ON CRITICAL WRITING

a collection of documents and quotations from letters to students

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quotation not connotation

there is no such thing as uncreative writing

Rarely do I have a student who “gets it” the first time. But you’re learning to read the code. Your astonishment at how obvious and literal the structure is while remaining invisible to the reader echoes my own astonishment when I began to figure all this out. And you counted things and gave me ALL the examples! You’re absolutely right when you say in your letter that this is actually another language, the language of literature. It’s a way of thinking that is quite different from what we come to think of as communication--imparting or exchanging information. In a story or a novel you are thinking by pushing your characters through actions and what you write and what the characters do excite emotions in the reader who enjoys being excited that way. Hence what the story is about doesn’t matter; it’s how the aboutness is manipulated in a literary way that is important.

ON CRITICAL WRITING

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begins with careful reading

But learning to read as a writer is almost always new to students and takes a while to get the hang of. This isn't "critical" reading though that's what we seem to call it in the program. It's reading that absolutely honours the author's text–adds nothing to it and takes nothing away from it. It is NOTICING what the author did.

reading rubric

Glover Reading Rubric

1) Start by simply looking at the physical story, see how long it is (the better to compare it to your own stories in terms of pacing, event/length ratio, etc.), see if it is divided into sections and how that division is accomplished technically (simple line breaks, numbers, chapter heads, etc).

2) Analyze the point of view structure. What it is and who it is. List other characters and their relationship with the point of view.

3) Summarize the plot of the story. Who does what to whom and what happens after.

4) Keep careful track of words, ideas, images, grammatical structures that repeat (but do not try to draw any conclusions about why they repeat yet). Track, note and number the instances of important repeated elements. Decide if there is a primary image pattern and if there are also subsidiary patterns.

5) Time flow: Only at this step should you begin to even THINK about the larger conceptual/structural (but not thematic) issues. Here you should begin by seeing how the sequence in which events are told relates to the basic chronology of events. What is backfill, what is forward-moving action, and how is the backfill placed in the story (one large section, a dance of little sections, maybe very little)? How much or little does the author "play" with the time flow? If this is a reminiscent narrator, how does the time of the telling of the story interpenetrate the story itself? Etc.

6) More structure: What is the basic conflict of the story? Between what and what? (A vs B)

7) What are the basic steps or event/plot/interactions between A and B? If we conceive of the story as a series of rooms in which A and B get together again and again and again, what are the nature of these rooms/events? Be careful to stick to the text, exactly what the author tells us on the page. Do not move to speculating on what the author means by doing such and such. Stop yourself at simply stating what the author says. Look at scene/event length, how dialogue is played on the page.

8) Make comparisons. Make some judgement as to what type of story this is: love story, historical epic, comic--be naive and even superficial here. Just put a name to things and try to recall other stories that are similar

to this in one way or another. In your mind, compare and contrast how different authors handle similar sorts of structures, actions, genres.

a note on the rubric

You came to Vermont to learn something you didn't know and one of the first things you need to learn is how to read like a writer. This is so that you can teach yourself more after you have graduated. Literature is an encyclopedia of technique just waiting for you to plunder it. What follows is a reading rubric I give people sometimes. You might find it helpful. The emphasis is on what might seem at first a simple-minded and literal reading of the text. Count the line breaks. Note and count word repetitions. Etc. But this is the way writers read to learn about writing.

I have a little reading rubric that sometimes helps people learn to read better. I'll write it out here hoping you don't find it insulting. You can ignore it if you want. Essentially it counsels you/the reader to slow down, bracket out all those lit crit English lit class preconceptions and notions and pay attention to the words the author write.

I don't know if it will help but here is the reading rubric I give people now and then. Especially when they aren't focussing directly on the text, the words of the author. It's meant to help teach you to read as a writer so that you can teach yourself more technique after you leave the program. It may seem simplistic (if not simple-minded--I've been accused of worse) and literal, but it's a way of reading that honors the exact words the author wrote. It applies to stories and novels both.

It doesn't surprise me that there is a lot more interpretation here than hard structural data. When someone really starts reading as a writer, there is a problem of not being able to see the woods for the trees. Try to do your technical analysis in a more simplified and "naive" manner.

All this is, amazingly enough, preliminary work that a writer needs to do in order to understand what another writer is doing. And it ALL takes places before you make a single move into thematic analysis. If you start training yourself to do this, it quickly becomes automatic (although it may seem slow and awkward at first). I taught myself to do this in the days when I was learning to write and at the same time writing book reviews for newspapers. It may also seem, at first, as if you have nothing to learn from doing this. But again let me just promise that you will begin to see and learn things you never saw before--and very quickly. This kind of approach, to me, is the essence of professionalism and respect (to the author). The fact that most readers (consumers) don't do this and still enjoy the books is irrelevant to your

situation--a writer learning to write.

reading a story with the rubric

I think it was a good exercise to use my reading rubric as an outline. It seems to me that you noticed a lot of good things about the story. On the other hand, many of the sections need only a very short answer. Point of view, for example, need only be "1st person single character Kurt" – your tendency to expand, extrapolate and interpret leads you into a kind of wandery gray area and finally into mistakes. Again, as to point of view, I wouldn't call this a "reminiscent" narrative just because it's written in the past tense as you seem to want to say. Past tense is a standard conventional story tense, in part because since it's "written down" or "told" the action of the story must have already taken place. It has a sort of logic. (Present tense stories are always slightly illogical that way–but that's another issue.) A reminiscent narrator is narrating from a point in time far after the events of the story (conventionally 20 years or more). There is nothing in the text of this story to indicate that Kurt is speaking from a time that far away from the events. If you need this clarified, look at a book called *Points of View* by Moffett & McIlheny. The authors divide first person narratives into several categories depending on various rhetorical setups. But the main categories are 1st person subjection narration and 1st person objective narrations. "The Point" is the former, reminiscent narrators fall into the latter category.

Similarly, under "physical story" you only need to tell me that the story is 14 pages and divided into five sections of about equal length. You fall into error or exaggeration when you start talking about "mini-stories" which seriously misrepresents the nature of a story segment (though you may mean something different from what you actually said here). Try to stick to the words of the story text, the words the author actually wrote–this is the way he honour the author. The story doesn't say anything about souls or holistic experiences or the mystery of life. Leave these ideas to the critics.

Under plot, you needed a) to specify desire and resistance (conflict) and then b) specify the series of interactions between the desire and the resistance. You should also have noticed the number of times that D'Ambrosio explicitly states Kurt's goal or desire. This was an important part of the plot-conflict part of the analysis and for some reason you left it out. It's really important to see that over and over D'Ambrosio explicitly says in the text what Kurt wants and what his goal is (to get Mrs. Gurney home). This is important because I want you to see that he makes the goal obvious and clear to the reader. There's no hinting, no obliquity, no vagueness. And Mrs. Gurney equally is not vague–she just simply keeps stopping or wandering off the path to the goal. You give me an action summary on p5 of your essay. But that's not the same as seeing the plot as a series of repetitions of a desire

and a resistance. You needed to see the reiteration in the text of the story.

You're a bit better on image patterns because you did count and you did see all the repetitions and I think this was good for you. But you missed the other elements of image patterning, techniques such as loading. So in discussing the image patterns you needed to specify that the "black hole" pattern is the main or root pattern of the story. The patterns of black are splintered from "black hole" and the patterns of white are split off as a kind of mirror structure of the black pattern (I have no idea why or how he invented this, but it is quite beautiful and, as far as I can tell, means nothing–I'm a writer not a critic). You can tell that "black hole" is the main or root pattern because it's the image that is "loaded" with meaning (moral and thematic)–this loading takes place in the passage about Kurt's theory of black holes. Not noticing this and quoting the loading passage means you really only saw the skeleton of the image pattern. You don't have to interpret the pattern because like many good writers D'Ambrosio tells you exactly what the image means in the words of the text of the story. Also you're not using the terms "tie-in" and "ramify" correctly–you seem to imply that they are synonyms, that they are the same technique. You need to reread my essays on structure–though, for the sake of clarity, I'll say a bit more about imagery here.

An image is a thing, or rather something available to sensory apprehension (or mental apprehension -- Milan Kundera runs patterns of ideas through his novels the way another writer, say, Margaret Atwood or myself might run a pattern of images through the novel). As a thing, the image is value free, it means what it means, it is what it is. (There is a small side issue here: There are such things as INTRINSIC and EXTRINSIC SYMBOLS in literary criticism and it's useful to know what they are. An intrinsic symbol is what I am talking about here -- an image that is loaded with a particular meaning by the author. An extrinsic symbol is an image that carries its meaning into the text from the culture at large, e.g. all crosses end up being connected with Christ, etc. You need to be generally aware of this just so that you don't start building an intrinsic symbol out of an extrinsic symbol -- it's too difficult to control the meaning.) The first thing you do to manipulate an image is repeat it. The very act of repeating references to something begins to give a work rhythm and coherence, a memory of itself, helps create that cosy thing we call a world. Some writers simply repeat images at this level and leave it at that. Beyond mere REPETITION, you can LOAD an image. I use the word "load" because I like to think of an image as one of those old time six-shooters. The writer loads the bullets into the chamber throughout the story and then shoots the reader at the end (with meaning). The first technique of loading is giving the image a SIGNIFICANT HISTORY, that is a story that ties the image meaningfully to a character and theme. The second technique of loading is to use ASSOCIATION (playing on associated meanings and words) and JUXTAPOSITION (putting words in close proximity with the image in the text) to add further meanings (always here you must be aware of the meaning you are adding and make sure you remove associations and juxtapositions that confuse or muddy the meaning). Finally, you can do what I call RAMIFY the image (the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky calls this "splintering" or, in Russian, rozevlenie), that is, you split off aspects (associations or words

juxtaposed with the image) of the image and run them through the book. You can split things again and again and develop rather complicated root patterns of imagery running through a story or a book. It's quite fascinating to do and see. And when it's done right you will also find what I call TIE-IN LINES, sentences which tie together two or more splinters momentarily in the text (I think I have managed sometimes to get up to five splinters mentioned or referred to in a single sentence -- in my novel THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CAPTAIN N., but you can see this also in the novels of Margaret Atwood and John Hawkes.) You don't have do image patterning in every story, and there is a wide variation in the degree: someone like John Hawkes will go berserk with patterning, I myself get pretty baroque sometimes. But other writers often play their imagery pretty close to their chests, don't overdo it (too much patterning destroys verisimilitude -- and, of course, that's exactly what some writers want to do). And then there are stories and novels where the meaning of the work as a whole is controlled by a main image as in Atwood's novel CAT'S EYE in which the root image is a cat's eye marble. I call this a BOSS IMAGE story.

You said good things about sequence and then went off into expansion and interpretation. All I mean by sequence is the ways the author manipulates the basic chronology of the story. In this story, the story starts and moves straight ahead to the end and then at the end we have the father's letter and the story of his suicide which happens before the story text begins. And, as you quite rightly points out, in the straight ahead story, there is a deft dance of bits of backfill spread here and there throughout. That's all you need to say.

The nature of the conflict is simply what's already been said in terms of plot. Kurt's desire to take Mrs. Gurney home against Mrs. Gurney's desire to wander and sit down. That's all.

In the compare to other section, you did okay–partly because it's a do as you like section. I would try, if you can, to stay away from off the rack readymade categories like coming of age story and rite of passage story. I always start by saying something like–this is a dead father story. It's the story of a kid whose father has just committed suicide. It's a weird father-son story. It's also a kid and an older woman story. That's where I start–and then I think of other father-son stories or other kid-older woman stories. I try to say something about the story that actually is in the story rather than pulling in readymade and cliched templates.

Anyway, next time really try to stick with the text in hand. I know a lot of this interpretation is your enthusiasm running away with you–but it leads to vagueness and mistakes in comprehending the real story. So you need to learn to discipline it. Next time read with the rubric in mind, but don't write the essays to the rubric. Just use the rubric as your way of thinking about the story.

a note on time flow analysis

In analyzing a text for time flow, pay attention to the details AND ALSO contrast the text in question with the strict form (as in the simple forward-moving time flow structure of the short story exercise I give) and also try to formulate a more general statement of how the time flow is functioning. I give you the strict form (the exercise) in the hope that besides helping you compose some stories it will also give you a kind of baseline model with which to compare stories that you are reading. Not because the strict form is correct, not at all, but just to give you a reference point and a way of defining variations (I think this is always helpful in terms of just keeping your thoughts straight). This will help you get a sense of how a story always moves forward--moves forward, then spends a little time filling in the intervening time, then moves forward. But mostly always forward.

You can also analyze time flow in a text segment in detail. How does time flow relate to scene? Exactly how does the text cover a period of time? Etc. Look at time switch words and tenses.

analytical cheat sheet

A cheat sheet of structural questions:

Physical Description: length (pages/paragraphs), chapters, sections, line-breaks, other?

