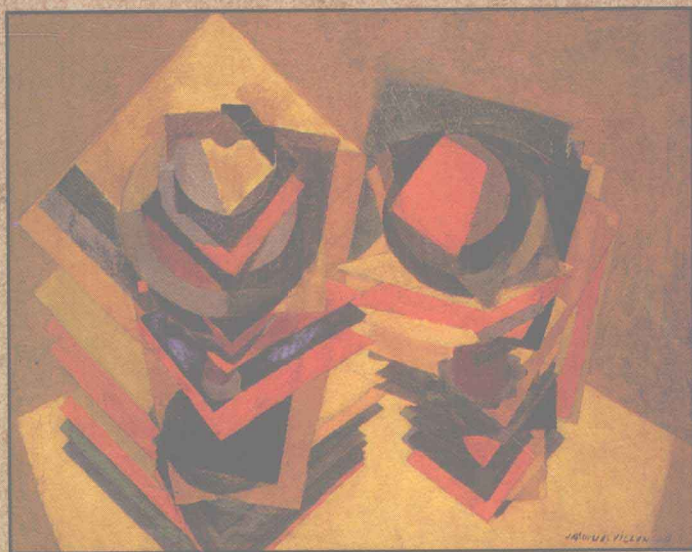


BRIEF EIGHTH EDITION

WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

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EDGAR V. ROBERTS

Brief Eighth Edition

*Writing
About
Literature*

EDGAR V. ROBERTS

*Lehman College
of
The City University of New York*



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To the Instructor

In the Brief Eighth Edition of *Writing About Literature*, I have kept and strengthened those features that so many of you have valued over the years. As in the past, I base my approach not on genres, with specific assignments to be determined, but rather on topics for full-length essays on texts in any genre. The chapters may also be used as starting points for classroom study and discussion and may be adapted for shorter writing assignments. The result is that the Brief Eighth Edition offers great scope and variety, with the possibility of complete or close to complete use.

Organization

As in each past edition of *Writing About Literature*, the chapters consist of two parts. The first is a discussion of a literary approach, and the second is a sample essay (or, in one chapter, two) showing how students might deal with the approach.

A major characteristic preserved in this edition is that, after the preliminary discussion in Chapter 1, the chapters are arranged in order of increasing difficulty. Beginning with Chapter 2, which helps students connect their reading with their responses, the chapters progress from topics relevant to all the genres. The comparison-contrast chapter (10), for example, illustrates in its two parts the ways in which the earlier techniques may be focused on any

of the topics in the book; in addition, the essay of extended comparison may serve as a longer assignment for a one-semester course.

Although you might assign the chapters in sequence throughout your course, you may choose them according to need and objective. One instructor, for example, might pass over the earlier chapters and go directly to the later ones. Another might omit the longer comparison-contrast essay, but might repeat the shorter one for separate assignments such as comparative studies of setting, character, or point of view. Still another might use just a few of the chapters, assigning them two or more times until students have overcome initial difficulties. No matter how the chapters are used, the two parts—discussion and illustration—enable students to improve the quality of their analytical writing.

The illustrative parts of the chapters—the sample essays—are presented in the belief that the word *imitation* need not be preceded by adjectives like *slavish* and *mere*. Their purpose is to show what *might* be done—not what *must* be done—on particular assignments. Without the samples as guides, students must add the task of creating their own thematic form to the already complex task of understanding new concepts and new works of literature. Some students may follow the samples closely, while others may adapt them or else use them as a point of departure. My assumption is that students will become free to go their own ways as they become more experienced as writers.

Because the sample essays are guides, they represent a full treatment of each of the various topics. Nevertheless, in this edition they have been kept within the approximate lengths of most assignments. If students are writing outside of class, they can readily create essays as full as the samples. Even though the samples treat three or more aspects of particular topics, there is nothing to prevent assigning only one aspect, either for an impromptu or for an outside-class essay. Thus, using the chapter on setting, you might assign a paragraph about the use of setting in only the first scene of a story, or a paragraph about interior settings, colors, or shades of light.

Following each sample essay is a commentary—which my students recommended that I include in the fourth edition and which I have kept ever since. The commentary is designed to connect the precepts in the first part of the chapter to the example in the second.

