FINDING & FRAMING AN ESSAY TOPIC

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A Messy Process. Unlike much work in the “hard” and social sciences, research in the humanities—and particularly in literary studies—tends not to follow a linear pathway from hypothesis through data collection and analysis to “writing up” the results. Instead, literary scholarship is much more dependent upon serendipity, intuition, indirection, and recursion, from beginning to end of any given research project. There is apt to be a lot of thinking and researching “around” what ends up being your thesis before you eventually narrow in on a conclusively defined line of argument. (That is not to say, however, that the end result can be anything other than rigorous: the process may be messy and circuitous but the product cannot be.)

This process can be frustrating, feeling at times as though you’re wasting time researching information and developing ideas that won’t ultimately play even bit parts in the essay toward which your research supposedly is leading. It may help, however, to conceive of the entire process as being aimed not merely at the creation of an essay in literary criticism, but instead at the construction of a wider and deeper body of knowledge about your topic than could conceivably be contained within the rather narrow boundaries of a single essay.

Questions, Problems, Issues. As a general rule, your paper is much more likely to represent a genuine intellectual inquiry rather than a rote exercise—and therefore to be a genuinely successful essay—if it seeks resolution for a “live” question, problem, or issue with which a literary text confronts its interpreters. You’ll be well served in your quest for a viable essay topic by defining a substantive question about the text, one whose answer makes a genuine difference to how readers might understand the meanings of the text.

Places to Begin Searching for a Topic. There’s no telling where you might come up with a topic and approach, but here are some of the places you might concentrate your efforts.

- Textual weirdness. Particular features or patterns or problematic passages (cruxes) in a literary text may be good places to begin asking meaningful interpretive questions. For example: why, in the middle of a play that for the most part seems unquestioningly based on contemporary anti-Semitic assumptions, does Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice suddenly give his main Jewish character a rousing speech in defense of full Jewish personhood?

- Cultural and Historical Contexts. Since all literary texts were written at particular times in particular places, they necessarily participate—as reflections of, comments upon, and/or interventions in—the facts, problems, and issues of the cultures and societies within which they were written. Not all contexts, of course, will be equally relevant; indeed, most won’t be relevant at all. But identifying and pursuing a given text’s interface with a carefully defined cultural-historical context with which it seems to be in close conversation can be a very fruitful way to define an interpretive approach.

  - Primary sources. One way in to this kind of topic is inductive. “Read” broadly in one or more primary source areas—magazines, newspapers, music scores, artwork, etc.—in search of patterns that a) reveal something about the fundamental assumptions, values, and preoccupations of the culture that produced the literary text you’re studying, and b) have substantive points of connection to the content of that text. For example: Mary Shelley’s novel, Frankenstein, features an (arguably) mad scientist, as well as a live and sentient being that he creates from spare body parts. Popular magazines of the time include scores of articles on contemporary science. How does Shelley’s novel endorse or modify or reject (etc.) the ideas about science found in those journal articles?

  - Secondary sources. Sometimes a literary text will loudly announce, in one way or another, what one or more of its topics of particular concern are. Another cultural-contextual approach is to read secondary historical research—i.e. historians writing about the results of their research in primary sources) to find out more about that particular topic, in order to set up a dialogue between the literary text’s address of its subject matter and what others were thinking and doing with that same topic. For example: Ernest Hemingway’s novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls, embodies in its characters’ actions and words a particular take on the morality of war. What kinds of public discussion of this topic (in newspapers and magazines, among philosophers and theologians, in schools and churches) were happening at the time Hemingway
wrote and published his novel? How does the novel converse with this body of ideas about the ethics of war?

- **Author Biographies.** Book-length biographies of literary authors usually include substantive discussion of relevant contexts for understanding authors’ literary output, as well as resources (footnotes, endnotes, bibliographies of sources) for further study. Be careful, however, not to be seduced by the temptation to turn your literary-interpretive essay into a mere biographical report; biographical information may be relevant to your topic, but the author’s life is neither the topic of your essay nor the be-all end-all explanation for why your literary text says what it says.

- **The Critical Conversation.** First, a word of warning: it’s easy to be so bowled over by what Critic X or Scholar Y has published on your topic that you either don’t feel there’s anything left to say or you end up just repeating in your essay what other writers have already written. Nevertheless, it can be a productive approach to your own work to begin by getting a general sense—without necessarily spending loads of time on any particular scholarly essay or book—of what the issues are that critics have already been arguing about in connection with your text, in hopes that you’ll be provoked to join that conversation. For example: a quick glance at published work on Kate Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, indicates that the novel is almost impossible to discuss without drawing some conclusions about what’s going on in its rather ambiguous last pages. What are the terms and the range of possible positions in that argument, what position are you inclined to take, and what does that reveal about the meaning of the rest of the novel?

The list below comprises some good resources for getting a sense of established areas of interest, concern, or argument with regard to particular texts and authors. These are also good sources for still more ideas about relevant cultural and historical contexts for textual interpretation; in fact, all of the following could be included in the “Cultural and Historical Contexts” list, above.

- **Websites** devoted to particular authors, literary texts, or aesthetic movements. Be very careful, however, to evaluate the depth, authority, and reliability of all such sources. Anyone can post anything on the internet; don’t accept it all uncritically.

- **Bibliographic reviews** such as *American Literary Studies* and *The Year’s Work in English Studies* give brief summaries of recent scholarship and contextualize recent work in terms of trends and recurring topics and issues in criticism.

- **Headnotes, Prefaces, Introductions, Afterwords** (and so on) in literary anthologies and edited editions of literary works often include information about the “live” issues and questions in regard to particular works and their authors. For example:
  - **Norton Critical Editions, Bedford Editions, Broadview Editions** (etc.) of particular literary works usually include essays and notes orienting readers to areas of fruitful inquiry and previously published opinion and controversy.
  - **Anthologies** almost always include headnote essays on the works and authors they collect, as well as general essays about discrete periods of literary history.
  - **College-market Editions** of literary works include ancillary essays by literary scholars and/or artists that point the way toward approaches to interpretation defined by previous generations of readers and scholars. Examples include Penguin Classics, Modern Library, and Everyman’s Library editions.

- **Literary Histories** such as *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, *A New Literary History of America*, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, and many, many others.