Type or Genre:

Point of view: (person/name -- type/structure if applicable)

Tense: (primary or baseline tense of story and variations if applicable)

Time Flow Structure (baseline chronology vs actual deployment of events on the page):

Desire: (of protagonist, other characters?)

Conflict:

Plot Steps:

Subplots (if any):

Primary Image Pattern (if any; list all references):

Subsidiary Image Patterns (if any, list all references, show how they connect to the main image pattern):

other preparatory readings

- "Art as Device" in Viktor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*
- essays on story and novel structure in *Attack of the Copula Spiders*
- essays on grammar and copula spiders in *Attack of the Copula Spiders*
- a sampling of analytic essays in *Attack of the Copula Spiders*
- E. K. Brown's *Rhythm in the Novel*
- sample lectures and critical theses published on *Numéro Cinq*, esp. Rebecca Martin, Gwen Mullins and Julie Marden

CRITICAL ESSAYS

call them analytic essays

or, think "critical" as in the comparison and contrast of texts in regard to form, structure, technique and craft and NOT theme, meaning, interpretation, character psychology, and politics

short critical essays

contents

outline
- aim of critical essay
  - artificiality of analysis
    - finding your own critical voice
      - comparison and contrast
        - other devices

outline

i. Synopsis of text
ii. Name, define and explicate the technique you are discussing
iii. Use the text to supply examples
    1) quote the examples
        a) if you're discussing plot structure quote specific text relating to desire and resistance (there might be more than on relevant passage)
            i) then give a good description with quotes of each plot step/event
        b) if you're discussing an extended image pattern then list all the (quoted) instances of the main pattern and then each of the subsidiary patterns (this could be a lot of quoted bits of text)

    2) discuss each quotation as an example of the technique or structure
    3) arrive at a general rule of thumb or modus operandi for applying the technique in literary work

aim of critical essay

Your plot essay should focus on the simple repetition of the protagonist's goal and the repetition of the resistance rising to a climax. If you can get this simple structure working in a story, then you can add all sorts of other elements and meanings (as in "Shiloh"). Kurt's mission (getting Mrs. Gurney home in "The Point") is tied in linguistically with his father's missions in Vietnam. Mr. Crutchfield gets repeated mentions and he becomes a parallel pre-story (another death). And then the black hole pattern gets draped on top of these other patterns, a pattern of imagery with a thematic component that helps explain the larger meaning of the story. It's your job now to begin to isolate and identify the functional parts of a story like this--and to begin with you need to be able to see the simple ongoing present action (plot) of the story. The repetitive desire and resistance pattern.

artificiality of analysis

Of course, in any good story it's sometimes difficult to separate image from plot (the log cabin image is also the concrete focus of Leroy's plot desire), but for the sake of argument and also for the sake of trying to learn how things work we need to try to tease the different elements of a story apart, even if only for a moment, to see how they work as a separate device. In both these stories, the desire and resistance pattern is announced early and repeated insistently through to the end in a very literal way. That's what I wanted you to see.

finding your own critical voice

The important thing for a writer is to make the observations and deductions and definitions yourself, not buy them from what other people say (other people can help but you have to some way make all the discoveries your own or they don't function properly within your personal aesthetic).

Both essays are fine examples of craft/technique analysis and also just plain good readings of the story in hand (and thus they are also a respectful and deep homage to the writer you are reading--Richard Ford, in this case). They are focussed, and they blend clear discussion and naming of techniques with examples that show you have read and carefully understood the whole story and that you see all the armatures of the technical point in question, small and large. They also have a nice, informal voice which does not in any way undermine the huge amount of information you pack into them. This is just terrific to see. Your discussion of dialogue esp. is great because you go beyond the teaching in my essay (which, of course, I mean you to do) and you rope in other sources (correctly and appropriately) and you also simply note and describe techniques that you see on your own. This is exactly what you have to do to teach yourself. Just look at the text and see what the author is doing (and then of course you appreciate it much more--I bet you feel like you're reading better and seeing a lot more in the stories than you used to). Only on thing I'd add to this essay, as a comment and an expansion: When you compare Ford's story to my short story exercise, you'll see that I make space for two thematic passages of some length whereas he tends to distribute his thematic moments, using several smaller thematic passages. This is, of course, how stories develop length and complexity. He has more scenes than I have in the exercise, too. But I think you understand the pacing and rhythmic principle involved--he tends to run a thematic passage at the end of a scene or plot-step both as a breathing point, as commentary on the scene and the story and as a bridge to the next scene or step. My exercise is a shortened, stylized version of a structure he has expanded and danced with. The dialogue essay is just great, going well beyond, as I say, my half-dozen sample techniques. Over and over, in your example and discussion segments, you make nice sense of the intricate dance he is doing. You seem to be really seeing this stuff and that's the point of these essays.

comparison and contrast

Your job in the essay is to summarize the story and focus on the major desire-resistance pattern and describe it accurately and precisely AND use your experience reading the other stories as a knowledge base for comparison and contrast.

The desire resistance pattern in "Brokeback Mountain" is simply that Jack and Ennis are lovers (and desire one another) but Ennis resists full involvement because he is afraid of the consequences in the gay-bashing west. Now I know you saw this, but you needed to say it at the outset. This is the whole story's desire/resistance pattern in a nutshell. That's what you needed to tell me. Then the plot of the story develops in a series of three large steps: 1) the opening at Brokeback Mt where they first discover their desire; 2) the meeting a couple of years later when they go to the motel and decide to try to see each other in some half-assed way which leads to: 3) the years of fishing and camping trips which climax in those scenes when Jack tries to insist that they be together in a more fully committed way and Ennis resists with a finality that basically ends things. That's it. That's the plot.

But in your essay you wander through the story without being able to abstract the precise essential structure. I think you're confused by the fact that each of the steps involves a sequence of scenes and smaller steps, bits of backfill, etc. That is Proulx "steps out" the steps, expands them into smaller steps. But the story still basically develops through three events. And it's bookended by the two segments of text that have to do with aftermath (...a week later, so much had happened...) and the shirt image pattern. This also might confuse you especially if you think all story should have the conventional straightforward chronological pattern of, say, "Shiloh." Here you should be contrasting the stories we have read together. "The Point" is straight on chronological EXCEPT for the weird chunk of backfill AFTER the end of the story plot. "Shiloh" is relatively straight on conventional. "Company of Wolves" has the weird chunk of preamble material BEFORE the plot starts up. After the plot starts up the story is straight on chronological. And in "Brokeback Mountain" we have a BOOKEND structure, a FRAME, that chronologically fits AFTER the plot of the story. You make a careless error in your essay on p3 when you say "The rest of the story moves backwards from this moment"--that's completely incorrect: Aside from the frame texts, the story is straight on chronological and conventional from beginning to end; it starts at the beginning and moves to the end. It doesn't go backwards. I think that in some way you didn't quite pay attention to this story or the issues at stake. I hope I don't sound like I'm lecturing you here--I just am trying to get at the way I want you to read and learn. It's important for you to understand

structure and also to see how other authors deploy it so that you can both learn the structure and learn how to vary it to make it exciting.

Only on thing I'd add to this essay, as a comment and an expansion: When you compare Ford's story to my short story exercise, you'll see that I make space for two thematic passages of some length whereas he tends to distribute his thematic moments, using several smaller thematic passages. This is, of course, how stories develop length and complexity. He has more scenes than I have in the exercise, too. But I think you understand the pacing and rhythmic principle involved--he tends to run a thematic passage at the end of a scene or plot-step both as a breathing point, as commentary on the scene and the story and as a bridge to the next scene or step. My exercise is a shortened, stylized version of a structure he has expanded and danced with.

And here you need to begin to make comparisons (e.g. with "The Point") and judgments and decisions for yourself. I can offer suggestions (ah, which sometimes sound like criticism or outright orders–sorry). I imagine you want to get better than "quite good"–even approach the mystery of "The Point" without actually imitating "The Point" but I mean write a story that good. So you need to think about plot. The simple desire-resistance pattern of "The Point" allows so much mysterious complexity to get built into the story...

But again there are comparisons and judgments and decisions to make. Who are your writing gods? Who do you want to emulate? Compare your stories to their stories? The lack of a desire-resistance pattern in the present-plot line makes this very unlike most modern stories
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Okay, so now I ask myself how does this story reflect what we've been reading– "The Point"–and learning about story construction. We have a character who wants to be someone else in the first sentence. He has an awful boring life and isn't very nice. But in fact there is no conflict in his life. No one stops him from being someone else. Indeed, when he decides to change his name, it seems very easy. He just a loser and when he becomes someone else he becomes even more of a loser. That's okay in concept–a little like Gogol's "Overcoat." But a story needs a plot, it needs dramatic energy. It can't just wander from event to event (the whole Sunset sequence is long and has no upshot, no plot significance, no development).

But this story is also similar in set up to other stories of yours–I'm thinking of the story where the woman cooks up a soup of filth, for example, or the guy who wants to change his identity. You tend to write stories about characters flipping out instead of stories about characters interacting with other characters (and maybe flipping out as well–nothing wrong with characters

flipping out). But contrast your story here with “Shiloh” which has a similar starting premise: guy loses his job and stays home. In “Shiloh” Leroy and his wife interact in a series of scenes about, first, log cabins, but then also Mabel, music, smoking and finally their marriage. In your story, there is no present time interaction at all between the main characters except for one lying phone call at 8 p.m. Because Nikki and Mel both lie, they, in fact, don’t interact. Nothing either one of them says has any effect on the plot line of the other. Mel seems lost in a depression because he’s lost his job and Nikki seems to disapprove of him. But I can’t understand why Nikki descends into her flipping out time in the bathroom.

other devices

Then there are other techniques to study in these stories: How exactly does each author deploy backfill? (They are quite different.) What role do the subsidiary characters play? Are there subplot-like elements? But we can leave these for a bit later.

sample synopsis

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example synopsis Chekhov story
example synopsis Wolff story
example synopsis Smith story
example synopsis Almond story

example synopsis Chekhov story

Anton Chekhov's story "Grief" is about a talented turner (or woodworker) and abusive alcoholic named Grigory. He's a poor Russian peasant and has been married for 40 years, coming home drunk and beating his wife every night, until the night before the story begins (yes, there's a flashback). That night, Grigory comes home drunk and is about to beat his wife when she gives him a look that scares him so much he doesn't beat her. Instead, first thing next morning he borrows a neighbor's horse and sledge to take her to the rural district hospital to cure her of whatever is causing the funny look that scared the shit out of him the previous night. But a terrible blizzard slows him down, no matter how hard he whips the borrowed horse. His wife dies before they reach the hospital. Grigory thinks he should head to the cemetery but for some reason keeps heading to the hospital. He gets lost. Night comes on. He starts to freeze. His hands become so numb he can't control the reins. The horse goes on unguided until it stops in front of a building, which Grigory can just make out in the dark and through the snowstorm. By this time, Grigory's so cold he can't even move his feet, so he decides (as if he has any choice) to fall asleep in the sledge, not even minding that he might die in the process. But he doesn't die. The next day, he wakes up in the hospital. He recognizes the doctor – the one he'd wanted to take his wife to. He wants to get out of bed and fall on his knees to thank the doctor or beg him for help – he's quite confused. But he can't move. He has lost all four of his limbs to exposure. The doctor tells him not to complain – he's had a good, long life – and leaves the room. The end.

"Grief" is short – about 2,000 words – and is told by a third-person narrator, limited for the most part to Grigory, who delivers a long muttered monologue in the first half, which doesn't really end until he falls asleep but which is interrupted mid-way through by the narrator. (The other character who speaks in this story is the doctor, but just for a few lines.)

--Julie Marden on Numéro Cinq

example synopsis Wolff story

Tobias Wolff's story "Bible," published in The Atlantic and included in the Best American Short Stories 2008, is about a high school English teacher, Maureen, who leaves her friends at a bar to go home alone on a cold Friday night. As the slightly drunk Maureen walks to her car, she searches the faces of the crowd outside a dance club looking for her twenty-something-year-old daughter, Grace, who Maureen hasn't seen for two years since Grace left college and moved in with one of Maureen's former colleagues. When Maureen gets to her car, a man comes up behind her and takes her keys. He forces her into the driver's seat and gets in the car with her. She doesn't know if he's going to rob her, rape her, or kill her, but she drives the car. The man directs Maureen to take a turn on a deserted, unplowed road. When she stops the car, the man begins to talk and Maureen figures out that he is the father of Hassan, one of her students whom she is failing for cheating. The man wants his son to become a doctor; Maureen informs the man that Hassan will never be a doctor and she is going to report Hassan for cheating. Maureen asks the man if he is planning to kill her, mocking him by placing his hands on her neck. Maureen realizes the man will not hurt her but she remains angry at being kidnapped even while she begins to feel sorry for the man. She drives back to the parking lot. The man apologizes. Maureen asks how he was going to make her keep her promise (if she had even agreed to make such a promise) not to turn his son in for cheating. The man pulls out a pink Bible he has picked up at Goodwill. She lets the man go and leafs through the Bible while wondering what happened to the long-lost girl who owned it and then the story ends. The story is about 3,000 words and is told from the point of view of third-person narrator, Maureen.

