

The Imaginative Option: Another Way to Write About Literature

By Chuck Guilford

No sooner have you feasted on beauty with your eyes than your mind tells you that beauty is vain and that beauty passes. Death, oblivion, and rest lap round your songs with their dark wave. And then, incongruously, a sound of scurrying and laughter is heard. There is a patter of animals' feet and the odd guttural notes of rooks and the snufflings of obtuse furry animals grunting and nosing. For you were not a pure saint by any means. You pulled legs; you tweaked noses. You were at war with all humbug and pretence.

--Virginia Woolf

In this passage from "I Am Christina Rossetti," an essay marking the centenary of Rossetti's birth, Virginia Woolf abruptly breaks from writing *about* Rossetti and addresses the poet directly in a strikingly perceptive and arresting apostrophe. Reading this, I am reminded of how easily writers can speak across time. We take for granted, of course, that writers from times past can speak to us here in the present, but can we reply to them? Why not? Can they hear us? Who can say for certain? But whether they can is not entirely the issue; such apostrophes generally have a second audience in mind, an indirect audience, if you will. While ostensibly speaking directly *to* Christina Rossetti, Woolf also creates a new, somewhat intimate rhetorical context in which her readers become an indirect audience, eavesdroppers on a bit of overheard conversation: one writer speaking frankly to another.

Sure, "real" writers can do this sort of thing. William Wordsworth, for instance, in his sonnet, "London: 1802," when he says, "Milton, thou should'st be living at this hour,/England hath need of thee" or W. H. Auden in Part 2 of "In Memory of W. B.

Yeats,” when he addresses Yeats, saying, “Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry./Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,/For poetry makes nothing happen . . .” Yes, real writers can do this, beautifully and memorably. But students?

Here is Brandon, a student in my Survey of British Literature class writing to Wilfred Owen about his poem, “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

Finally, the bitterness of war and fighting is truly brought out in the last two lines of the poem: “To children ardent for some desperate glory,/The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.” I understand this line completely. Every government and national leader fills all of their country’s young people with the notion that it is very honorable to die for one’s country. Then all of these people have a high morale going into a war until they actually realize that war is a gruesome, horrible experience that nobody should have to endure. That, my friend, is why you stated this was a complete lie. I will take your word for it because you never made it out of World War I. . . . I offer much respect to you and every other that has served his country. That, my friend, is not a lie. I just wrote to tell you how much I enjoyed and ingested your poem. Please write back soon.

No, this is not Virginia Woolf or W. H. Auden. It’s Brandon, struggling with poetry, struggling with language and ideas and emotions. And Brandon’s letter has some rough spots, but Brandon writes with voice, with conviction, understanding, and with a strong sense of audience and purpose. I enjoy reading such papers, and since I have about forty students in each survey class, that enjoyment counts for a lot.

But it's not just *my* enjoyment that I'm thinking of; I'm also trying to make this assignment enjoyable for the students, most of whom are not English majors and have little need to practice the scholarly conventions of literary discourse.

Students in my British literature survey classes may write a traditional critical or research-based essay. Or if they prefer, they may use an imaginative option to respond to and show their understanding of the works we are reading. I encourage students to write creatively about literature using a variety of genres--journals, interviews, letters, poems, dramas, lesson plans, and more. Although I make clear that I have no preference which option they take, generally about half choose non traditional approaches. In the most recent batch of papers, for instance, I received, some letters to friends, spouses, and parents, discussing the poetry of William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I received letters to and about Mary Wollstonecraft and read an interview with her on Oprah's Book Club. I also received one Italian sonnet in the manner of Keats, accompanied by supplementary discussion, and one short poem written in Spenserian stanzas, and modeled on Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage."

Many students also wrote more traditional critical/analytical papers. Most often, these are problem-posing essays that explore topics developed from in-class freewrites and discussions. And because two papers are required per semester, individual students often opt to write one paper of each type.

At this point, I may as well confess that I come to this topic from a somewhat checkered academic background. Permit me to briefly explain. In graduate school, I was a student of literature. In fact, for my doctorate I wrote a dissertation on the metaphysical poetry of Henry Vaughan. As enjoyable and rewarding as this was, however, it was of no

help in finding a tenure-track job. As a result, I spent several years as an adjunct, teaching and studying composition. And instead of writing about metaphysical poetry, I began to write poetry of my own. I also wrote a composition textbook and a few articles on teaching writing, all of which, back in those days before Ph.D.'s in rhetoric were available, combined to make me employable as a writing teacher. Because the Boise State University English Department, then as now, was often short staffed due to sabbaticals or to budgetary holdbacks, I sometimes taught creative writing classes and literature surveys, along with expository writing classes.

