



English Department

3rd year students

An Essay

9 Lecture

(Literary Essay)

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The literary essay (elementary)

Instructions

1. TYPE OF BOOK You should, at this stage, be reading as widely as possible both for general interest and to increase your vocabulary. At the same time, whether you are preparing for an examination or not, it is wise to devote particular attention to a small selection of books as the writing of literary essays presupposes a detailed knowledge of certain texts. You will be reading classics, modern novels, popular stories, plays and non-fiction – principally short biographies of famous people or accounts of exploits and outstanding achievements. The books you will be reading for special study will either be short original works or simplified texts of the level of Longmans' Simplified English Series or Longmans' Bridge Series.

2. SUMMARIES In order to be able to write literary essays you must know the contents of the books you are studying very well indeed. As it may not always be possible to read a book twice, it is advisable to keep a record of what you read. A well-arranged summary will enable you to revise the contents of a whole book in a matter of minutes.

It is not necessary to write long, laborious summaries of each chapter. These are tedious to write and not very exciting to read. The best way to keep a record of a book is to make a page by page summary in note form. It is rarely necessary to write more than a few points for each page. Here is an example based on the Longmans' Simplified version of *Jane Eyre*.

Chapter 1	
Page	GATESHEAD
9	Reed children: Eliza, John, Georgiana. Jane dismissed. Room next door: book, window-seat.
10	Discovered by John. Appearance: fat, coarse features. Character: selfish; ill-treats Jane.
11	Strikes and insults Jane. Throws book at her. They fight. Discovered by Mrs Reed, Bessie & Abbot. Jane punished: Red Room.

Chapter 2

THE RED ROOM

- 13 Attitude of maids: both against Jane.
- 14 Jane locked in room. Remembers kind uncle and the promise Mrs Reed had made to him.
- 15 Thinks of the dead: light, 'ghost'. She screams. Attracts attention but Mrs Reed refuses to let her out.

This sort of summary tells you all you need to know and the page-references enable you to look up any incident in the story which you may have forgotten. When you have finished making out your summary you are ready to begin essay writing.

3. TYPES OF ESSAY The literary essays you will be writing will be narrative and descriptive, but unlike general essays, these will be based entirely on the books you have studied. The questions you will be set will be designed to test your knowledge of the book. You may be required to reproduce in your own words any particular part of the story or to write a brief description of one or more characters.

4. ANSWERING THE QUESTION You may know the contents of a book very well and yet still fail to write a satisfactory essay. It is most important to discipline yourself to answer each question *as closely as possible*. Do not disregard the question altogether and then proceed to tell the whole story from the beginning to impress on the reader the fact that you know the book well. You must only include information which helps you to answer the question.

5. ACCURACY All the information given in your essay about characters and events should be accurate. There should be no difficulty about this if you know the book well. On no account attempt to 'invent' facts of your own or to write things about the characters which are not in the book. It is not necessary to learn passages by heart in order to be able to quote. If, however, you do quote a phrase, make sure you are using the *exact* words of the book. Do not put quotation marks around words or phrases which were never spoken at all but which have occurred to you on the spur of the moment.

6. REPRODUCING PART OF THE STORY If you are asked to re-tell part of the story in your own words, take great care to relate events in the order in which they occurred. When arranging your facts in chronological order you will not only avoid confusion, but you will be able to give a clear account of what happened without omitting any important details.

Some questions require a detailed knowledge of a small part of the book, say a chapter or even a fairly short scene. Do not attempt this type

of question unless you know the book well enough to be able to reconstruct the scene, stage by stage, as it appears in the book. If a question covers a great many chapters it is not necessary to give too much detail about any one particular scene: keep to the most important events only.

7. 'CHARACTER' QUESTIONS Questions which require you to give an account of a person's character are, on the whole, more difficult than those which ask you to reproduce a scene. The reason for this is that to answer 'character' questions you have to select your facts from all parts of the book.

The characters in a story can be divided into two groups: the people who play a leading part (these are called *major* characters) and those who play a small part (*minor* characters). For instance, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane and Mr Rochester are major characters; Mrs Reed and Grace Poole are minor characters.

The best way to write an account of a person's character is to note down abstract qualities which he or she possesses and then to illustrate them by referring to events from the book. The sort of qualities you should look for are: courage, cowardice, generosity, meanness, kindness, cruelty, understanding, initiative, wickedness, stupidity, cunning etc.

If you are asked to give an account of the part played by a certain person (this is not a 'character' question exactly) you should begin with a brief and very general description of his or her character. Then you should go on to relate the main things the person did, illustrating your answer from your knowledge of the story.

8. PLANNING Never attempt to answer a literary question without first making out a plan. Only by doing so will you be able to make sure that you will answer the question closely. Once written, a plan should help you greatly for you will know beforehand not only what you will write in each paragraph but how many paragraphs will be included in your essay.

A good way to make a plan is to leave a wide margin on the left-hand side of the page. In the left-hand column you should write down any points that will help you to answer the question. These points may be written in any order as they occur to you. You may then order them correctly in the right-hand column, dividing your material into clear paragraphs. Cross out your plan neatly with a single line when you have completed it so that it will be possible for your teacher to refer to it if necessary.