--Gwen Mullins on Numéro Cinq

example synopsis Smith story

In Ken Smith's story, "Meat," originally published in The Atlantic, {Incidentally, I had written a first draft of this lecture before I realized the both of the stories I'd chosen had a number of similarities and were both originally published in The Atlantic. I have since acquired a subscription to The Atlantic. C. Michael Curtis has been (and I believe still is) the fiction editor there for the past 30 years} a widowed old rancher named John Edward Walker sits at his table in the morning listening to gunshots some distance away in the hills. He is sick to his stomach and he knows that no one has any business shooting upcountry but Walker is too old, sick, and tired to go check it out. He remembers finding one of his yearlings butchered along the side of the road a few days previous and the police officer had remarked that it was because of the strikes at the copper mines. Walker has lived on the ranch for over seventy years. In the text of the opening paragraphs, he remembers an incident involving his brothers, his father, and his grandfather who once caught two rustlers stealing a dozen head of cattle. The Walkers had let the rustlers go but had taken back their cattle as well as the rustlers' horses. This memory is all part of the preamble. Incidentally, this particular technique – that of writing backstory, especially a story within a story, before kicking off into present action — is one that must be used with full awareness and a measure of caution so that the story does not get sidetracked by background information that does not advance the present action of the story or support the plot. Smith makes it work for this particular story since the memory is interesting, relevant (it's about cattle thieves and the protagonist), and actually tells the reader how the larger story will likely play out without taking any tension away from the main plot.

--Gwen Mullins on Numéro Cinq

example synopsis Almond story

“Run Away, My Pale Love” by Steve Almond appears in his collection of short stories, My Life in Heavy Metal. “Run Away, My Pale Love” is approximately 12,000 words and constructed by numerous short passages, most under a page long.

The following is the nucleus of the story: One May morning, David, a 30-year-old doctoral candidate of comparative literature, sees Basha, a young Polish woman, on a nameless American campus. Two weeks later, he manages to ask her out, but she refuses to kiss him. At this point, David notes to himself that he longs for a grand romance, which Basha also seems to want; on their second date, they have sex until dawn. She returns to Poland. At the end of his summer break, David visits her in Warsaw. She tells him she wants to return to America with him, but David goes home alone. He visits her a second time at Christmas, this time staying in Katowice (a city about 150 kilometers from Warsaw) in the apartment that Basha shares with her twice-widowed mother. Mamu accepts David, but he observes that the genuine affection and intimacy the two women share is missing from his relationship from Basha. The following May, he returns for a third and final summer-long visit to Katowice, time he uses to work on his dissertation. By this time, the couple’s sex life has wilted. In July, David is offered a teaching position in America, but Basha refuses to join him. On his final night, Basha refuses sex. They tussle and Basha elbows him in the mouth. She runs into Mamu’s room. Mamu comes out an hour later to hug him goodbye. David breaks down and sobs in Mamu’s arms.

--Rebecca Martin on Numéro Cinq

critical thesis

outline for critical thesis or 4th semester lecture

1. *Brief Narrative Introduction*
2. *Define and focus your topic, use secondary sources if necessary:*
3. *List 3-5 techniques typical of this kind of story, define and explain each. Give brief examples from literature (for illustrative purposes, not in depth discussion)*
4. *Then move to your story examples:*
    a. *Work A*
        i. *description*
        ii. *synopsis*
        iii. *technique 1*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        iv. *technique 2*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        v. *technique 3*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
    b. *Work B*
        i. *description*
        ii. *synopsis*
        iii. *technique 1*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        iv. *technique 2*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        v. *technique 3*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
    c. *Work C (if needed)*
5. *Conclusion*

informal opening

I am always pushing people to do some sort of informal narrative opening, either to the critical thesis of the lecture, which associates the body of the argument with their own urgencies as a person or a writer.

synopsis

Usually, I try to get students when they are doing an essay like this (or a lecture for that matter) to give a brief summary of the work he or she is discussing. This is, I find, a rather helpful habit. You technically don't need it for the critical essay because I am going to be the only one who reads it, but if (and I think you might want to think about this) you ever decide to publish your critical essay (or any literary or craft essay in which you discuss a text) it always helps to assume most of your audience may not have read the work you are talking about or, even if they have read it, they won't remember it in the detail you do. So it is always good to insert a summary for the sake of context--it's like giving the reader an overall map of the territory before you get into specifics. And then the specifics make more sense. Your summary should be practical and yet written in such a way as to express your enthusiasm for the piece--when I used to write book reviews I would always include a summary that, more or less, made the best case possible for how the book should be read. A quick summary should include a sense of how long the work is, how it's layed out, how its time flow pattern works, point of view and a potted plot summary. You want to make the reader feel like he or she knows the book--this flatters the reader or audience member. (I spend a lot of time in my book on *Don Quixote* making that 840-page novel seem simple, clear and familiar before I launch myself into a nitty-gritty analysis. So people who haven't read *Don Quixote* can still read my book. Your synopsis can also include some idea of the main desire resistance pattern and the major thematics of the work. These summaries should be terse, very terse. I used to have to write 350-words book reviews--and I'd manage to find a way of synopsizing the whole novel in one small paragraph. Good practice.

The novel summary is excellent. I can see the book physically, I have a sense of its story and a sense of the complexity of the telling you are going to explore in part. Also you tell it in a relaxed and humorous way that fits the book. A minor masterpiece of the art of summary. I also like your discussion of the sense of circularity--as a feeling the text gives, as a metaphor, AND (this is the best part) a motif that threads its way through examples and through bits of thematic commentary in the novel. (In this way, the novel is always contemplating its own form--you might add this thought if you want; it's something I've noticed in a lot of great novels.)

grad lecture

outline for 4th semester lecture

1. *Brief Narrative Introduction*
2. *Define and focus your topic, use secondary sources if necessary:*
3. *List 3-5 techniques typical of this kind of story, define and explain each. Give brief examples from literature (for illustrative purposes, not in depth discussion)*
4. *Then move to your story examples:*
    a. *Work A*
        i. *description*
        ii. *synopsis*
        iii. *technique 1*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        iv. *technique 2*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        v. *technique 3*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
    b. *Work B*
        i. *description*
        ii. *synopsis*
        iii. *technique 1*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        iv. *technique 2*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
        v. *technique 3*
            1) *example 1*
            2) *example 2*
    c. *Work C (if needed)*
5. *Conclusion*

focus, audience, clarity

One of the biggest difficulties with a lecture is narrowing the focus and also imagining an audience. The first thing to remember is that probably most of your audience hasn't read the books you're talking about, and if they have read them, they haven't read them as recently or as well as you have. I'd say you'll completely loose your audience with the discussion of the Marquez book as it stands. You have to start with a neat, terse, clear book summary before your start talking craft and pulling examples out of the book. Maybe one paragraph long. And then you need to SLOW DOWN, DEFINE YOUR TERMS, AND GIVE GOOD COMPREHENSIBLE EXAMPLES. It makes no sense to say Marquez uses fragments unless you show us exactly how this works. And when you start talking about repetition creating spirals, you are moving into metaphor as opposed to close technical analysis. Spiral time really means nothing (unless you can explain it to me so that I can understand it). And what's the distinction in a novel between circular time and spiral time? Be careful. You're making things to airy and complex. But Marquez does use looping tenses, fragments and repetition, and time suspension. You're right. Just slow down, don't make huge claims about spirals, just describe the actual techniques and show them in action. Same goes for Munro. Truth is none of the techniques for creating this slightly unconventional time illusions is really odd. Most writers use fragments and repetitions and time suspensions more or less. You don't want to mystify craft--it's pretty simple.

Besides remembering that your audience needs to be carried through the lecture with clarity and lots of good examples and novel/story summaries, you need to think about length and proportion. I'd say the lecture should run to between 17 and 18 pages depending on how many single-spaced example texts you use. (Don't use power point. Use charts and handouts--make sure all your examples are also in handouts.) The way your draft reads, you have what looks like more than four pages of introduction--clearly too much. Cut the intro and get to the meat of the lecture: how certain authors play with time in narrative in a way that seems non-linear (that means you also have to define what you mean by a linear narration and give examples). Your title signals the fact that you're being too general. You can't possibly survey theories of time, the various ways time plays out in fiction AND how time works in a non-linear narrative in 18 pages. The fact that you're being too general drives you to the trite Einstein train image. This is very old (early 20th century). And much of what you glean from Mendilow goes by too fast for anyone in your audience to understand. In fact, relativity theory and subjective time and so on have very little to do with narrative. (And I don't think you'll have time for a lesson in the grammar of tenses--you need to get

down to analyzing your texts and giving clear examples.)

a note on the lecture outline

Just remember how to focus things in the lecture (same as in the critical thesis, only it's a shorter piece of writing). Focus on a few techniques. Define them in your own words, give them names. Then give two or three clear, concrete examples from the texts you choose (quotations) with some discussion of each example. Always remember that you are trying to teach yourself something that you need to know for your own work. Also remember that you need to supply good, terse summaries of each of the texts you pull examples from. This is crucial because, for the lecture, you need to imagine an audience that probably hasn't read the books your are discussing. Quotations without a narrative context float vaguely in the air. So, when you think of it, you don't have room in the lecture for too many books.

synopsis

Don't forget you're talking to an audience in which some people may not have read any of the texts you're talking to them about. The purpose of the summary is to make the audience see the book, understand its movements and even be inspired by it--you want to make the books you use sound fascinating to an audience. The summary is the way to do this.

COMMON CRITICAL READING/WRITING FAULTS

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a note on narrative boot camp

NB. Many of the excerpts refer to a series of stories I give students to read and analyze, the same stories, my narrative bootcamp sequence.

- Charles D'Ambrosio's "The Point"
- Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh"
- Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain"

The stories deploy desire/resistance, plot, backfill and image patterns in different ways and make an excellent sequence for comparison and contrast. You get to see the forms varied.

But the stories also progress technically in very interesting ways. "The Point" takes place over the course of a couple of hours. "Shiloh" takes a few weeks. "Brokeback Mountain" covers more than 20 years. So you get to see the same structures varied and applied over stories that also progressively lengthen chronologicall (which gives you a chance to see how authors handle time).

In any case, the choice of stories is not random.

prior assumptions

I wish these things could go more smoothly, but it's generally been my experience that most students have a difficult transition period when they try to move out of old unexamined ideas about what story-writing is toward new more conscious ideas. Unfortunately, most of us need to make this transition because the old ideas are either narrow or insufficient in some way–if the old ideas were working fine, then there would be no need to come to Vermont College and you'd be publishing big time. Sometimes I use a sports analogy here. I don't know if you have played any particular sport or taken lessons or what. But usually, say, with tennis or golf, people go out and hit the ball and play games and then they go and take a lesson and the first thing the instructor does is break down the swing, for example, and makes you suddenly concentrate on foot placement and changing weight distribution through the feet and then the grip and then the idea of keeping your eyes on the ball and so on and so forth. All of a sudden the thing that seemed perfectly natural (except that you couldn't hit the ball straight) becomes very complex and you have to keep your mind on a dozen different aspects of the "swing" or "stroke" and it takes a while and a lot of practice for the new ideas to become second nature. But then gradually you start to hit the ball better than you ever did before. Writing and learning to write can sometimes be a little like the sports learning process. This seems very counterintuitive sometimes because of course writing is words and you've been talking and writing all your life. But you need to remember that, though all those people out there have also been reading and writing all their lives, very few indeed can write a successful story. And so you have to keep asking yourself how far you can get writing on instinct alone and how conscious you have to become of your process. Writing a successful story is always a combination of instinct, imagination, intuition, luck and craft. Of all these elements, craft is the only one you can get better at by trying and learning and becoming more self-conscious. And that's the one I am trying to concentrate on with you. Unfortunately, this often means that I sound as if I don't care about or credit the other four. But, of course, I am a writer and I know absolutely how important imagination and instinct and intuition and luck (especially, luck) are in writing a good short story. But I can't teach those things–though I can, through craft, sometimes show you how to give them freer rein; oddly enough incorrect ideas of form and structure often lead to a student having a rather narrow and unfree idea of what a story is. But anyway–enough preamble.

You say in your letter: "I think I'm slowly coming to understand what makes a

good short story--and it's very different from what I'd originally thought." I hope this means what I think it means. Because I have to tell you--one of the hardest things for learning writers to do is let go of what they previously thought a story or a novel is. The lesson I want you to take from looking at "Shiloh" is that, irrespective of what subterranean beliefs and motives Leroy has (and whether or not he actually would build her a log cabin), the story is driven by his explicit and repeated desire to build a log cabin for his wife who doesn't want one. This little conflict is repeated over and over again. Nothing else is repeated in the story with the same emphasis (except log cabins themselves). This is what I want you to see. And this is also what I want you to think about doing in your own stories. Because stories really are founded on the simple surface repetition of a desire and a resistance. All the complexity and meaning gets built in around this structure.

