Literary Essays

Preface

The "Literary Essay" genre is one of the most complicated to teach because of the skills necessary to complete it well. Further confounding the problem is that it is a genre used almost only in academic arenas. Rarely do we as adult readers sit down on the couch, cuddle up to a delightful read, finish it late into the night, and then spend the next 5 days drafting a 5-part essay with a thesis statement and supporting details. Yet this *is* what most high schools and universities require of their English students.

To remain pure to my beliefs – that academic study should revolve around skills used not only in academia, but also in broader society – I chose to teach the Literary Essay more as intellectual process and organized argumentation, and less as essay *per se*. I believe that the value of writing a literary essay starts with the process. Thinking through the novel, its symbols, the author's intent, its characters, and any number of other factors, and trying to piece it together like a detective into a thought-out thesis statement, is incredibly valuable. I also believe that struggling with trying to put our thoughts down on paper in a sequential, powerful set of arguments is also incredibly important.

Teaching the genre

Traditionally, literary essays have been taught in the following way: 1, give students the format for an essay; 2, give them one thesis statement or a choice of 5-10 possible thesis statements; 3, have them find arguments and plug them into the format to prove the given thesis.

In my mind, I begin this teaching much earlier. The following is a general synopsis of how I prepared the students for the eventual essays they were to write, including a basic timeline for how this unfolded:

Step one – questioning the text (mid-November)
Students develop questions about their independent reading. Starting with the read aloud, I would craft minilessons that enabled students to question different aspects of the text. All varieties of questions are welcome – whatever pops into their minds. These they would share with their read-aloud partners. When practicing this strategy independently, students write their questions on Post-It Notes and stick them into the book.

Step two – developing "hunches" (Early December)
After students began getting really good at questioning while reading, they began taking a step back from their books and re-reading the questions. They would begin noticing similarities in the topics of some of the questions. In the early part of *To Kill a Mockingbird* , they might have asked, "Why does Jem imitate Atticus so much?" Then, later in the book, they might ask, "Why is Jem's middle name Atticus?" Later still they might ask, "Why does Jem know so much about law?" After taking a step back and re-reading all these questions, the reader might develop a "hunch" about the book. The hunch is a guess about what the author was trying to do. The reader might start to think, "Maybe the author wanted Jem to embody Atticus as a boy." Students can either do nothing with this hunch (since they might have many during the book), or they might document their hunches in their Writers Notebook. The important part of this is not writing anything down; the important part is the process of developing hunches.

Throughout this time, the teacher is modeling this process with examples on the overhead and/or during read-aloud.

Step three – Developing strong arguments (mid-December)
After students have gotten good at finding some similarities throughout their books and developing hunches, students begin to learn to defend these hunches through argumentation. The best thing I ever said as a teacher came at this point in the year: "I don't care what you think; I care what you can prove." The point was that they were quite capable of having opinions (this being the Jerry Springer Nation), but they struggled to prove those opinions. And part of a strong argument is the recognition of its flip-side. Teaching students to recognize the other side of their argument is challenging and requires lots of modeling.

Step four – formulating the Literary Essay (the entire month of January)
At this point, they were now ready to complete the mental process necessary to generate a quality Literary Essay. What follows is a description of each of the parts of the essay that I taught using lots of modeling and discussion. I've included some of the lingo I used to help students understand what I'm teaching.

Writing the Literary Essay

Introduction (Which I call the Yellow Brick Road, and I'll explain that later)

First sentence: the lead, the way to get into the piece (But this is not to get *you* into the piece; it's to get *your reader* into the piece – you already know what's coming, so you set the reader up). Often this is a general statement about the world that seemingly has nothing to do with the thesis statement. If the thesis is from *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, and the thesis is something about love conquering all despite obstacles, the general statement might be about the complexity of marriage today.

Last sentence: the thesis statement, a more formal version of the "Hunch," is what you've noticed about the book, or poem, or short story, or…This is the most important part of the paper. This, in fact, is the ONLY important part of these types of papers because it is the argument to prove. This is what you are trying to get the reader of your essay to believe. This is what you've noticed about the book that you think others should want to believe. This is what you develop three or more arguments to prove, and this is what many people might TOTALLY disagree with (which is why your argument is so important).

Now, between the first sentence and the thesis, that's the *yellow brick road*. You must figure out a way to lead the reader to the thesis so that it's smooth and easy to understand. You build the "brick road," and you force the readers down it. A yellow brick road is easily traveled and should be smooth. If the road is bumpy or full of holes, the traveler becomes weary and frustrated. Similarly, if connection between the general statement and the thesis jumps too quickly, or doesn't include enough sentences to make the transition smooth, the reader will get frustrated and confused.