Examine carefully the plans that follow, noting how they have been written. They are based on questions on *Jane Eyre*.

(a) SUBJECT: Give an account of the visit of the Fortune Teller.

IDEAS

PLAN

Asks for Jane.	<i>Introduction</i>
Mary Ingram, Amy and Louisa Eshton.	1. Witch's arrival: effect on guests.
Blanche insists.	Blanche insists.
Witch's arrival.	<i>Development</i>
Mason.	2. Blanche's visit: disappointment; Mary Ingram, Amy and Louisa Eshton. Witch wants Jane.
Jane's attitude: suspicious.	3. Witch's appearance: dress, hat. Jane suspicious and not afraid. Crosses palm.
Appearance of witch.	4. Speaks of Blanche (loves his purse).
'Reads' her face.	'Reads' Jane's face: eyes, mouth, forehead.
Crosses palm.	<i>Conclusion</i>
Eyes, forehead, mouth.	5. Reveals himself, asks for forgiveness.
Mr R's purse.	Jane shocks him: Mason.
Reveals himself.	

(b) SUBJECT: Describe the character of Helen Burns.

IDEAS

PLAN

Contentment.	<i>Introduction</i>
Illness.	1. Who Helen Burns was: her character in general: kindness, courage, influence on Jane.
Kindness.	<i>Development</i>
Advises Jane about Mrs Reed.	2. <i>Kindness</i> : answers questions of unknown girl (first meeting). Smiles at Jane: Mr B's visit.
Punishment.	3. <i>Courage</i> : history class; accepts punishment without complaint (Miss Scatcherd).
Miss Scatcherd: history lesson.	4. <i>Understanding</i> : older than Jane; advice and influence (Mrs Reed).
First meeting with Jane.	5. <i>Cleverness</i> : top of class; criticizes herself, wants to improve; discussions with Miss Temple.
Clever.	<i>Conclusion</i>
Mr Brocklehurst's visit.	6. Illness and death: calm acceptance; Jane's sorrow.
Brave.	
Miss Temple.	
Death.	

The essay that follows is based on the second of the two plans given above. Read it carefully, noting how it has been written.

Helen Burns was the only true childhood friend Jane Eyre ever had. Her kindness and courage, her understanding and intelligence made a deep and lasting impression on the younger girl.

Jane met Helen shortly after her arrival from Gateshead. Helen was kind to her right from the start. She willingly put aside the book she was reading to answer Jane's childish questions about Lowood Institution and the staff. On a later occasion when Jane was publicly humiliated by Mr Brocklehurst, Helen smiled at her and this simple act helped Jane to face up to her punishment.

Helen herself was often punished. Once she was dismissed from a history lesson and made to stand in the middle of the classroom. Another time she was severely beaten by Miss Scatcherd. Even though the punishment was unjust, Helen accepted it without complaint.

Her belief that it was wrong to remember past injustices made Helen act in this way. When Jane complained of Mrs Reed's harsh treatment, Helen showed great understanding, but at the same time, she pointed out that people should love their enemies because nothing could be achieved by violence.

Though Helen was very clever and top of her class, she continually criticized herself in an effort to correct her 'faults'. Jane was present when Helen and Miss Temple talked together over tea. She was amazed to discover that Helen had read so much and was able to converse so well with her teacher. Moments like these were the happiest in Helen's life.

After a long illness, Helen was able to meet death with the same calm acceptance that she faced life. She died happy with no regrets. Jane, who was with Helen on the night of her death, lost a true and dear friend.

Answer these questions:

1. Would you say that the question has been answered closely? Why?
2. Show how facts are drawn from different parts of the book in order to answer the question.
3. Is all the information that is given accurate? Justify your answer from your knowledge of the story.
4. How does the writer illustrate abstract qualities of character by referring to events in the book?
5. What relationship is there between the plan and the essay. Comment on the arrangement of material.
6. In what important ways does this essay differ from one requiring you to reproduce part of the story?

Exercises*Instructions*

The questions given below should be answered with reference to any books you have studied in detail. You should write essays of between 250 and 300 words not spending more than 35 minutes on each question. The best way to divide your time is as follows: plan: 5–10 minutes; writing 20–25 minutes; re-reading: 5 minutes.

1. Give a detailed account of any short scene.
2. Describe a meeting that took place between two characters and show what it led to.
3. Give a general account of the experiences of any *one* major character.
4. Write short notes on any *two* minor characters describing the part they played in the story.
5. Give an account of the part played in the story by either a major or a minor character.
6. Explain how an important event came about.
7. Give an account of a character's first impressions of a place or of other characters.
8. Describe a typical day in the life of any *one* character.
9. Explain a character's attitude to someone or something.
10. What special qualities are shown by a major or minor character (e.g. courage, initiative etc.) and how are these brought out in the story?
11. Explain the strange behaviour of a character, illustrating your answer from the story.
12. Give an account of friendship or hostility between two characters.
13. On what occasions is a person's true character revealed? Confine your answer to a consideration of any *one* major character.
14. Show how one character's suspicions of another are confirmed by the events which take place.
15. Describe an important visit that takes place in the story.