



Formal Writing Assignments in Literature Classes

IN A LITERATURE CLASS you can expect to spend a good deal of time discussing various features of literary works; you may also be asked to write informal responses to the works in order to help you interpret their meaning. Almost certainly, however, you will be evaluated on your ability to compose formal essays that explore some feature of a literary work. Such essays are normally divided into two categories: *explication* and *analysis*. *Explication* refers to explaining how the meaning of the literary work emerges; *analysis* refers to examining how different parts of the work contribute to its meaning. Those parts include *character*, *setting*, *symbols*, *point of view* (*narrative perspective*), *language*, and *theme*. Whether you are asked to explicate or to analyze, it is essential that you make specific reference to the literary work in order to support your interpretation. This chapter provides a brief overview of formal writing assignments, with examples of explication and analysis of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" and Kate Chopin's short story "The Story of an Hour." (The complete poem and story can be found at the end of the chapter.)

Explication

When you *explicate*, you demonstrate how the pieces of a literary work come together to make meaning of the whole. Explication is more than mere summary: The emphasis in explication is not on what happens in the work but rather on how each piece contributes to your sense of the work as a whole. Because of this emphasis, explication requires careful, close reading of the literary work. Although it can be helpful to explicate fiction and drama, explication is most often associated with writing about poetry. Consider the following explication of the first eleven lines of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall":

The speaker in this poem feels rebellious toward the tradition of maintaining walls between neighbors. The very first line of the poem, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," suggests that some force greater than humans or nature is at work in damaging the wall each winter. The speaker recognizes the gaps resulting from nature's "frozen-ground-swell" and from hunters who "have left not one stone on a stone." But he is at a loss to explain all of the damage: "The gaps I mean, / No one has seen them made or heard them made. / But at spring mending-time we find them there." The speaker implies that this "something," this mysterious force, conspires each winter to undo what he and his neighbor accomplish each spring when they mend the wall.

Notice how the explication goes beyond simply summarizing the passage to explore its relationship to the overall meaning of the poem.

Analysis of Character

One of the most common writing assignments for fiction and drama (as well as for some forms of narrative poetry) is analysis of *character*, largely because it is through identification with or recognition of characters that readers come to understand a literary work. Just as you observe and draw conclusions about people whom you meet in real life, you observe and draw conclusions about fictional characters as well; however, unlike real people, fictional characters exist in a world carefully constructed by the writer, and thus understanding those characters helps readers to make meaning of that world. In constructing a character analysis, you may focus on personality traits, on behavior, on development, on motivation, or on interactions with other characters. Your analysis will also be informed by the character's physical description and his or her language.

Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" provides only brief glimpses of Mrs. Mallard, but those glimpses provide a powerful characterization of the woman who has just been informed that her husband is dead. Here is a paragraph in which Mrs. Mallard's character is analyzed:

Through the course of this hour, Mrs. Mallard undergoes a transformation from a typical subservient housewife into a powerful independent woman. Chopin presents these changes in physical terms, describing Mrs. Mallard first as a woman "afflicted with a heart trouble" who is "pressed down by a physical exhaustion" when she retires to her room after hearing the news of her husband's death. But gradually, as she stares out her window, a metamorphosis begins: "There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully." She attempts to fight off the feeling, but her will is "as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been." When Mrs. Mallard finally succumbs to the feeling and utters the words "free, free, free," the image of fragile woman "afflicted with a heart trouble" is replaced by one of a strong woman whose eyes are "keen and bright" and whose "pulses beat fast" with "couraging blood." When she finally leaves her room, it is with "a feverish triumph in her eyes." These physical descriptions reflect a far more substantial transformation within Mrs. Mallard, one that reaches into her soul.

Notice how this analysis focuses on the physical descriptions of Mrs. Mallard and her reaction to her husband's death in order to underscore the profound change that her character undergoes in the story.

Analysis of Setting

The fictional world inhabited by these characters constitutes *setting*, which includes not just place (e.g., geographical location, nature, buildings, and