I chuckle to myself though when I reread your letter. You have this little school-marmish streak in you: "I assume you'll not judge these exercises for their great literary merit. But perhaps they'll entertain you, albeit briefly." N______!!!!!!! What in Hell do you think "literary merit" is? And why can't short entertaining pieces also have literary merit? Why do STORIES have to be LONG and ponderously full of so-called LITERARY MERIT? Wherever did you get lumbered with these inhibiting and obscurantist ideas? You also say the short story exercise brings out your "melodramatic side" as if that might be something slightly distasteful. N______!!! Literature is melodramatic. Where did you get the idea that it isn't? Everything in literature is heightened, exaggerated, dramatized. Til now your main problem has been a scarcity of drama. Your idea of being "melodramatic" is really just what normal literary writing is. So keep on being melodramatic, for goodness sake.

At the beginning of the essay you say something about how dialogue is essential to a relationship story--I don't know where you get an idea like that. I would never say something so general as that without lots and lots of empirical data to back it up (and I bet there are relationship stories with little or no dialogue, too). I'd rather you just said that dialogue is one tool a writer can use in a story. Then you list some of the techniques Lorrie Moore uses--but I wish you'd actually given examples of those techniques or pointed them out in the examples you do give. On p3 I take exception to your line "This passage is effective because it explains the dynamics of the relationship without using a heavy amount of narration" as if you think narration is bad. You need to learn not to make value judgements between different techniques. One technique is no better or worse than another. Narration is good, dialogue is good. In any particular situation (and depending on the author's taste, inclination and level of craft knowledge) an author will use a mix, or just dialogue, or just narration--whatever works. I actually don't think you meant to imply these value judgements, but I also think that you need to watch yourself so that you don't fall into this way of thinking when you are writing. No need to unnecessarily limit your own technical repertoire with false

ideas.

danger of academic crit

So many people can't read as writers because they've absorbed too much academic literary criticism at school. They want to tell me what the story means. They want to tell me what associations the story brings to them. What I want my students to do is pay strict attention to the exact words of the story. I don't care about much else. As a writer, I want my readers to do that for me.

Right there, an academic literary critic would begin to want to know what this means. But I stop myself from going down that road. Rather, I first ask myself if it has to mean anything. And I'm not sure it does, really. Repetition, resonance, rhythm and pattern have their own aesthetic values over and above and beside meaningfulness. I think writers make patterns, first, because they are beautiful and resonant. Then, sometimes, they make them mean something. The second thing I ask myself is whether or not, even if I think there is a meaning there, I should look for the meaning now, or wait until I've traced and plotted all the repetitions, the patterns, the roots and the split-off elements. Isn't it better to see the whole pattern before drawing any conclusions about what it means?

You give the standard lit crit/Aristotelean received wisdom about plot, whereas in my essay on novel structure I try to go beyond that. You even get into the standard confusion: plot is an arrangement of fictional events in causal format vs plot is different from the chain of causal events (hence someone invented the distinction you half-use between "story" and "plot" — but even that distinction is easily garbled). I also say in my essay that "causal" isn't that helpful a word in this case--the basic engine of causality in a novel is "ordinary human motivation." I also try to go beyond the rec'd wisdom that plots are "satisfying because they create a sense of orderly cause and effect." I don't think so at all. As desiring beings we identify with desire and the struggle to achieve it; I think that's the key to our response to plot. Also, since you're summarizing rec'd wisdom, you manage to ignore experimental novels in which (e.g. Queneau's *The Bark Tree*) events do NOT "seem to be caused by preceding events." Also it is simply not true in all cases that success=comedy and failure=tragedy. In *Lucky Jim*, one of the great comic novels, Jim absolutely fails to get what he wants (to keep his teaching job).

I am being quick and terse here (sorry), but I think you need to be a bit careful of the feeling that you've seen all this (what a plot is, technical analysis e.g.) before. What I am trying to get you to do is to look again at all

the perceptions and ideas and bits of wisdom you have because, it seems to me, the key to learning how to write a novel is to remake yourself as a reader and a writer. If you knew how to write a novel, you wouldn't be a student; conversely, what you already know isn't going to be that much help in writing a novel (and hasn't been so far). What you need to do is set up a whole new interrogation of literary facts (rec'd wisdom) and literary works (real novels) and a dialogue between the two, a dialogue in your own head. You have to start perceiving structure in a way that is new and fresh and exciting and inspiring to you. Thinking about plot in the way you describe it in your essay is only going to get you into compositional difficulties down the line.

topic too general

Then you'll need to sharpen your focus. So far this is a bit all over the map. You keep shifting from topic to topic without sticking to one argument. You start with the idea that great art teaches us how to write, instills honest expression and confidence. This is a bit vague and overly general. Then you discuss a definition of art and get a bit confusing as to whether you are talking about artists or people who experience art. Also, of course, you can't just thump down a definition of art from somewhere without giving the proper citation. In any case, this is a graduate level paper and you can't just cite dictionary definitions without thinking them through. There are in fact a lot of competing ideas about what art is going back to Aristotle and Plato who thought art was imitation not expression, a view still held in contemporary times--see Eric Auerbach's book *Mimesis*. The whole point of doing critical work (essays, lecture) is that you examine your beliefs and assumptions by comparing and contrasting them with other ideas, other books. By doing this you make your ideas deeper, stronger and more complex. I'd stay away, in your lecture, from these VERY general ideas--leave out this discussion of what art is.

insufficient basic read (see rubric)

You need also a section in which you pull back and describe the time flow in a more structural flowing sense. With Alice Munro, I think, it's necessary to get across that swooping rhythmic recursive feel of her time flow. And the effect this has on the reader. I wish you'd spent a little time on that. Also it would have been nice if you had compared the time flow (in your mind) to the simple time flow structure of, say, the model story exercise we've been working on. For example, if you step back, you can see how the first couple of sections of narrative are setup. And the problem part of the story, the resistance, begins at "one morning" which is the equivalent of the "one day" moment in the story exercise. #timeflow

reading through as essay structure v logical organization

You write your essays as you're reading your way through the story, or it seems that way--you go through the story as a way of structuring your reading of the devices you're analyzing without going back and rewriting after new discoveries or grouping your discoveries. This is a bit studentish. Learn to write a nice, terse, clear and pointed plot summary at the beginning of your essay. Then give the exact quotes of your examples, discussing each one along the way.

In your essay, you write the essay sequentially as you move through the novel. But really this doesn't help you step back and look at the devices and see how they work. It's really a fairly easy academic essay structure. Train yourself to do a very short novel summary near the beginning of your essay (no more than 250-300 words). Train yourself to sketch in the essentials beginning with the physical look of the text. How many pages. How is it divided in terms of chapters, sub books, etc? What is the point of view structure? What is the time flow structure like? Then do the plot summary.

missing summary/synopsis

What you should always do is begin your essays on stories with a terse little summary of what happens in the story. In this case, Neddy, In John Cheever's story "The Swimmer," decides to swim home across the county. As he moves from pool to pool, there is an very odd and beautiful time transformation. To Neddy it seems like he is taking an afternoon to swim home. But we have clear signals in the text that years have gone by. So this is not a realistic story; it's a little magical or experimental. When Neddy reaches home, his life is ruined, the house sold, wife and daughters gone, no one there, and he is an older man. The desire/resistance pattern is actually very clear, though almost trivial except as it goes along. At the end of the second para, it occurs to Neddy that he can "reach his home by water." At the end of the fourth para, "he said he was going to swim home." That's it. That's the desire. In the second to last para of the story Cheever writers: "He had done what he wanted, he had swum the county..." So the story is very explicit about what Neddy wants, his desire. Always begin your analysis of the structure of a story by looking for the simple words of desire (want, desire, decide...words like that). It is always amazing to me how literal stories are in announcing the desires of their characters. In this story, Cheever uses the verb "wanted" to let you know what Neddy wanted. The difference between this story and "The Point" and "Shiloh" is that Cheever doesn't repeat the actual words of the desire/resistance pattern over and over again. And the word "wanted" comes at the end of the story. But you, as a reader, need to be flexible in your reading and see how an author is using the form in some varied or surprising way. (In many ways, the story is structurally and tonally quite like "The Point." I know you say "Neddy desires to see himself other than he is" but really I can't find any text that actually says that--and the key to reading a story is to find the text, the actual words on the page: usually an author will say the character wants or desires something. And I think your missing this point really skewed your whole analysis of the story.) What starts out as a whim becomes deadly serious in the thematic passage in the middle of the story; Cheever even uses a run of rhetorical questions exactly as I showed you in my short story essay and exercise. The repeated action of the plot is Neddy's movement from pool to pool and the various encounters he has along the way. At first people try to hold him, keep him from proceeding. Then he moves along easily enough but there are signals along the way that all is not well. A pool is empty. People insult him. He gets weaker and weaker. The weight of these later incidents is to tell us that though he is making superficial progress on his pilgrimage, what is he moving toward is also moving away from him. When he reaches his goal, home, home is literally no longer there.

You're right to note the repetitions of water and rain and alcohol and sports. You're also right to note the references to nice summer days and the decline towards autumnal and wintry references. I know houses etc repeat, too, but my sense is that these are less and less important items, mostly backdrop. What is extremely important to the technique and structure of this particular story is the ways Cheever invents to tell us that things are not progressing as Neddy thinks they are. 1) Track all the references to memory. 2) Track all the references to surprise and disappointment. 3) Track the seasonal changes and the way they contradict Neddy's sunny summer day expectation. 4) Track the overheard conversations that deliver factual information about Neddy and his family that he seems not aware of. 5) Finally, track Neddy's subjective (feelings) reactions to things and his sense of his own body. Note how references to swimming style and diving into pools and hoisting oneself out without a ladder bookend the story. Yes, you do catch the reference to memory in which the precise mechanism inside Neddy is explained, the mechanism of forgetting or repressing difficult facts. But there is much more than this.

You write your essay sequentially as you move through the novel, basically a play-by-play instead of an analytic exercise. But really this doesn't help you step back and look at the devices and see how they work. Train yourself to do a very short novel summary near the beginning of your essay (no more than 250-300 words). Train yourself to sketch in the essentials beginning with the physical look of the text. How many pages. How is it divided in terms of chapters, sub books, etc? What is the point of view structure? What is the time flow structure like? Then do the plot summary.

I wish that a) you would discipline yourself to write a tight, one-para story synopsis when you do essays...

Just remember how to focus things in the lecture (same as in the critical thesis, only it's a shorter piece of writing). Focus on a few techniques. Define them in your own words, give them names. Then give two or three clear, concrete examples from the novels (quotations) with some discussion of each example. Always remember that you are trying to teach yourself something that you need to know for your own novel. Also remember that you need to supply good, terse summaries of each of the novels you pull examples from. This is crucial because, for the lecture, you need to imagine an audience that probably hasn't read the books your are discussing. Quotations without a narrative context float vaguely in the air. So, when you think of it, you don't have room in the lecture for too many books.

But you forgot to do a nice plot summary of the novel--don't forget you're talking to an audience in which some people may not have read any of the

books you're talking to them about. The purpose of the summary is to make them see the book, understand its movements and even be inspired by it--you want to make the books you use sound fascinating to an audience. The summary is the way to do this.

SEQAnd, yes, speaking in front of an audience presents certain problems which you don't necessarily encounter in writing an essay. The audience has no written text to look back through; you have to be clear and comprehensible all the way through. That means, for example, that if you're using examples from a text the audience hasn't read, then you have to give a clear and concise synopsis of that text. In other words a clear, concise description of Blake's *The Four Zoas*, Dylan's song and Woolf's novel. Otherwise the examples hang in thin air without any context and without seeming to be part of a larger work that the audience has some impression about. A description or synopsis would tell us what the work was (poem, song, novel), how its ideas and/or plot work, and roughly what it's form is like. In the novel, for example, you need to tell us the story and how the point of view structure works so that we can understand who Jacob is and what happens to him and where your examples fit in the book. Same goes for the poem and the song. Also you need to give us a sense of how Blake's poem works as a whole--you can't make the same case for the small fragment as you can for the whole of Dylan's song or Woolf's novel. You need to be comparing complete works with complete works. Then, of course, it's all right to pick examples from those works
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Again, you have to spend some time telling us what the examples are from. As I said above, describe the poem, song, novel. Synopsis and structure. To give the audience a context. Your discussion of the Blake excerpt doesn't really make much sense because we don't know the structure of the poem, what the poem is about, who is talking, the voice, the point of view, the general, as opposed to this particular, argument. And observations like "his language is immediate and perseverant, and without time for reply" are not helpful--I don't know what you mean by any of the words.

