BOW VALLEY COLLEGE

LEARNING RESOURCE SERVICES

Writing A Literary Essay

A literary essay is a critical assessment of an author or authors' work. The intention is to explain or interpret the literature through references to characters, plot, setting, theme, style, etc. Warning! It is not a summary of the story. Rather, the literary essay is evidence of your knowledge and understanding using the literature as a support.

Before you begin writing your literary essay, be sure you understand the assignment. Are you asked to compare and contrast two characters from two stories? Are you asked to explore the theme or the setting in relation to some other element? Are you asked to explain the significance of any one element to any other? You must understand what is being asked of you.

Second, make sure you have read thoroughly the literary work you will be analyzing. Indeed, you may have to read parts of it several times before you have completed your paper.

The next step is to jot down details about the characters you have chosen to write about, or the setting you will relate to the theme, or the significance of either of these. These notes will depend on the assignment you have chosen.

Once you have created a thesis statement and have jotted down details relating to the points of your thesis statement, you are ready to begin writing your paper. Continue the process much as you would if you were writing an expository paper. That is, write an effective introduction, body and conclusion. Once the rough draft has been revised, you are ready to write the final paper.

Sample Literary Essay

The following exposition is an example of a literary essay. The assignment asked the student to compare and contrast the character Montresor in the story "The Cask of Amontillado" to the character General Zaroff in the story "The Most Dangerous Game."

The first step is to jot down words or phrases which depict the two characters from the two stories. Details referring to the physical nature or the emotional behavior of the characters is appropriate.

Once you have listed these characteristics, review them and group them into similar categories. Then determine which categories you will use to complete the assignment. For instance, your list for General Zaroff may look like this:

- cultivated voice marked by a slight accent that gave it added precision and deliberateness (Connell, p.40)
- the man was singularly handsome (Connell, p.40)
- high cheekbones, a sharp-cut nose, a spare, dark face, the face of a man used to giving orders, the face of an aristocrat (Connell, p.40)
- an evening suit ... it came from a London tailor who ordinarily cut and sewed for none below the rank of a duke (Connell, p.41)
- a thoughtful and affable host, a true **cosmopolite** (Connell, p.41)
- I have but one **passion** in my life, Mr. Rainsford, and it is the hunt (Connell, p.41)
- I live for danger, Mr. Rainsford (Connell, p.42)
- Now mine is an **analytic** mind (Connell, p.43)
- smiled the quiet smile of one who has faced an obstacle and surmounted it with success (Connell, p.44)
- Life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and, if needs be, taken by the strong. The weak of the world were put here to give the strong pleasure ... I hunt the scum of the earth (Connell, p.45)
- dressed faultlessly in the tweeds of a country squire (Connell, p.47)

And your list for Montresor may look like this:

- my smile now was at the thought of his immolation (Poe, p.256)
- I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could (Poe, p.257)
- without consulting you in the matter (Poe, p.257)
- that I might hearken to it with more satisfaction (Poe, p.259)
- I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength (Poe, p.259)

After you have compiled a list of appropriate quotations describing these two men, devise a thesis statement that will encompass the ideas you have pinpointed. In this case, the thesis statement might include these three ideas:

both aristocrats

both passionate in their desires and pursuits

both analytical and methodical

Thus, your thesis statement may look something like this:

> Aristocrats such as Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado" and General Zaroff in "The Most Dangerous Game" are analytical and methodical and very often too passionate in their pursuits.

Furthermore, the introductory paragraph will begin with general statements and eventually will narrow to the thesis statement. Your introductory paragraph may look like this:

> A gentleman is a man of leisure. His pursuits may often include activities which the common man would find unattainable. Indeed, some "gentlemanly" pursuits may even seem above the law. Some men make a life of pursuing ideas which are daring just because these adventures offer an element of risk or punishment. Aristocrats such as Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado" and General Zaroff in "The Most Dangerous Game" are analytical and methodical and very often too passionate in their pursuits.

To continue, the body paragraphs of your essay must now expand upon the ideas expressed in the thesis statement. Briefly outline the contents of the body paragraphs.