Body (a word I think is silly, but I'll use it because it's probably what they use in school still)

Let me say first that I view each "argument" in the body individually when I write it.

A. Introduction to the Textual Evidence

B. Textual Evidence

C. Interpreting the Textual Evidence

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A. Introduction to the Textual Evidence
Textual evidence, the part of the story, poem, novel, etc…that **proves** your point, needs to be introduced to the reader. This can be a simple sentence: "In the following quote, it becomes clear that…" or "In the following passage, you will notice Romeo

B. Textual Evidence
These are the direct quotes of the book, poem, etc…Once you set the reader up with the textual evidence, you quote it. Pick just enough, but not too much.

C. Interpreting the textual evidence
This is the KEY!!!! You've set up the textual evidence, then you quote it directly. Now, what you know is that if I quote a piece of literature for 20 readers, you're going to get 20 different reactions to it and thoughts about it. That's why when you quote something for the reader in your essay, you are OBLIGATED to explain what *you* think the quote means, or what you think the textual evidence proves. Now, because you're giving the reader the quote and your interpretation of the quote, the reader *might* disagree with your interpretation. So make your interpretation good. That's the point; this is where most literary essays stink – writers of them haven't thought well enough about what the textual evidence means/proves. And if the interpretation is mediocre, a talented reader of literary essays will realize the argument is weak. But as long as the reader at least knows *how* you interpreted the quotes, that's cool.

D. Connecting textual evidence back to the thesis statement
        This is when you take what you interpreted, and connect what you interpreted back to the thesis statement. Example: If the thesis is "Romeo and Juliet proved that in spite of all obstacles, love conquers all," you could write "Having killed himself, Romeo obviously proves that love conquers all."

And this process is repeated usually for three different arguments. If you notice, I believe the argument comes straight from the textual evidence, and without textual evidence one has no argument.

Conclusion
This typically has two parts. One is to remind the reader what you just proved to him/her. Often this means restating the thesis in a different way. The other part (I believe, but some teachers disagree) is including why the thesis is important to the real world. Connect it to the real world. Talk about why Romeo and Juliet's love for each other, even though there were so many obstacles, is important, and why it's a real tragedy they died. Put yourself and your experience into the essay. Like, "Romeo's and Juliet's deaths truly were tragedies. Society did not allow their love to exist without insurmountable obstacles. Yet today, in society so many years later,

the same thing happens day after day. Nowadays, it is not so much family against family, but instead race, economic levels, or some other issue that separates. When people from two races or two socioeconomic levels fall in love, their 'family' makes that love challenging." Etc…that kind of thing, where you bring the thesis and the reality of the thesis, back to the real world.

Typical problems (it's valuable to address these in advance of publication)

These are the problems I've noticed pretty often when teaching how to write this type of writing:

1. Students have a thesis that is either confusing, too obvious (Like "Romeo and Juliet is about two people in love." Duh!), or nonexistent (some people don't even have an obvious thesis statement – they simply don't have a thesis statement at all).
2. Students use textual evidence, but don't interpret it; they try just to let IT prove ITSELF. They kinda use the textual evidence, and then say, "And that proves…" No, the text doesn't prove anything. How you interpret the evidence is the proof.
3. Students don't organize the essay. There are no clear changes in arguments. And this is only a problem to the reader. The writer, the student, might have a GREAT sense of what he/she wants to prove, but doesn't realize that I, the reader, don't know what's in his/her head.

How to grade a literary essay

In high school and college, often the essays are given simply a letter grade without justification. Write an essay and get a grade. This unbelievably subjective, grade-brokering method irks me, so I choose rubrics. What goes on the rubric derives solely from what I've taught. A sample might include categories like "Thesis statement," "Arguments," and "Conclusion." Often in the explanation of each category, I explain that grades will derive from whether or not they met the criteria discussed in minilessons. I'll give samples of good and we'll talk about why those are good, and I'll give samples of bad and talk about why those are bad. Then, in the final analysis, I'll write comments explaining why they earned or did not earn full credit.

What texts are good for literary essays?

I believe that the best texts to teach literary essays have *lots* of different potential thesis statements. I've used songs ("Put your lights on," by Santana), movies ("West Side Story"), and novels (*To Kill a Mockingbird*). All of these texts had gobs of arguments to be developed. I believe the process of writing is far more important than the length of the text. I'm certain in many English circles that's heathen talk, but I'll always side on "Let's do it" over "Let's take forever to do it" or "Let's do it poorly."

Literary Essays

Yellow
Brick Road →

Thesis statement → [*]

1
2
3

Body/Arguments →

Ex. Argument 1, 2, or 3

A. Intro to textual evidence
B. Textual evidence
C. Interpretation of textual evidence
D. Connecting textual evidence back to thesis statement

Restatement of thesis →
Statement [*]

Conclusion →