Once again as I think I mentioned earlier, when you're doing a lecture you have to assume that most if not all your audience is not familiar with the work you are discussing. A lecturer can breeze over things that seem very familiar to her but completely leave the audience in the dust (the result is boredom, inattention). So it behooves you to take the time to set up your literary analysis by giving a nice terse and interesting description of each work. Just saying the book follows Jacob from birth to death doesn't tell us enough about him or the plot to give your examples any context at all. You should make the audience feel that it has actually read the book--start with the physical book--how long--chapter set up, point of view structure, time structure; then give a quick plot summary that tells what happens and, above all, makes it sound

interesting. You should be able to do this in about 10 sentences (it takes practice and work).

"Desire and Resistance in 'Brokeback Mountain'" is not bad at all though it's a bit wordy and over-general in parts. And you have a tendency to tell me what things mean (when you still need to concentrate still harder on what precisely is in the text) and to pat Proulx on the back (that last page) when she doesn't really need it. On the over-general side, I include things like the story summary at the beginning. You should concentrate on getting this right. A one-paragraph story summary is an excellent exercise in describing structural elements if it's done correctly. But if you say things like "to their mutual surprise" you are misrepresenting the story--since no one in the story actually ever seems surprised (the fact that they aren't surprised is one of the telling aspects of the story and one of the ways Proulx brings the reader to accept the situation so quickly). And when you say things like "they are two young men from Wyoming without good prospects" you are sliding over the very precise socio-economic and family history aspects of the story which Proulx is exceedingly careful to construct properly. I'm not saying you have to write long text summaries to include all this information, but be careful NOT to slide so far above the text that you misrepresent it. What you write here is what you think--if you misrepresent the story here, then it's difficult to think about it correctly. Use the story summary to lay out the main structures and events of the story.

quotation not connotation

words on the page

I think one crucial thing you say in your letter is: “I’m about to add things that aren’t in the text, but isn’t that what we, as readers, are supposed to do?” Well, yes, as readers we do that all the time. *As readers*. But as writers we’re looking for something else. As writers we’re not trying to see what things mean; we’re trying to see how the meaning is put into the text. So the reason I talk about the log cabin and nativity scene is not to talk much about the meaning but to show you how a writer loads and controls meaning in a text. And what is the technique I was trying to show you? Well, it’s the little sentence in which Leroy is reminded of rustic nativity scenes. That’s a technique of loading. And nativity scenes are about a husband and wife and a baby (and in Leroy’s family there is no baby--this is the upshot of the next paragraph or two of the story). We don’t need to go much further into the meaning here because we’re not literary critics. (Though I’d add that if Mason had wanted us to think much about Joseph and Mary etc, she’d have done more with the nativity scene reference--in the story she doesn’t bring it up again.) In any case, do you see the difference. I was trying to get you to see how things are done, not necessarily what they mean. If I am sometimes vehement or over-simplify it’s because I want you to focus on technique. #Shiloh

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You still reach a little too much for meaning. Actually your essay got more efficient near the end when you stopped explaining how every reference in a pattern works. I mean that is an important exercise, but moreso when you are doing literary criticism. For the sake of what I am trying to teach you, it’s more important now just to see how often a particular word (or image word) appears, where it appears, how its loaded (that is, what textual loading takes place--not what it means outside the text but what it’s associated with IN THE TEXT, what other words it’s associated with--in your essay, you don’t mentioned the concept of “loading” which I outline in my essay on story structure. You should look at it again). #loading

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So what repeats here in “Shiloh”? Well what repeats most obviously is a pattern of confrontation that is literally repeated in pretty much the same words over and over again beginning on the first page of the story. Leroy will say he wants to build Norma Jean a cabin and Norma Jean will tell him no in one way or another. This happens, if memory serves me, six or seven times clearly. All except two instances are in conversations between Leroy and

Norma Jean. The two other occasions are: 1) Leroy tells it to Stevie, and 2) he tells it to Mabel. (By doing this Mason manages to push the main plot idea into non-main plot areas of the story, those creating coherence and organic unity.) So the main plot is this. Leroy, an invalid suddenly at home, decides he WANTS to build a log cabin for his wife. Over and over in the course of the story he says this AND she says no. That's the basic plot backbone. It's based on a very simple conflict repeated, literally, again and again. You need to be able to see this because this is the structure of stories. Now in most stories, the author doesn't repeat the exact words like this over and over again. But the structure is there.

Much of what you talk about in your essay is not precisely relevant to this (and some of it is not in the story at all). You're interpreting. "Home is where you come at the end of a journey" is not a proposition that has any relevance to this story. (To be more precise, the word "home" is specifically loaded into the net of associations connected with log cabins on the first page, along with the idea of the Nativity scene. So Mason clearly means us to read the word "home" differently than you suggest.) And then other things you say like the little excursus on food as a metaphor for nourishment and love are off topic (not about plot) and a little too vague anyway. Food isn't exactly a metaphor in this story and it wouldn't be a metaphor for nourishment--it is nourishment. But then I don't see anywhere in the text where Mason extends the associations of food to love. I just don't see the words. What happens is what Mason says. Norma Jean starts cooking unusual foods and Leroy notices this. That's not food as a metaphor, it's a change in behavior that another character notices and possibly thinks of as evidence of some change. Nor are the Union dead and their cemetery a metaphor. (And in any case, metaphors are a different device and don't have a direct bearing on understanding basic plot structure.) I don't know if this sounds brutal to you, but I feel like I need to cut to the chase here. And, of course, I know this is new for you. And you need to be clear that I don't think badly of you for not knowing how to do what I need to teach you. But I do want to teach it and get on to other more important things.

The lesson I wanted you to take from reading the plot structure of this story was to see the simple, clear, repetitive desire/conflict structure that is at the heart of a story. Out of this simple structure all sorts of complexities can arise. But the simple structure has to be there. In your essay and reading, you are having a difficult time making distinctions between the simple plot structure and the ancillary elements that are draped over the simple line to add texture, complexity, rhythm and associative meanings. E.g. things like supporting characterization and imagery, doubled characters (Mabel is a sort of double of Leroy, Stevie is an image of Randy is he had grown up--in both cases Mason puts in specific language to make these associations). You need to get clear idea how simple a basic plot structure is because as I move to looking at your stories we'll begin to see that this is one of the main issues we'll have to work with at the outset.

don't change the words

Everything a writer does is deliberate. That's the assumption you're reading with. Every repetition is deliberate. But then you do the wrong thing; you jump to interpreting why she repeats the idea. And I don't think jumping to interpretation is always helpful. It's important to learn that deliberate repetition is the basis of constructing a story or a novel or a poem. Just pay attention to that. Without paying much attention to what it means (except in terms of the very specific literal word associations the author makes in the text). Mason just keeps repeating dead baby references partly because it's part of the backfill of the plot and partly to keep reminding us that the dead baby, like a throbbing drumbeat, is at the back of everything going on on the surface of the story. She repeats because repetition makes things important. But then notice that she repeats with variation. The baby who gets killed by the "datsun dog" is a comic dead baby. (Don't change the words of the story, by the way--you keeping changing it to a dachshund which is not what Mason wrote. She wrote a joke.

You add a lot of extra stuff in your critical papers (sometimes you add things that aren't in the story--Leroy isn't intimidated and there's nothing about "rather than asking Norma Jean where a more suitable building site..." in the story, nor does his avoidance of confrontation cause the confrontation [the confrontation is there from the start and it just gets repeated]) and you seem to have the idea that the characters change which is basically a lesser vision of what a story is. In fact, what I'd hoped is that you would jump up and down exclaiming about how in fact Mason just repeats exactly the same, or almost exactly the same words, of the conflict over and over again. It's the same conflict repeated again and again. This is enough and it should strike you as interesting and instructive. #plot #repetition #Shiloh

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The essay “The Plot Structure in ‘The Point’” is also succinct and rather well done in that you did just sit and look at the story and you saw the goal and the resistance and how they are repeated and you even saw how there was almost, shall we say, a recycling of the actions over and over again: the plopping down in the sand, the retrieval of clothing, the talk about Mr. Crutchfield. Nice and perceptive. But as in the Anne Tyler essay (though less so) you still have this tiny tendency to want to say more than you need to (or more than is in the story). And as soon as you do that you begin to muddy the waters a bit. For example, over and over Kurt repeats that his goal is to get

Mrs. Gurney home. There isn't anything as far as I remember about "and when he's done, to hurry back home." And certainly this is never repeated the way the goal of getting Mrs. Gurney home is. (And actually his goal is not to get her home "safely"; it's just to get her home--the word "safely" doesn't occur in this context either.) If the author had kept repeating "The goal is to get you home safely, Mrs. Gurney, and then get myself home as quick as possible" it would have been a very odd and flabby story indeed. So your description of the story in this regard doesn't quite fit and in fact distorts the story. This may not seem like a big point, but it looms larger when you come to try these techniques in your own stories--if you don't see the essential clarity and simplicity of the desire-resistance structure in a good story, you'll muddy the waters of your own stories when you come to write them. I hasten to add that out of this simplicity comes a wonderful depth and complexity (as you have seen in "The Point"). This simple desire-resistance pattern is one of many construction elements that go into making a story--but it's one we need to learn.

Similarly, when you say every step of the way is fraught with land mines, I sit back and say, were there any land mines mentioned in the story. I know you're being a bit free and also taking a hint from the pattern of military jargon and the Vietnam elements in the story. But land mines are antipersonnel bombs hidden by the enemy to explode against unwary soldiers. In fact, in the story the plot resistance comes from Mrs. Gurney. She doesn't plant anything like a land mine (metaphorical or otherwise). She just resists. You're correct that other things resist their progress as well--wind, sand, etc. But for the purposes of the lesson about plot that I am teaching you, it's important to see this issue clearly. This is crucial--and you'll see why when I come to discuss your own story draft.

interpretation

What you sent was a mix of trying to read for technique and form and some thematic criticism and analysis and some fairly generic consumer reaction. This is the way most intelligent readers read, and there's nothing wrong with it except that it doesn't much help you as a writer. You'll see that I did shred a lot--questioning relevance, crossing out thematic analysis, questioning your focus, and asking you where you find what you are talking about in the text of the story. Don't be alarmed. You need to learn to read like a writer, and that means reading in a completely different way. Reading as a writer means sticking to the text, to the words the writer wrote, and not speculating about what they mean or what the author associated them with. That's another discourse, the discourse of interpretation, and it doesn't help you learn the craft. The craft is about the precise words on the page, their order, their punctuation, their repetition, and so on. So first of all, discipline yourself to refer only to the words the writer has written when you do these essays. Also you need to focus on a particular technique or structure--don't wander from plot to structure to image pattern. There is plenty of material to cover on even the smallest technical topic to fill an essay. Because you wandered and interpreted and appreciated instead of looking at the precise text, you did not write me an essay about any particular thing.

Take plot: in "The Point" the primary plot structure is a desire and resistance pattern that is repeated over and over again (you should be able to quote the precise repetitions and count them). The desire is Kurt's desire to get Mrs. Gurney home (how many times is this literally repeated and where?). The resistance is Mrs. Gurney's actions that get in the way of moving toward the goal of her home. This simple desire and resistance pattern is the backbone of the story. That's what you needed to see. There really isn't anything much in the text about the middle ground or grayness--all that interpretive stuff you were talking about. In "Shiloh" there is an equally simple and literal desire/resistance pattern. Even more literal. Over and over Mason gives us some words to the effect that Leroy wants to build his wife a log cabin and his wife doesn't want him to. This is repeated (where and how many times) over and over. It's the backbone of the story text. All the rest of the text is draped over and manipulated around it. This is the plot lesson you need to extract from these stories.

Take image patterning: The root or main image pattern in "The Point" is the black hole pattern. You need to see how many times black holes are mentioned, where, and how they are loaded (that is, the precise text the author uses to control and add meaning--don't tell me what you think they mean; tell me the exact words the author uses to give them meaning--that is,

give me the technique not opinion or interpretation). The black hole is the main image, but, of course, subsidiary patterns are split off from it: black, darkness (Hat Island), even white holes (see how the splitting works by splitting off associated elements of the main pattern). Ideally, you should send me an essay that tracks the main pattern and the subsidiary patterns, giving me every instance of the patterns in order. Quote them. Give page numbers. This is the only way you'll learn how to compose your own image patterns correctly. In "Shiloh" that main image pattern is the log cabin. You need to give me every instance of log cabin, also give me the loading. There is also a smaller dead baby pattern.

Then there are other techniques to study in these stories: How exactly does each author deploy backfill? (They are quite different.) What role do the subsidiary characters play? Are there subplot-like elements? But we can leave these for a bit later.

