

A Loose Sally of the Mind – Putting Forward Bright Ideas in English Literature Essays

Writer, academic and critic Blake Morrison discusses the nature of the English literature essay, going back to the original meaning of the word to discover just how exploratory, tentative and personal it's meant to be.

For most students, an essay is something imposed on them rather than something they choose to do. You might hear someone say 'I've been writing a poem' or 'I've been writing a story', as if these were pleasurable and freely chosen activities, but if someone tells you they've been writing an essay it'll usually be with a groan – the essay will have been set as homework, to be done as duty, rather than as a means of self-expression. But essays – even literary essays – can be as personal to write, as pleasurable to read and as creative as poems or novels. And they're no less a matter of expressing yourself and offering your personal take on the world.

Trying Something Out

'To essay' something – the verb, that is – means to try something out, to have a go. And the noun 'essay' suggests an attempt or endeavour. In his famous Dictionary, Samuel Johnson defines the essay as

a loose sally of the mind, an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition.

Of course, when teachers come to mark essays, they do look for order of some kind, the sense of an argument being put forward in a clear and logical fashion. Still, I think Dr Johnson is right – the best essays put forward a bright idea or series of bright ideas, not fully formed perhaps, but stimulating and provocative. An essay isn't the last word. It's tentative, personal and subjective: 'Here's what I think – how about you?'

The most famous exponent of the essay is perhaps the French 16th-century writer Michel de Montaigne, who described his essays as attempts to show 'some traits of my character'. They also expressed his thoughts on politics, religion, morality, love, sex, parenthood, death and much besides. But they were unashamedly personal and this was what made them radical. We tend to think of essays as impersonal. When I was doing A Levels, and then again at university, the use of the first person pronoun was discouraged. You were meant to be objective, which meant adopting a style that was neutral, beige or passive. But essays can't help but be subjective. And the original model for them, Montaigne's, was candid, open, not afraid to say 'I'.

After all, it's your engagement with the text that matters. You do need to be aware of what others think of that text – critics, reviewers, your teacher, your fellow students, the way in which that text was received when it came out and has been received since. But it's what you bring to that text that

matters – your own ideas and responses. Talking about its structure, or its themes, or use of metaphor, or characterisation, all this is also a way of saying how it affects you. And if it hasn't affected you, if it's left you cold, that too is something to explore.

Orwell and Early 20th-century Essays

The literary essay had its heyday in the early 20th century, with writers like D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster. Topping all of them was George Orwell. In the current era of post-truth, newspeak and double-think Orwell is essential reading – a man who can help us see through the lies and sham, a man to guide us through the labyrinth of war, post-colonialism, Brexit and Donald Trump. My favourite essay of his is called 'A Hanging'. It recounts an experience he had as a young man while serving in the police force in Burma, at a time when he was already beginning to question the ethics of colonialism. The essay brilliantly describes the scene of the hanging: the guards, the condemned man (whose offence we are never told), a dog that bounds into the yard where the hanging is due to take place and disrupts the proceedings. For most of the essay, Orwell doesn't comment on the morality of capital punishment. But when he notices the prisoner step aside to avoid getting his feet wet in a puddle, even though he has only minutes left to live, Orwell suddenly realises how immoral it is to take another person's life for any reason, even by way of punishment. Of course, the thought may have occurred to him before. The essay is as carefully shaped, and as artful, as any short story. But there's a sense of discovery in it – as though it's through the act of recalling the event, and writing about it, that Orwell is working out what he really thinks. In creative writing showing always works better than telling. And it's by showing what happened, rather than preaching and pontificating, that Orwell gets his point across.

Of course, Orwell's essay tells a story and it's based in life. Critical essays can't do that. They engage with texts. But when Orwell writes about Gulliver's Travels, or boys' comics, or the poetry of the 1930s, or the idiocy of Tolstoy's criticism of Shakespeare's King Lear, you still hear that same voice – of somebody not afraid to have his own thoughts, even if they're out of step with current opinion. Above all, there's a sense that he's connecting the books he writes about with his own life, his own experiences, his own ideas about the world. And you don't have to be in your twenties, thirties and forties to do that. If a sentence in a novel resonates with you, or the line of a poem rings true for some reason, or you come across a simile or metaphor that sends shivers down your spine, then that's worth writing about: it's what the poet or novelist hoped when he or she set down those words – not that their text would be studied for exams, but that someone would be emotionally moved or intellectually provoked by it.

The Extinction of the Essay?

In a recent article for the Guardian, the American novelist Jonathan Franzen suggests that what defines the essay – the expression of opinions or the narrating of personal experiences (or some combination of the two) – is now a staple of social media: of blogs, of posts, of tweets. He asks:

Should we be mourning the essay's extinction? Or should we be celebrating its conquest of the larger culture?

It's a good question, but I don't think that essays and tweets are comparable. That's not just because the most famous tweeter in the world – the man who's given Twitter a bad name – is Donald Trump or because 140 or even 280 characters are too minimal to be called essayistic. It's because tweets

allow little room for nuance. They're assertions not explorations – and exploring is what the essay does best. Blogs are a better comparison: as first-hand testimonies of thoughts, opinions and experiences set down by one person for other people to read, they're the equivalent of essays. And however opinionated, blogs are often vulnerable, tentative and deeply personal – again just like essays.

Criticism, Judgement and Celebration

At one point in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, exchange insults – 'vermin', 'moron', 'sewer rat' and 'cretin'. The ultimate, unanswerable insult they come up with is 'critic'. The word 'criticism' (like the word 'essay') has negative associations. But literary criticism doesn't preclude positivity: passion, enthusiasm and celebration. It's about championing books by showing what makes them tick far more than it's about attacking them or doing them down. Honest judgment is what we look for in criticism – reasoned, nuanced but personal judgement. Critical essays may be parasitic – they exist in relation to the literature they're feeding off – but they can also be an art-form in themselves. What we value in them is wit, passion, intelligence, provocation, enjoyment – the same qualities we look for in a novel or poem.

Of course, hatchet jobs can be fun too, when someone takes on an established name and calls his or her bluff. But it's a different kind of fun I'm thinking of – the fun of finding new things in a classic text or of finding new ways to talk about that text, through the insights of feminism, or environmentalism, or politics, or simply from personal experience. Books might exist physically as objects without even being opened, but they don't truly exist till someone reads them. The author Alberto Manguel has said that

All writing depends on the generosity of the reader

– the text gives to us and we bring something to it in return. Your task when writing a literary essay is to interpret, explain, elucidate, make sense – but also to connect the book you're reading to your own life. *Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur* the Roman poet Horace wrote:

Change the name and the story is about you.

Classic texts tell stories that seem to be our stories, as though written just for us. And that's why we, in turn, write about them.

In short, there's nothing weird or elitist or negative about the act of criticism. It's as natural as breathing. It's what we all do when we've seen a film, or heard a new album: 'What did you think of it? I thought this.' And we back up our thoughts by reference to a particular scene or song, and argue our corner against those who disagree with us. That's the basis of the critical essay. And it can be inventive, it can be creative, it can be passionate. Most importantly, whether you use the I-word or not, it has to bear your stamp – it has to have your personality at its heart.

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