For example:

First body paragraph:

Aristocratic tastes:
evidence of ... - expensive
physical appearance - exotic
emotional behavior - bizarre
consequences of ...

2nd body paragraph:

Analytical and Methodical Methods:
schemes
manipulations
deliberations

3rd body paragraph

Passionate
motives
emotions
intensity
conscience
philosophy

Now you are ready to write your body paragraphs. Some of all of your points must be expanded upon and supported by quotations from the stories. The paragraphs will begin with a topic sentence which relates to your thesis statement and will end with a concluding sentence which may also signal your next point. **Effective transitions** should be included to ease the flow from one idea to the next.

Your body paragraphs may look like this:

> If a man has been schooled as an aristocrat, his tastes often reflect the expensive, the exotic, or the bizarre. Montresor could obviously afford the finer things in life evidenced by his very extensive wine cellar. He admits to a weakness for wine collecting, "I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could." (Poe, p.257). Similarly, General Zaroff is equally as expensive in his tastes, "...an eveningsuit ... it came from a London tailor who ordinarily cut and sewed for none below the rank of a duke" (Connell, p.41). Not only are tastes expensive, they tend to be exotic – Zaroff hunting in the Rockies, the Ganges, East Africa and the Amazon and Montresor choosing the Mardi Gras as the appropriate time for his deed. It seems almost inevitable that their pursuits would then turn to the bizarre. Stalking human prey or burying someone alive are ventures that might be responses to a lifestyle replete with all the favours of the aristocracy.
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> Most often, men interested in these ventures must develop an analytical and methodical mind, devoid of emotion and unable to feel remorse. Montresor and Zaroff fit this description perfectly. Montresor was deliberate and deceitful in his attempts to lead Fortunato into the vault, repeatedly taunting him with threats of consulting another connoisseur, "We will go back, you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides there is Luchresi –" (Poe, p.258), knowing full well Fortunato would refuse. Just as diabolical, Zaroff forces Rainsford into compliance with threats of the tortuous form of Ivan, "But may I not venture to suggest that you will find my idea of sport more diverting than Ivan's?" (Connell, p.48). Both men have come to their decision to kill through an analysis of their feelings, respectively revenge and boredom. Their schemes for acting out the solutions include manipulating their enemy while keeping a "cool head" and an objective outlook. In this way, the perpetrators, who are well above the law at this point, experience no remorse and a good deal of retribution.
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> Lack of remorse alone is not enough to compel a man to rejoice in pursuit. In addition, the intensity of the pursuit reveals the baser side to mankind's existence. Montresor finds the torture test quite satisfying. In fact, on his departure, he blesses the tomb, "In pace requiescat! (Rest in peace!) (Poe, p.260). Meanwhile, Zaroff is humming a bit from Madame Butterfly assuming that like Mme. Butterfly, who felt there was no other alternative

> but to kill herself, Rainsford was forced to jump into the sea as his only recourse. Zaroff feels this is just reward for his intent. Both Zaroff and Montresor enhance their aristocratic lifestyles by intensifying their desires.

Once you have complete your body paragraphs, your next task is to write a conclusion. Re-state your thesis statement and move towards a general conclusion which will leave your reader with some thoughts to contemplate. For example:

> In that case, does satisfying one's ultimate passions preclude the idea of being an aristocrat? It would seem so. Montresor's passion for revenge intensifies his behavior just as Zaroff's passion for the hunt intensifies his actions. Montresor is able to respond in good conscience as Fortunato pleads for his life, "I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still." (Poe, p.258). It would seem in both cases that these men will escape incarceration for their actions. A commoner would surely be indicted for such deeds. Is the aristocracy able to circumvent the law so that their passions can be fulfilled? Montresor's and Zaroff's actions would seem to verify this.

Finally, proofread your essay and begin the second draft correcting errors in spelling, punctuation and organization. Follow the footnote format that your instructor prefers. Handouts suggesting footnote and bibliography format are available in the LSS. Additional information suggesting title page format is also available.