To really get a handle on the construction of an image pattern, you need to look at my essay and take careful note of the elements: repetition, significant history, loading and splintering. Then you have to look at these elements as they occur precisely in the story. Splintering is where one pattern splits off from another. But you need to track one pattern all the way through the story before you get sidetracked on a split-off line (unfortunately, you tend to jumble separate lines of development together). So you needed to track every single repetition of the phrase "black hole" first, before you launched yourself into another line of investigation. Once you've tracked each repetition, then you examine each repetition to see what the author does with it. In the case, of black holes there is that very significant passage in which the author ties the theory of black holes to Kurt's job of guiding drunks home and loads the phrase "black holes" with a chunk of thematic text. Once you've fully explored black holes, then you can start on a split-off line. Take "black" and similarly track every single repetition of the word and analyze the associations or loadings (again, pay attention to the words the author uses--your own "associations" with the words, the reader's associations outside the text, are of little relevance to the actual craft of construction; of course, readers bring associations and that's a necessary part of being a reader; but we're learning about writing not the act of reading). Then "dark" or "darkness", Hat Island, "holes" which leads to "white holes" and another pattern of "white" and, yes, a pattern of "silver" and "gray" and "moonlight"--all of these getting split off further and further from the main pattern which is "black holes." But in every case, track the whole literal pattern first before going back down some other branch. I know from your essay that you did get a fairly good idea how pervasive these patterns are, but I don't think you quite see the root and branch structure, or maybe the trunk and branch structure, quite as well as you should. Learn to see the system and structural elements--repetition, significant history (if there is one), loading and splintering. What you then see is how pervasive this branching pattern is through the story.

Also paying attention to the straightforward literal repetitions (black black black black black) would prevent you from stretching too much, which

you do a bit. Again, you still have a reader's tendency to want to stretch and interpret, when I suggest writers want to first be read very literally. On the first reading, when I say X, I mean X. Don't interpret, don't stretch. So if you pay closer attention to the obvious, literal patterning, you don't need to talk about seals or potato bugs or pepper. I'm not saying your wrong at all. But when there is so much to learn in the particularity of the main and obvious patterns, why try to work out whether the author really decided to use the word "pepper" to make it part of an image pattern. Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. But the obvious literal repetitions he CLEARLY meant. And these are what you need to pay attention.

Again I may seem tiresomely kindergarten-ish about all this. But you need to train yourself to look at actual words and devices before you look at meanings and associations or stretched associations or you won't see the writer doing his or her magic; you'll be taken in and enthralled by the illusion but you won't see how to construct an illusion yourself.

Moreover you don't need to write complicated rationales for image patterning as you do on p2. Frankly, after looking at them for ages, I am less and less clear why they make a story more interesting. Why do readers respond to this kind of patterning (and mostly they respond without consciously seeing it)? It's a mystery. And I think you're wrong to say the author "uses image words laden with symbolic meaning." He uses plain ordinary words and he loads them with some meanings as the story goes along. They are not "laden with symbolic meaning" prior to the story. Black is black. It's a color. The author tells you what he wants you to associate with it inside the story. Of course, there is that standard distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic symbols. Extrinsic symbols take their associations from their position in a larger cultural discourse. Crosses, fish, bread and wine--you put these in a story and we know we're in a Christian universe. Intrinsic symbols are constructed within the text itself, loaded to mean what the author wants them to mean. These are the sorts of things I am talking about at one level. But at another level I am not talking about "symbols" at all. It can't really be said that moonlight or gray or silvery develop any real meaning in this story. They are not really symbols at all. They are merely patterns of repetition related by association with other patterns of repetition. They lend to the story a coherence (that is mainly subliminal) and a rhythm.

"Desire and Resistance in 'Brokeback Mountain'" is not bad at all though it's a bit wordy and over-general in parts. And you have a tendency to tell me what things mean (when you still need to concentrate still harder on what precisely is in the text) and to pat Proulx on the back (that last page) when she doesn't really need it. On the over-general side, I include things like the story summary at the beginning. You should concentrate on getting this right. A one-paragraph story summary is an excellent exercise in describing structural elements if it's done correctly. But if you say things like "to their mutual surprise" you are misrepresenting the story--since no one in the story actually ever seems surprised (the fact that they aren't surprised is one of the telling aspects of the story and one of the ways Proulx brings the reader to accept the

situation so quickly). And when you say things like "they are two young men from Wyoming without good prospects" you are sliding over the very precise socio-economic and family history aspects of the story which Proulx is exceedingly careful to construct properly. I'm not saying you have to write long text summaries to include all this information, but be careful NOT to slide so far above the text that you misrepresent it. What you write here is what you think--if you misrepresent the story here, then it's difficult to think about it correctly. Use the story summary to lay out the main structures and events of the story.

association and connotation

you don't need to tell me what you personally associate with these associations, as a writer you should ONLY be interested in the associations that the author makes in the words on the page
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At the top of the page you notice the word “dirt” in the story and then you do a paragraph on you think dirt is associated with darkness. I’m not saying you’re completely wrong. But I am saying look at your method here. Instead of sticking to the clear literal repetitions of the word “dark”, you bring in associations FROM OUTSIDE THE STORY to support your thesis. The thing we are trying to learn here are the techniques by which a writer repeats references to an image AND LOAD ASSOCIATIONS INTO THE TEXT OF THE STORY BY ASSOCIATION AND JUXTAPOSITION. Now maybe the author thought dirt is dark but he doesn’t tell us whereas is does tell us over and over that a lot of other things are dark. Black branches, dark-brown neck, darker gulf, etc. So--and I don’t mean to keep beating a dead horse (well the horse isn’t dead)--but I want you to try sticking even closer to just the text next time.

Similarly on p4 you cite a passage on depression and tell me that depression is often associated with darkness--but then you give examples from other books, books that Charles D’Ambrosio didn’t write, to back up this association. Now, the truth is you’re not wrong--d’Ambrosio does link depression and darkness but he does it within the text and you didn’t notice it (because, I think, you jumped too quickly to making associations outside the text). Go to the next page and see the passage on black holes. ...*it became a policy with me never to let one of my drunks think too much and fall backward or forward into a black hole* and then look back at the depression passage ...*Often drunks seemed on the verge of sobering up, and then, just as soon as they got themselves nicely balanced, they plunged off the other side, into depression*. Actually these passages are quite close together in the story, and you can see that the actions are parallel falling backward or forward into a black hole and balancing on a verge and plunging off the other side into depression. By parallelism IN THE TEXT, depression=black holes. This is one of the techniques of loading. It’s got nothing to do with whether or not d’Ambrosio had read Styron’s book on depression.

Also, in searching for meaning, these associations WITHIN THE TEXT should always be more important to the reader than associations OUTSIDE THE TEXT. Remember that FIRST: the author means what he or she says. The exact words.

interpretation v. loading

You still reach a little too much for meaning. Actually your essay got more efficient near the end when you stopped explaining how every reference in a pattern works. I mean that is an important exercise, but moreso when you are doing literary criticism. For the sake of what I am trying to teach you, it's more important now just to see how often a particular word (or image word) appears, where it appears, how its loaded (that is, what textual loading takes place--not what it means outside the text but what it's associated with IN THE TEXT, what other words it's associated with--in your essay, you don't mentioned the concept of "loading" which I outline in my essay on story structure. You should look at it again).

At the top of the page you notice the word "dirt" in the story and then you do a paragraph on you think dirt is associated with darkness. I'm not saying you're completely wrong. But I am saying look at your method here. Instead of sticking to the clear literal repetitions of the word "dark", you bring in associations FROM OUTSIDE THE STORY to support your thesis. The thing we are trying to learn here are the techniques by which a writer repeats references to an image AND LOAD ASSOCIATIONS INTO THE TEXT OF THE STORY BY ASSOCIATION AND JUXTAPOSITION. Now maybe the author thought dirt is dark but he doesn't tell us whereas is does tell us over and over that a lot of other things are dark. Black branches, dark-brown neck, darker gulf, etc. So--and I don't mean to keep beating a dead horse (well the horse isn't dead)--but I want you to try sticking even closer to just the text next time.

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depression. By parallelism IN THE TEXT, depression=black holes. This is one of the techniques of loading. It's got nothing to do with whether or not d'Ambrosio had read Styron's book on depression.

Also, in searching for meaning, these associations WITHIN THE TEXT should always be more important to the reader than associations OUTSIDE THE TEXT. Remember that FIRST: the author means what he or she says. The exact words.

But I'd like you to pay more attention (in the essay) to how the pattern develops in the text. That is, I wish you'd paid stricter attention to the process of building an image pattern as I outlined it in my essays on the novel and the short story and applied that to your thinking about the story. For example, you go on about the black hole and the bullet wound--which is maybe a connection though I doubt seriously if D'Ambrosio "deduced" his image pattern hat way. When you should have spent more time noticing the passage of "loading" where Kurt tells the reader in thought what the black hole means to him and how it works. This is the kind of loading that is important to learn as a writer. See how it works as a thematic passage and as a loading device for the image pattern AND connects the meaning of the image personally to the main character and the action of the story. By explaining the image, Kurt explains the story. And though you did count the number of times things repeated, you didn't track (in your essay) the development of things. It is interesting that the phrase "black hole" doesn't appear until we're well into the story, but there are many mentions of darkness and black (and Hat Island--which you missed as an element in the pattern). And you once seriously off the rails when you start talking about balloons as symbols and childhood. First of all, as a personal corrective (for all that idiotic high school interpretation), I rarely use the word "symbol". It distracts from the constructed quality of most real literary symbols and it leads to people say things like balloons are symbols of childhood which is not in the text of the story but an association you bring to the story yourself. As a writer, D'Ambrosio may or may not have associated balloons with childhood but of all the things he could have actually put in the text of the story that particular association was NOT one. It behooves us as readers and writers to concentrate on the things he put in the text and refrain from speculating on the things he did not put in. (There is an old distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic symbols. Extrinsic symbols take their meaning from the culture at large and are intended as such. Thus a cross is a Christian symbol. Intrinsic symbols are constructed within the text--these are generally what I mean by image patterns. Writers use extrinsic symbols less and less these days because we have less and less of a pure cultural context to refer to.)

failure to distinguish simple backbone

You (we all) need to read stories differently, not as reader but as writers. And you can read a story carefully as a reader (and English major or literary critic) and still not see how it works as a writer would see it. That's the point I was making. As a writer you want to see structure and you want to see how the various devices work and are organized to work together. I absolutely DO NOT disagree with you that there is more to the story than Leroy simply wanting to build a log cabin. Of course, this relates to communication and to the baby and all that. But as a writing teacher teaching you to write, I was trying to show you how the story works around the backbone of a very simple, repetitive, literal desire and resistance mechanism, a surface plot if you will. Other meanings are added to this plot through the course of the story. But I was trying to draw your attention to this simple structure because you need to learn how to construct simple structures like this in your own stories. Clearly you can see how complex a story "Shiloh" is, but what's miraculous to me as a writer and teacher is how simple the backbone structure is, how literally repetitive it is. #Shiloh #backbone #meaning

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Your plot essay should focus on the simple repetition of the protagonist's goal and the repetition of the resistance rising to a climax. If you can get this simple structure working in a story, then you can add all sorts of other elements and meanings (as in "Shiloh"). Kurt's mission (getting Mrs. Gurney home in "The Point") is tied in linguistically with his father's missions in Vietnam. Mr. Crutchfield gets repeated mentions and he becomes a parallel pre-story (another death). And then the black hole pattern gets draped on top of these other patterns, a pattern of imagery with a thematic component that helps explain the larger meaning of the story. It's your job now to begin to isolate and identify the functional parts of a story like this--and to begin with you need to be able to see the simple ongoing present action (plot) of the story. The repetitive desire and resistance pattern.

But it's a reading that still misses the basic structure of the plot. I know you saw the basic structure because you do say Kurt's job is to get Mrs. Gurney home and that Mrs. Gurney impedes their progress "three times." Then you go on to discuss other aspects of the story (and discuss them well). But in effect you pay too little attention to the real structure of the plot. You're absolutely right that the full meaning of the story depends upon an echo between the father plot and the son plot. But you haven't SEEN the son plot,

the basic plot, the surface plot, the present-time action, if you will, of the story properly. And this is something you need because both the stories you sent me suffer from difficulties with the basic surface plot.

What you need to notice in "The Point"–and maybe you did notice it and just didn't think it was worth telling me about–is that the story begins with Kurt getting an assignment, a mission, a job–to take Mrs. Gurney home. And the whole surface action of the story is about getting her home. What I wanted you to see and notice and exclaim about and quote for me was the number of time the author repeats literally some text having to do with getting "home" or the "goal" to which Kurt is trying to get Mrs. Gurney. I wanted you to see how literal and how repetitive and how, above all, simple the basic surface plot structure of the story is. And I wanted you to see it clearly in terms of the text the author writes about it. Mrs. Gurney doesn't deviate "three times"–actually she deviates several times in a series of rising actions which also involve talking about suicide and taking her clothes off, etc.