As I moved back and forth among these areas, I did my best to keep their subjects and methods strictly compartmentalized, to color within the lines. But it was never easy. I understood that there was no time to teach writing in a literature class, that there was no time to teach literature in a composition class. And creative writing? Well, that was another world entirely. And so it went: 9:15, Nonfiction Writing; 10:40, Survey of British Literature Since 1790; 12:15, Advanced Poetry Writing--like Herb Philbrick, the protagonist of a TV show I watched as a child, *I Led Three Lives*. In my survey classes, writing assignments conformed roughly to the proportions that Wendy Bishop observed in introductory literature courses: 15% *Exploratory* (reader-response journals, position papers, drafts of interpretations); 80% *Instrumental* (biographical essays, critical essays, book reviews, etc.); 5% *Imaginative* (imitations, creative writing options) (36).

Gradually, however, this pattern began to change. I started talking about William Blake in my nonfiction class, about freewriting in my British Survey, about cumulative sentence structure in my poetry class. And, it was okay. I began to see that beyond the categorical boundaries imposed by curricular design, woven deeply into the fabric of my teaching

and learning experience, was a rich interpenetration of subject and method that I could tap into in my teaching, and in my writing. The lines between literature, creative writing, and composition began to look more like what Microsoft calls “shared borders.”

Even so, I began to sense a need for more system and method in my approach. One essay that I found especially helpful was “Literature, Composition, and the Structure of English” by Nancy R. Comely and Robert Scholes. They believe that, “a writing approach to literary texts, in which students write in the forms they are reading or use such texts as intertexts for writing in other forms, not only will improve their ability to write in all forms of discourse, but will also improve ability to read and interpret texts”(108). Among the examples they give of such writings are updating the slang in Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool” from a 1950’s feel to a more contemporary idiom (107). Another is to write from the viewpoint of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s Richard Cory, just before he “went home and put a bullet through his head”(105).

In my overall philosophy and in my classroom method, I am deeply indebted to both Wendy Bishop and James Britton. Much of Bishop’s pedagogy is built upon the work of Britton, especially upon his three major categories of writing function: the Expressive, the Transactional, and the Poetic (*Development* 81-86). Expressive writing, broadly, is writing that is informal, “close to the self,” ““thinking aloud on paper’.” Transactional writing is done to “inform people . . . , to advise or persuade or instruct people.” Poetic writing, in contrast, “uses language as an art medium” (*Development* 88-91). Bishop’s three types of discourse, noted above, are based upon Britton’s model, with her term “Exploratory” being roughly equivalent to Britton’s “Expressive,” her “Instrumental” equivalent to Britton’s “Transactional,” and her “Imaginative” equivalent

to his “Poetic” (29). I like Bishop’s terms because they emphasize the ways this discourse taxonomy plays out in my teaching.

To integrate the writing assignments with classroom learning activities, I often devote class time to informal exploratory writings that students share and discuss. See Figure 1. An activity like this one typically takes about 40 minutes. First I distribute the topics and read them aloud, then ask the students to pick one and free write on it for about ten minutes. I tell them they will not have to show this to anyone or turn it in, but the writing will help them to explore, extend, and solidify their thoughts before discussing them in a small group. And I also point out that the freewrites, and the ideas that come up in the ensuing discussions, could be useful for one of the required papers or for answering an essay question on an exam. A frequent variant of this activity is to have students bring to class a list of four questions about a work--Coleridge’s “Chistabel,” for instance--and then in a group of four persons, use a process of synthesis and selection to narrow the sixteen questions from each group to four that will be shared with the whole class.

As the due date for papers approaches, I remind the class that they have been accumulating a number of interesting issues and ideas (Expressive/Exploratory writings) that could be explored more fully in a critical essay (Transactional/Instrumental writing) or a creative piece (Poetic/Imaginative writing). Also, to help students envision some of the things they might do for an imaginative paper, I often make a point of directing their attention to works like those noted above by Woolf, Wordsworth, and Auden. Or in connection with Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” we will read Stevie Smith’s poem “Thoughts On the Person From Porlock.” Along with Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His

Love,” we read Raleigh’s “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd” and Donne’s “The Bait.” But these are only some obvious examples from classes I teach. Other examples will no doubt spring to mind for teachers of these and other courses. These examples help show students that such writing can have value and purpose far beyond merely satisfying a class requirement.