Changes and Innovations

I have designed all changes in the eighth edition of *Writing About Literature*, which the Brief Eighth Edition follows closely but does not duplicate exactly, to guide and help students in reading, studying, thinking, planning, drafting, organizing, and writing. Many chapters are extensively revised; some are almost entirely rewritten. In making the many revisions, alterations, repositionings, and additions (and subtractions), I have tried to improve,

sharpen, and freshen the underlying information and examples. Of particular note in the eighth edition, at the requests of numerous readers, is the addition of a new Appendix (C) containing brief descriptions of critical approaches that have proved important in twentieth-century literary studies, such as New Criticism, structuralism, and feminism, and including deconstruction and Reader-Response criticism.

Totally new in both versions of the eighth edition is the addition of "Special Writing Topics" at the ends of the chapters. These are mainly keyed to the works anthologized in Appendix D, but instructors are encouraged to adapt them to the selections in whatever anthologies they may be using. In a number of the chapters, there are short related topics that are boxed and shaded to set them apart for emphasis. On topics like "A Note on Handwriting and Word Processing" and "Citing References in a Longer Comparison-Contrast Essay," these discussions are designed as helpful short notes to aid students to think about and develop their own writing.

Also, at the suggestions of readers of the seventh edition, I have reversed Chapters 5 and 6, thus placing the discussion of point of view before setting in the order of chapters. Also, I have changed the name of Appendix B from "A Note on Documentation" to "The Integration of Quotations and Other Important Details, and the Use of Tenses in Writing About Literature."

Aside from the extensive revisions and improvements, the chapters are internally different because of a number of changes in Appendix D ("Works Used for Sample Essays and References"). At the suggestions of readers, Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" have been added, in addition to poems by Layton and Wordsworth. Accordingly, a small number of stories and poems have been dropped that were included in the Brief Seventh Edition. These changes necessarily bring about many alterations in references, which I hope will make the book richer and, within the confines of the short number of selections, timely. With all the changes, the Brief Eighth Edition of *Writing About Literature* is a useful and comprehensive guide for composition courses in which literature is introduced, and also for literature courses at any level.

An innovation of the sixth edition and continued in the seventh and eighth is the glossary based on the terms set in boldface in the text. The increasing number of students taking entrance examinations and GREs has justified this continuation. A student may consult the glossary, which contains definitions and page numbers for further reference, and thereby develop full and systematic knowledge of important concepts in the text.

A particular word is in order about the works included in Appendix D. At one time I believed that clarifying references could be drawn from a pool of works commonly known by advanced high school and college students, and I therefore thought that no reference anthology was necessary. I presented a small number of works in the second edition, keyed to some but not all of the sample essays, but reviewers recommended against it for the next

editions. Recent commentary, however, has emphasized that references to unknown works, even complete and self-explanatory ones, do not fully explain and clarify. Therefore, after the fifth edition I have made the book almost completely self-contained with the increased number of works in Appendix D (for the chapter on problems, however, I have continued to assume acquaintance with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). The result is that both references and sample essays may be easily verified by a reading of the accompanying works. Experience has shown that the unity and coherence provided by these works help students understand and develop their own assignments.

Writing and Literature

The Brief Eighth Edition brings into focus something that has been true of *Writing About Literature* since it first appeared in 1964. The book is primarily a practical guide for writing; the stress throughout is on writing. This emphasis is made to help students not only in composition and literature, but in most of their classes. In other subjects like psychology, economics, sociology, biology, and political science, instructors use texts and ask 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 instructors of composition face the problems we have always faced. On the one hand the needs of other departments, recently thrown into renewed focus by studies about writing-across-the-curriculum, cause wide diversification of subject matter, straining the general knowledge of the staff and also creating a certain topical and thematic disunity. On the other, programs stressing internalized subject matter, such as personal experiences or occasional topic materials, have little bearing on writing for other courses. We as English faculty, with a background in literature, have the task of meeting the service needs of the institution without compromising our own disciplinary commitment.

The approach in this book is aimed at this dilemma. Teachers can work with their own discipline—literature—while also fulfilling their primary and often required responsibility of teaching writing that is externally, not internally, directed. The book thus keeps the following issues in perspective:

- The requirement of the institution for composition
- The need of students to develop writing skills based on written texts.
- The responsibility of the English faculty to teach writing while still working within their own expertise.