All this stuff is more important than the attention you've given it in your essay. And if you compare this sort of surface plot to the surface plots of the two stories you sent me you'll see some instructive or at least suggestive contrasts. In neither of your stories is there clear set of actions based on a desire and a resistance. Most of the "action" in "Cuisine" is in the character's head while her husband, her antagonist, lolls in the bathtub–later we find out he has died and you add your trick ending. In "Pen" Even never actually encounters an antagonist, nor does he have a clear desire in place. Whereas the marvelous and still, as you correctly assert, mysterious "The Point" has a surprisingly simple, even primitive, desire-resistance structure that eventuates in a series of rising actions. It's simplicity (getting Mrs. Gurney home) is the basis for the mysterious complexity that we find in the story. This is the essence of the story writing art–elegant complexity comes out of simple structure (which even astute readers sometimes thing are not worth paying much attention to).

I wanted you to see this simple structure. I wanted you to quote back to me each textual iteration of the desire-goal and then describe Mrs. Gurney's resistance. I wanted you to see exactly how many times this takes place. If you don't see this precisely you won't see how to use the lesson.

In the plot essay, you miss the simple concrete repetitive plot structure. On the first page of the story Leroy says he wants to build his wife a log cabin and she demurs. This dialogue conflict (I want to build you a log cabin and she says no) repeats several times in the story. It also repeats in scenes between Leroy and the drug dealer and between Leroy and Mabel. When I teach "The Point" and "Shiloh" in sequence like this, it's so that you can see the literal repetitive structure of the surface plot. "The Point" is organized around repetitions of statements about getting Mrs Gurney home, the goal is to get you home, "a message" that is literally repeated over and over just as the resistance from Mrs. Gurney is repeated. In "Shiloh" a similar surface plot structure exists and is literally repeated in terms of that dialogue confrontation (I want to build a log cabin and I don't want a log cabin). You say on p3 of your essay that

Leroy wants to know what his wife thinks about them and this is certainly in the text, yes, but in terms of the structure of the story, the log cabin conflict is repeated, begins in the 3rd paragraph, and controls the meaning of the story, so it must be looked at as the plot structure; the plot of the story is not based on wanting to know what the wife thinks. If wanting to know what his wife thinks formed the desire of the plot, then there would be several repetitions of Leroy asking her what she thinks, trying to find out what she thinks, and there are none of these. Whereas he does keep talking about building the log cabin.

I don't quite understand how you missed this repetition since you saw so much else in the story. And I thought I made it clear how simple and literal these structures are in reference to your essay on "The Point" when I wrote last time: "You should also have noticed the number of times that D'Ambrosio explicitly states Kurt's goal or desire. This was an important part of the plot-conflict part of the analysis and for some reason you left it out. It's really important to see that over and over D'Ambrosio explicitly says in the text what Kurt wants and what his goal is (to get Mrs. Gurney home). This is important because I want you to see that he makes the goal obvious and clear to the reader. There's no hinting, no obliquity, no vagueness. And Mrs. Gurney equally is not vague–she just simply keeps stopping or wandering off the path to the goal." I hoped you would go back to that story and reread it with this in mind which would have set you up for reading "Shiloh."

This is fairly important for you to see because again this is a structure you are having a difficult time putting into your stories, this simple repetitive desire-resistance pattern on which all the rest of the story hangs. In "Shiloh" of course Leroy has his accident and suddenly he is living in the house with his wife again. He thinks about building a log cabin, a real home, for her though she doesn't want it. Being home and thinking of the log cabin makes him remember that they haven't really been a family since their baby died. He wants to build a log cabin because a log cabin represents to him a "home" – note the words "rustic nativity scene" in the 3rd paragraph–a nativity scene is a mother, father and baby. At the end of the story, after several repetitions of the log cabin desire and Norma Jean's resistance, we have a real log cabin, shot full of holes, which Leroy says is not what he meant when he talked about log cabins. Literally, his desire for a log cabin, a home, a marriage is shot full of holes.

I know you got the main idea–that the plot is built on a repetition of Jack's desire that he and Ennis be together and Ennis's reluctance, born of fear, is the resistance. You didn't really need all the summary and I'd have been more sure that you got the point if you had just said there are three basic events, or repetitions of the desire-resistance pattern. First on the mountain, then when Jack comes to visit four years later and finally the scene during the camping trip when Jack finally realizes he's not going to get what he wants the gives up. This would have been all you need, coupled with some appropriate quotations (where Jack asks and Ennis turns him down). You did

okay. And, as I say, I am pretty sure you got the point. But if you wrote it out for me in this simple way with the precise quotations I'd have been even more sure. If you can see the essential plot structure, then you're in a position to see how the author varied or reinvented the form. In this case, there is the italicized opening which creates the looping time frame–the story text actually begins well after the dramatic conclusion of the story. Plus the lengthy denouement which involves the news of Jack's death and Ennis's trip to see Jack's parents. It's essential to understand how the plot works in order to see how you can use these other devices. The material about point of view is generally good.

mixing different kinds of repetition

Both plot and image patterning work by repetition. A plot repeats a set of desire-conflict patterns; an image pattern repeats an image. What I think you might have done here is begin first by deciding on the desire-resistance pattern, the plot structure, and the basic events of the story before you launched into an analysis of the image pattern.

distinguish form and variant

There are certain ways all stories work the same (form), but every literary story is also different from every other story and the forms are not deployed in exactly the same way. The complexities of this story, I think, threw you a curve. And you weren't quite fast enough on your feet to see a) the desire (literally in the story but also tossed in at the beginning as a whim--I think this confused you) and b) the unusual and complex beauties of this story (the odd time shift that takes place).

Also you say the time comes (according to my story exercise) for a thematic moment and Moore substitutes a dialogue scene--as if this departure from my little model was somehow extraordinary. Just don't forget that my little model is a stripped-down, stylized version of a short story structure that in actual practice is ALWAYS different from the exercise model. Every writer varies the form more or less. And my story model specifically brackets out some very common devices like subplots and larger image patterns and supernumerary characters which are very often used to elaborate story form. My model isn't something to regard as a rule--though yes you should watch and compare it to what a writer is doing. So, yes, rhythmically you'd expect a thematic passage--but Moore is stretching the story out--instead of a couple of scenes, she does three..and then the thematic passage is very short (just a couple of lines beginning "But too often she lay awake wondering.").

lack of focus

You're clearly looking carefully at the work itself and beginning to find useful devices to use in your own novel. But the exercise was to write an essay about plots and subplots in the novel. I think you saw what I wanted you to see, but I'd like to see it written out instead of as a chart/list (which is useful, yes, as an analytical tool). I also wanted to make sure you saw a) the relative amount of text accorded to subplot, b) exactly how the plot shifted to subplot and back again and/or the various techniques for inserting subplot into plot, c) how characters in plots and subplot reflect on one another (if this happens). Your notes are more notes to you than something that communicates well to me--I don't know what "transitions" are between or what a "swing" passage really is. Also you notice that Macon's brothers don't change, but you don't quite see that that's a subplot option.

vagueness of (metaphorical) language

One thing to think about is refining your analysis of the desire resistance pattern of a story. Watch the way you write about these things. You say "The central conflict…involves the clandestine relationship…" Well you're right, but does writing it that way make the conflict clear? Not really. "Involves" is a very vague word. Train yourself to be precise. The conflict is… Now you're right that it has something to do with the relationship between the two men, and the root of that relationship is sexual (although it's clear by the end of the story that it's a love relationship). So the DESIRE is an obvious sexual desire between the two men. What's the conflict? You say "The conflict arises out of their sexual desire…, their denial of the ramifications of that desire, and ultimately Ennis's inability to fully commit to the relationship." Now "arises out of" is as ambiguous as "involves" and perhaps even less helpful. What is the conflict between? Desire for sex and….? (This is a problem, yes, I think you are having in rewriting your story as well.) Well, you say it arises out of "denial" and "inability"--what arises? To be precise, what arises is the fact they can't be together and have sex all the time. The conflict is between desire for sex and the thing that prevents them from being together and having sex all the time. What is that? It's the fact that they are products of a culture that kills homosexuals. Ennis is afraid to live in a relationship that might be perceived of as being gay (so is Jack at first but they diverge in relationship to their willingness or unwillingness to take risks). It's not Ennis's "inability to fully commit"--that's too vague and passive a construction. Ennis is afraid. He is afraid of getting beaten to death (hence the stories of gays, including Jack, getting beaten to death, the image of the tire iron). The whole thrust of Proulx's stories is that individuals are at least in part products of their regional cultural environments; she's asking herself what it's like to be two economically low-end cowboys in Wyoming who happen to want to screw. It's a Romeo and Juliet story (hyperbole); their love is in conflict with their context and the active agent of that context is Ennis's fear. "I don't want to be dead" is what he says. Think about it--the two propositions in conflict are: I want to screw Jack and I don't want to be dead; two statements of conflicting desire. That's the story structure. You need to train yourself to write it out like that.

Grant you, I'm sure you saw all this. But you didn't write it down clearly and because it's not written down it's not in your essay and because it's not there I am not sure it's really that clear in your mind. And you need to learn to be clear about the simple conflict relations at the base of story construction so that you can construct your own stories (and novel).

main structure confused with ancillary structure

So what repeats here in "Shiloh?" Well what repeats most obviously is a pattern of confrontation that is literally repeated in pretty much the same words over and over again beginning on the first page of the story. Leroy will say he wants to build Norma Jean a cabin and Norma Jean will tell him no in one way or another. This happens, if memory serves me, six or seven times. All except two instances are in conversations between Leroy and Norma Jean. The two other occasions are: 1) Leroy tells it to Stevie, the drug dealer, and 2) he tells it to Mabel, his mother-in-law. (By doing this Mason manages to push the main plot idea into non-main plot areas of the story, those creating coherence and organic unity.) So the main plot is this. Leroy, an injured truck driver suddenly at home, decides he WANTS to build a log cabin for his wife. Over and over in the course of the story he says this AND she says no. That's the basic plot backbone. It's based on a very simple conflict repeated, literally, again and again. You need to be able to see this because this is the structure of stories. Now in many stories, the author doesn't repeat the exact words like this over and over again. But the structure is there.

Much of what you talk about in your essay is not precisely relevant to this (and some of what you write is not in the story at all). You're interpreting. "Home is where you come at the end of a journey" is not a proposition that has any relevance to this story. (To be more precise, the word "home" is specifically loaded into the net of associations connected with log cabins on the first page, along with the idea of the Nativity scene. So Mason, the author, clearly means us to read the word "home" differently than you suggest.) And then other things you say like the little excursus on food as a metaphor for nourishment and love are off topic (not about plot) and a little too vague anyway. Food isn't a metaphor in this story and it wouldn't be a metaphor for nourishment--it is nourishment. But then I don't see anywhere in the text where Mason extends the associations of food to love. I just don't see the words. What happens is what Mason says on the page. Norma Jean starts cooking unusual foods and Leroy notices this. That's not food as a metaphor, it's a change in behavior that LeRoy notices and possibly thinks of as evidence of some change in his wife's character. Nor are the Union dead and their cemetery a metaphor. (And in any case, metaphors are a different device and don't have a direct bearing on understanding basic plot structure.)

The lesson I wanted you to take from reading the plot structure of this story was to see the simple, clear, repetitive desire/conflict structure that is at the heart of a story. Out of this simple structure all sorts of complexities can

arise. But the simple structure has to be there. In your essay and reading, you are having a difficult time making distinctions between the simple plot structure and the ancillary elements that are draped over the simple line to add texture, complexity, rhythm and associative meanings. E.g. things like supporting characterization and imagery, doubled characters (Mabel is a sort of double of Leroy, Stevie is an image of Randy, the dead child, if he had grown up; in both cases Mason puts in specific language to make these associations explicit). You need to get clear idea how simple a basic plot structure is because as I move to looking at your stories we'll begin to see that this is one of the main issues we'll have to work with at the outset.

not following the threads

I find it kind of useful to follow the image pattern threads separately, each one to its end in order--main pattern first. I wish you had just done black holes first. All the black hole passages. Then what is clearly split off from black hole is “black,” and so you would track every instance of the word “black,” then every instance of “dark” or “darkness” and then Hat Island etc. And then go back to the black hole pattern and see that obviously the word “hole” splits off and comes back again in “white holes” which connects the text to the word “white” and then you can lay down the “white” pattern from beginning to end. And of course the patterns weave in and out of proximity to each other. #thepoint
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But you would have gotten the lesson better if you had counted the number of repetitions and quoted them in your essay. Lots of work, I know, but absolutely essential to seeing exactly how a writer does what he or she does. You have to walk in the author’s footsteps as it were. Also you needed to organize and quote all the splintered items: Hat Island, shadow, dark, darkness, black, blackness, etc. And you need to learn to spot and quote back the tie-in lines where the author brings together splintered pattern lines in later texts in the story. This may seem nitpicky but again I think it’s essential to learning how to handle the technique.

not counting

I don't think a reader/writer can actually understand how much of this goes on if he or she doesn't go through and count out all the instances of repetition.

