsibility of teaching writing. Thus the book keeps all these problems in perspective:

The requirement of the institution for composition.

The need of students to develop writing skills based on written texts.

The responsibility of English faculty to teach writing while still working within their own area of expertise.

It is gratifying to claim that the approach in *Writing Themes About Literature* has been tested for many years. It is no longer new, but it is still novel. It works. It gives coherence to the sometimes fragmented composition course. It also provides for adaptation and, as I have stressed, variety. Using the book, you can develop a virtually endless number of new topics for themes. One obvious benefit is the possibility of entirely eliminating not only the traditional “theme barrels” of infamous memory in fraternity and sorority houses, but also the newer interference from business “enterprises” that provide themes to order.

While *Writing Themes About Literature* is designed as a rhetoric of practical criticism for students, it is based on profoundly held convictions. I believe that true liberation in a liberal arts curriculum is achieved only through clearly defined goals. Just to make assignments and to let students do with them what they can is to encourage them to continue in a state of frustration and mental enslavement. But if students can develop a deep knowledge of specific approaches to subject material, they can begin to develop some of that expertness which is essential to freedom. As Pope said:

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

It is almost axiomatic that the development of writing skill in one area—in this instance the interpretation of literature—can have an enabling effect on the development of skill in other areas. The search for information with a particular goal in mind, the asking of pointed questions, the testing, rephrasing, and developing of ideas—all these and more are transferable skills on which students can build throughout their college years and beyond.

I have one concluding article of faith. Those of us whose careers have been established in the study of literature have made commitments to our belief in its value. The study of literature is valid in and for itself. But literature as an art form employs techniques and creates problems for readers that can be dealt with only through analysis, and analysis means

work. Thus, the immediate aim of *Writing Themes About Literature* is to help students to do their work and to write about it. But the ultimate objective (in the past I wrote “primary objective”) is to promote the pleasurable study and, finally, the love of literature.

—Edgar V. Roberts

Acknowledgments

The decision to develop this Brief Edition of *Writing Themes About Literature* was based on the thoughts and comments of many instructors over the past years. A developing consensus was that a shorter version might suit their needs in some of their courses better than the full text. Thus, as in all past editions of *Writing Themes About Literature*, I am not only deeply grateful, but deeply indebted, to those who have used and thoughtfully responded to the book. I should also like to extend my thanks to Professors Douglas Buttress, Peter DeBlois, Kathleen Dubs, George Hayhoe, Henry Jacobs, and John Ramsey, all of whom offered detailed suggestions for improving this edition of *Writing Themes About Literature*. Their expertise and insights were the causes of many important additions, excisions, and revisions. To Bill Oliver, Bud Therien, and Bruce Kennan of Prentice-Hall, I am particularly grateful. I shall long remember their kindness, concern, intelligence, and helpfulness. Chrys Chrzanowski of Prentice-Hall designed the Brief Edition, and for her skill and hard work I am thankful. Finally, I should like to thank Ilene McGrath, who copyedited the manuscript and who offered many, many improvements.

Edgar V. Roberts

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preliminary:

The Process of Writing Themes About Literature

The chapters that follow are theme assignments based on a number of analytical approaches important to the study of literature. The assignments are designed to fulfill two goals of composition and English courses: (1) to write good themes, and (2) to assimilate great works of literature into the imagination. On the negative side, the chapters aim to help you avoid writing themes that are no more than retellings of a story, vague statements of like or dislike, or biographies of an author. On the positive side, the book aims to help you improve your writing skills through the use of literature as subject matter. Integral to your writing is your standard of literary judgment and the knowledge you need to distinguish good literature from bad. The book aims to encourage the development of these abilities by requiring you to apply, in well-prepared themes, specific approaches to good reading.

No educational process is complete until you have applied what you have studied. That is, you have not really learned something until you can talk or write about it or until you can apply it to some question or problem. The need for application requires you to recognize where your learning is incomplete, so that you may strengthen your knowledge. Thus, it is easy for you to read the chapter on *point of view* (the position from which details are seen, described, and considered), and it is presumably easy to read, say, Frank O'Connor's story "First Confession." But your grasp of point