It is therefore gratifying to claim that *Writing About Literature* has been offering assistance for many years to meet these needs. The approach works,

and it is still novel. 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 essays. 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 critical essays to order.

While *Writing About Literature* is designed, as I have said in the past, 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 let students do with them what they can is to encourage frustration and mental enslavement. But if students 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 learn'd to dance.

It is almost axiomatic that the development of writing skill in one area—in this instance the interpretation of literature—has an enabling effect on 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 for students to build on 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 About Literature* is to help students to read and write about individual literary works. But the ultimate objective (in the past I wrote *primary objective*) is to promote the pleasurable study and, finally, the love of literature.

Acknowledgments

As I complete the Brief Eighth Edition of *Writing About Literature*, I renew my deepest thanks to those who have been loyal to all the earlier editions. Your approval of the book is a great honor. As I think about the revisions I am impressed with how much the book has been influenced by the collective wisdom of many, many teachers and students. Those who have been particularly helpful for the eighth edition are Betty Gipson, Southwest Baptist University;

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—*Edgar V. Roberts*

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chapter 1

Preliminary: *The Process of Reading, Responding,* *and Writing About Literature*

The following chapters introduce a number of analytical approaches important in the study of literature, along with guidance for writing informative and well-focused essays based on these approaches. The chapters will help you fulfill two goals of composition and English courses: (1) to write good essays; and (2) to understand and assimilate great works of literature.

The premise of the book is that no educational process is complete until you can *apply* what you study. That is, you have not learned something—really *learned* it—until you talk or write about it. This does not mean that you retell a story, state an undeveloped opinion, or describe an author's life, but rather that you deal directly with topical and artistic issues about individual works. The need to write requires that you strengthen your understanding and knowledge through the recognition of where your original study might have fallen short. Thus, it is easy for you to read the chapter on point of view (Chapter 5), and it is also easy to read Bierce's story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Your grasp of point of view as a concept will not be complete—nor will your appreciation of the technical artistry of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" be complete, however, until you have *written* about the technique. As you prepare your essay, you need to reread parts of the work, study your notes, and apply your knowledge to the problem at hand; you must check facts, grasp relationships, develop insights, and express yourself with as much exactness and certainty as possible.

Primarily, then, this book aims to help you improve your writing skills

through the use of literature as subject matter. After you have finished a number of essays derived from the following chapters, you will be able to approach just about any literary work with the confidence that you can understand it and write about it.

WHAT IS LITERATURE, AND WHY DO WE STUDY IT?

We use the word **literature**, in a broad sense, to mean compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions, and analyze and advocate ideas. Before the invention of writing, literary works were necessarily spoken or sung and were retained only as long as living people performed them. In some societies, the oral tradition of literature still exists, with many poems and stories designed exclusively for spoken delivery. Even in our modern age of writing and printing, much literature is still heard aloud rather than read silently. Parents delight their children with stories and poems; poets and storywriters read their works directly before live audiences; and plays and scripts are interpreted on stages and before cameras for the benefit of a vast public.

No matter how we assimilate literature, we gain much from it. In truth, readers often cannot explain why they enjoy reading, for goals and ideals are not easily articulated. There are, however, areas of general agreement about the value of systematic and extensive reading.

Literature helps us grow, both personally and intellectually. It provides an objective base for knowledge and understanding. It links us with the broader cultural, philosophic, and religious world of which we are a part. It enables us to recognize human dreams and struggles in different places and times we would never otherwise know existed. It helps us develop mature sensibility and compassion for the condition of *all* living things—human, animal, and vegetable. It gives us the knowledge and perception to appreciate the beauty of order and arrangement, just as a well-structured song or a beautifully painted canvas can. It provides the comparative basis from which we can see worthiness in the aims of all people, and it therefore helps us see beauty in the world around us. It exercises our emotions through interest, concern, tension, excitement, hope, fear, regret, laughter, and sympathy. Through our cumulative experience in reading, literature shapes our goals and values by clarifying our own identities—both positively, through acceptance of the admirable in human beings, and negatively, through rejection of the sinister. It enables us to develop a perspective on events occurring locally and globally, and thereby it gives us understanding and control. It encourages us to assist creative, talented people who need recognition and support. It is one of the shaping influences of life. Literature makes us human.