Because such diverse submissions can prove difficult to evaluate, I have evolved a set of broadly applicable grading criteria, which I distribute early in the term. See Figure 2. This handout helps students see what I am looking for. A few sample criteria are: How much time, effort, and imagination appear to have gone into this? Does this show a good understanding of the literature we’ve been studying? By making these criteria known early and applying them consciously when grading, I’ve been able to overcome many difficulties in evaluating such a varied group of writing projects.

Student response to this approach has been positive. Students like having the option to do either a traditional essay or take this imaginative option. This is reflected in their informal comments, in their course evaluations, and especially the projects themselves. And in this paper about student writing, it seems appropriate to close with another example. Here are a few excerpts from Meagan’s letter to Virginia Woolf, inspired by the essay, “Professions for Women,” and offering a twenty first century take on “the Angel in the House”:

I am dealing with a different Angel, however, but one very similar to the one you were able to conquer. . . . She is the Angel of the Workplace, and she has chosen to follow me, bringing with her promises of wealth, of fancy cars, and designer clothing. . . .

Virginia, our angels seem to come from two opposite sides. Is it the plight of woman always to have an angel on her back of some sort or another? Just how were you able to kill the Angel of the House? It had to have been more than a tossed inkpot in her direction more than once. In your writing, you said that the “struggle was severe.” I can only hope that my struggle will end as yours did and that the Angel will quit appearing everywhere, even on the lips of my future mother-in-law! When something is that persistent, it seems almost impossible to destroy. Writing to you has helped somewhat to clarify my perspective of the angel. In closing I will borrow from your “Professions for Women”: “My time is up, and I must cease.”

Some Questions about Virginia Woolf

1. What do you make of "The Mark on the Wall"? Did you enjoy it? Did you understand it? Could you discern any structure, theme, or unifying point to it? Is it serious, or whimsical--or what?
2. How effective is the fanciful story of Shakespeare's sister? ("A Room of One's Own" 2174-79) What is Woolf's point in telling it? Do you think this might have been the fate of a bright, ambitious woman in Shakespeare's time? How much have things changed?
3. In the selection, "Professions for Women," Woolf takes up some issues we spoke of earlier when reading Mary Wollstonecraft and Florence Nightingale. What similarities and differences do you notice in this discussion? Do they indicate any progress in resolving these issues? Why, or why not?
4. In "Professions for Women," Woolf claims that her biggest obstacle as a writer was not men, but "The Angel in the House" (2215). Who is this strange creature and why did she give Woolf so much trouble? Do artists today still have to deal with her, or has she been pretty well conquered?
5. Woolf speaks of the problems of a woman "telling the truth about my own experiences as a body" (2217). Is it more difficult for women than for men to do this? Do men have any phantoms comparable to "The Angel in the House" (2215)? What might they be?

Figure 1

General Suggestions and Guidelines for Writing Projects:

These may be research papers, creative works, critical studies, epistles to friends--use your imagination.

You may choose to take a creative or imaginative approach. For instance, you might want to write some poetry inspired by the readings. Or you could write a letter to a friend about "Christabel."

You might want to turn one of the works into a play for junior high students. Or you could create a lesson plan for introducing romantic poetry to sixth graders.

You may want to relate one of these works to something going on today. You could write a series of letters telling Mary Wollstonecraft how much impact her ideas have had upon our own time. What evidence can you see of William Wordsworth's ideas in modern life? How does the role of the church, in your experience, resemble or differ from that portrayed by William Blake?

Or you could identify some question, issue, or problem that has come up in class discussions and explore it more fully: What are some essential differences between romantic and Victorian writings, and in which works do these differences show up?

When I read and grade these papers, I will try to see each project individually. Rather than apply a single standard to such diverse types of writing, I'll keep several broad considerations in mind:

- How much effort and energy appear to have gone into this? How much creativity, imagination, thought?
- How thorough an understanding of the literature does this paper show?
- Are ideas fully developed and explored or passed over superficially?
- Is the writer's purpose clear? Is it significant? Is it achieved?
- Is the paper well written in terms of its overall design, its language, its surface features of mechanics and usage?

Figure 2

Works Cited

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