Just for the sake of self-education, I wanted you to pay attention to the rough proportion of text between plot and subplot. I did mean for you to count the pages. The reason for this is that it's very helpful to see how authors deploy subplots and how they vary their strategies. I mean it's not really that important to count up the number of pages Tyler uses for subplot as opposed to main plot if you're a consumer reader and not so interested in writing a novel. But it becomes more important when, as a writer, you look at, say, John Le Carre's *The Russia House* and see how tiny the amount of space is accorded subplot or when you look at my novel *The Life and Times of Captain N.* and see how I extended the amount of subplot till it almost amounts to a parallel plot nearly equal to the amount of text in the main plot. This is important because at a certain point you'll be asking yourself in your own novel: How many pages should I spend on subplot? And you'll need to be aware of the options and the way other authors have done it. Same goes for the idea of see exactly where Tyler moves from plot to subplot on a given page or the various strategies she uses for giving out subplot information (scene, reported action). You did mention how Julian meets Rose by coming to find Macon. That's a scene in which the plot and the subplot intersect. But that's not the only way subplot information gets into the text in this novel. What I am talking about are specific techniques that you need to see clearly so that when you go to try them in your novel you will have more than just a vague idea of how they work. This is basic nuts and bolts stuff, and I can understand how it might seem a bit tedious and trivial (sometimes I think I am the only one who actually enjoys looking for this kind of nuts and bolts stuff--but then I suddenly fall into a conversation with another writer and realize we all do it). #Tyler

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But you would have gotten the lesson better if you had counted the number of repetitions and quoted them in your essay. Lots of work, I know, but absolutely essential to seeing exactly how a writer does what he or she does. You have to walk in the author's footsteps as it were. Also you needed to organize and quote all the splintered items: Hat Island, shadow, dark, darkness, black, blackness, etc. And you need to learn to spot and quote back the tie-in lines

where the author brings together splintered pattern lines in later texts in the story. This may seem nitpicky but again I think it's essential to learning how to handle the technique.

Under plot, you needed a) to specify desire and resistance (conflict) and then b) specify the series of interactions between the desire and the resistance. You should also have noticed the number of times that D'Ambrosio explicitly states Kurt's goal or desire. This was an important part of the plot-conflict part of the analysis and for some reason you left it out. It's really important to see that over and over D'Ambrosio explicitly says in the text what Kurt wants and what his goal is (to get Mrs. Gurney home). This is important because I want you to see that he makes the goal obvious and clear to the reader. There's no hinting, no obliquity, no vagueness. And Mrs. Gurney equally is not vague– she just simply keeps stopping or wandering off the path to the goal. You give me an action summary on p5 of your essay. But that's not the same as seeing the plot as a series of repetitions of a desire and a resistance. You needed to see the reiteration in the text of the story.

not writing things out

Next time try to boil your perceptions down into useful little essays on technique (with examples). I know you feel like you've been there, done that--that this is all old hat. Unfortunately, I am a firm believer that the act of writing something down in the correct way actually changes the way the brain is wired and that what we all need, over and over, is to change our wiring. So please bear with me. (And you should know that I am in the process of writing an essay on the structure of *Don Quixote* as just such an exercise in changing my wiring--you should know that I try to re-educate and change myself all the time, that I practice what I preach, that I do not ask any more of you than I ask of myself.)

You're clearly looking at the work and beginning to find useful devices to use in your own novel. But the assignment was to write an essay about plots and subplots in the novel. I think you saw what I wanted you to see, but I'd like to see it written out instead of as a chart/list (which is useful, yes, as an analytical tool, but doesn't, to my mind, do the job as thoughtful written out text would do). I also want to make sure you saw a) the relative amount of text accorded to subplot, b) exactly how the plot shifted to subplot and back again and/or the various techniques for inserting subplot into plot, c) how characters in plots and subplot reflect on one another (if this happens). Your notes are more notes to yourself than something that communicates well to me--I don't know what "transitions" are between or what a "swing" passage really is. Also you notice that Macon's brothers don't change, but you don't quite see that that's a subplot action.

One thing to think about is refining your analysis of the desire/resistance pattern of a story. Watch the way you write about these things. You say "The central conflict...involves the clandestine relationship..." Well you're right, but does writing it that way make the conflict clear? Not really. "Involves" is a very vague word. Train yourself to be precise. The conflict is... Now you're right that it has something to do with the relationship between the two men, and the root of that relationship is sexual (although it's clear by the end of the story that it's a love relationship). So the DESIRE is an obvious sexual desire between the two men. What's the conflict? You say "The conflict arises out of their sexual desire..., their denial of the ramifications of that desire, and ultimately Ennis's inability to fully commit to the relationship." Now "arises out of" is as ambiguous as "involves" and perhaps even less helpful. What is the

conflict between? Desire for sex and....? Whose desire? Well, you say it arises out of “denial” and “inability”--what arises? To be precise, what arises is the fact that Jack wants to live with Ennis and have sex all the time. The resistance is that Ennis doesn't want to live with Jack because he is afraid. He's afraid because he is a product of a culture that kills homosexuals. Ennis is afraid to live in a relationship that might be perceived of as being gay (so is Jack at first but they diverge in relationship to their willingness or unwillingness to take risks). It’s not Ennis’s “inability to fully commit”--that’s too vague and passive a construction. Ennis is afraid. He is afraid of getting beaten to death (hence the stories of gays, including Jack, getting beaten to death, the image of the tire iron). The whole thrust of Proulx’s story is that individuals are at least in part products of their regional cultural environments; she’s asking herself what it’s like to be two economically low-end cowboys in Wyoming who happen to want to screw. It’s a Romeo and Juliet story (hyperbole); their love is in conflict with their context and the active agent of that context is Ennis’s fear. “I don’t want to be dead” is what he says. Think about it--the two propositions in conflict are: Jack wants to live with Ennis and Ennis doesn't want to be dead; two statements of conflicting desire. That’s the story structure. You need to train yourself to write it out like that. And you need to learn to be clear about the simple conflict relations at the base of story construction so that you can construct your own stories (and novel).

But you would have gotten the lesson better if you had counted the number of repetitions and quoted them in your essay. Lots of work, I know, but absolutely essential to seeing exactly how a writer does what he or she does. You have to walk in the author’s footsteps as it were. Also you needed to organize and quote all the splintered items: Hat Island, shadow, dark, darkness, black, blackness, etc. And you need to learn to spot and quote back the tie-in lines where the author brings together splintered pattern lines in later texts in the story. This may seem nitpicky but again I think it’s essential to learning how to handle the technique.

not reading novel precisely enough

You really need to give me the steps in the main plot line and then separately the steps in the subplot line. And you need to abstract the essence and summarize the action in both. Macon moves from rigid control to a more chaotic love relationship. Julian more or less moves in the opposite direction, though in a lesser degree and somewhat comically. Then you need to look at the text where we move from the Macon line to the Rose/Julian line and see how much text there is and how the steps are conveyed in the novel.

symbols v image patterns

And as you're writing the essay, discipline yourself not to think or write about metaphors or symbols or meanings. There is plenty of time later to work on things like image patterns and thematic passages and novel thought, all of which have to do with how the author loads meaning into the text. But right now we're not working on those techniques. Stick as much as you can to the text itself. Things mean exactly what the author says of them in the text, nothing more. Again, this is how you train yourself to read as a writer.

But I'd like you to pay more attention to how the pattern develops in the text. That is, I wish you'd paid stricter attention to the process of building an image pattern as I outlined it in my essays on the novel and the short story and applied that to your thinking about the story. For example, you go on about the black hole and the bullet wound--which is maybe a connection though I doubt seriously if D'Ambrosio "deduced" his image pattern hat way. When you should have spent more time noticing the passage of "loading" where Kurt tells the reader in thought what the black hole means to him and how it works. This is the kind of loading that is important to learn as a writer. See how it works as a thematic passage and as a loading device for the image pattern AND connects the meaning of the image personally to the main character and the action of the story. By explaining the image, Kurt explains the story. And though you did count the number of times things repeated, you didn't track (in your essay) the development of things. It is interesting that the phrase "black hole" doesn't appear until we're well into the story, but there are many mentions of darkness and black (and Hat Island--which you missed as an element in the pattern). And you once seriously off the rails when you start talking about balloons as symbols and childhood. First of all, as a personal corrective (for all that idiotic high school interpretation), I rarely use the word "symbol". It distracts from the constructed quality of most real literary symbols and it leads to people say things like balloons are symbols of childhood which is not in the text of the story but an association you bring to the story yourself. As a writer, D'Ambrosio may or may not have associated balloons with childhood but of all the things he could have actually put in the text of the story that particular association was NOT one. It behooves us as readers and writers to concentrate on the things he put in the text and refrain from speculating on the things he did not put in. (There is an old distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic symbols. Extrinsic symbols take their meaning from the culture at large and are intended as such. Thus a cross is a Christian symbol. Intrinsic symbols are constructed within the text--these are generally

what I mean by image patterns. Writers use extrinsic symbols less and less these days because we have less and less of a pure cultural context to refer to.)

difficulty identifying root image pattern

On the other hand, it's clear that the black hole image pattern is the root pattern of the story. "Veteran" is not a boss image–it's a word pattern that connects Kurt with his father (all that military word patterning). But the black hole image is repeated several times and it's given specific thematic import in the passages that describe Kurt's theory of black holes (and of course there is the hole in his father's head at the end of the story). The "black" in "black hole" splinters off and develops its own pattern along with dark, darkness and shadow and Hat Island among others. And then there is that strange and beautiful shadow pattern of whiteness that leads also to "white holes" which seem to have no meaning at all in the story but are just THERE. Here's the clue–watch for the patterns which the author "loads" with thematic material. Usually they are the root patterns.

Similarly, in the essay on image pattens you missed the main pattern which, of course, is log cabins. Log cabins start as a pattern on the first page, 3rd para, I think. The "log cabin" is loaded with "rustic nativity scene," the word "home" repeated several times, juxtaposed with craft kits, etc. It splits off into craft kits, dust ruffles (the last image of the story), etc. You're right that this is a species of boss image story, but the boss image isn't Shiloh, it's the log cabin. Shiloh is merely the place where the final log cabin image is found, the one shot full of holes. It is also the place of failed marriages and lost battles. Shiloh is thus, really, part of the log cabin image pattern.

I admit that this is difficult to learn at first. And I see you kind of confusing yourself (or being confused by me) as you go through and see all these words like "home" and "marriage" etc. being repeated. The word "home" is, yes, part of the pattern. It's associated with the log cabin pattern on the first page of the story and then it has its own little life. It's a subsidiary pattern. And so on. The trick is to see what words are being repeated and then make a quick inspired judgement as to how they play in terms of main or root patterns and split off or subsidiary patterns. You were right to look at the title of the story as a clue but I think you got sidetracked by the clue. Sometimes the title of a story or novel does tip you off directly to the boss image. In Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye*, the main image is a cat's eye marble. In "Shiloh" the title refers to something that comes into the story near the end and serves to finish up the main log cabin pattern. It is a subsidiary pattern, a split off element of the main pattern.

I know this is difficult. But you need to learn to figure these things out. I don't think our education system actually prepares us for really reading

the craft of stories and novels. We tend to do too much in terms of critical free association exercises–what does this passage mean to you? sort of thing–without actually seeing how the text is put together. Perhaps it would help again to talk about this over the phone. I'd like you to grasp these simple structures before we push on into more complex territory (the stories I'm having you read increase in complexity as we move along).

weak writing

Throughout I found sentences and ways of writing your ideas that are just awkward and in some case vague and even nonsensical. For example, you write "By presenting opposition in literature, the scope of the story or the poem or the song is broadened..." The initial prepositional phrase is dangling. Who presents opposition in literature? What does "presenting" refer to as a subject? It can't refer to "scope"--that doesn't make sense. Then you use the passive voice in the main clause without ascribing agency. And besides that, what does it mean to broaden the scope of a poem? It's a very imprecise thing to say. Then you run the sentence on about something happening and changing, which again doesn't make sense, given the grammar.

This is a single example, but I found a lot of sentences like this, sentences where the basic grammar was awkward and the sense garbled by vagueness and over-generality. You say over and over that something "supports" the conflict or the theme or whatever--but this locution is exceedingly unhelpful. How does one piece of writing support another. Some bits of texts are examples of conflict. Some illustrate or enunciate theme. But the word "support" is really misused in this critical context. You also use the word "interesting" over and over as in "It is interesting..."--it becomes a tic or a mannerism. (Once or twice is okay.) You use words wrong: e.g. "polar". All of these grammatical and diction errors and awkwardnesses need to be cleaned up. (Not to mention the fact that you can't quote material from other sources without footnotes and bibliography--I'm referring to the quotations in your discussion of the Blake poem. This is just a basic requirement of graduate school critical writing.)