Unit 1. Perspective in the Essay: Close Reading

"Usually," Annie Dillard tells us in "Total Eclipse," "it is a bit of a trick to keep your knowledge from blinding you. But during an eclipse it is easy. What you see is much more convincing than any wild-eyed theory you may know" (481). What kind of knowledge does Dillard have in mind? What does she see? What are the "wild-eyed" theories? In this essay, Annie Dillard defies expectations about what a piece of writing should do: the essay has no clear thesis statement; it has no marked transitions between the paragraphs; it provides no obvious connection between its sections. What do the men in the hotel lobby have to do with anything, for example? What is Dillard doing? What does she want us to think about? It isn't immediately clear. Dillard's readers, it seems, must work with her as she works to make sense of things.

Or consider the story of the "devil baby" that Jane Addams, a pioneering social reformer of the early twentieth century, describes. This is a story, Addams argues, "constantly demonstrating the power of an old wives’ tale among thousands of people in modern society who are living in a corner of their own, their vision fixed, their intelligence held by some iron chain of silent habit" (76). Do you agree with her explanation? With her argument on the position of women in poor, immigrant society? Why do you think the "devil baby" story develops?

And there’s the neurologist Oliver Sacks, who, in “Brilliant Light,” employs what we might call a gothic vocabulary to talk about the scientific wonders of his “chemical boyhood.” Science becomes something magical to the boy. But how can science be magic, even as it works, in Sacks’s experience and imagination, against something like religion?

Though these three texts are quite different, they take strong positions on knowledge and imagination. In this unit, you'll write about Dillard's essay and the work you have to do in reading it. Or you can write about Addams’s essay and the problem of the “devil baby” story. Or you can write about Sacks’s growing up.

Essay 1 Goals
Your first essay of the semester will present an argument based on a close analysis of one (of the three texts we're reading. To do this, you'll identify a provocative or "problematic" passage or passages in the text or texts and analyze them, "close reading" these passages as evidence. Evidence of what? You'll be driven to tell your audience—intelligent, curious readers who perhaps haven't read the texts at hand but are interested in what they discuss—how the passage works in the text as a whole, or how the passage helps them to understand the perspective of the author. And you'll also be driven to explain how your analysis is important to an overall understanding of the text and the issues it raises.

An analytical question will drive your argument, which is based on close reading of evidence. You'll offer a motive, a reason for your paper to exist, and a thesis statement that specifies your argument.

Online Exercise 1.1 due Wednesday, 25 June, 8 PM (1 page or 300 words or less)
1. State the main idea of one of the three essays, Addams, Dillard or Sacks. Choose the essay you want to write about.
2. Select a passage from your chosen essay. Copy the passage into your online note. How to choose? Choose what seems to be an important, vivid, provocative, surprising, disturbing or interesting. It should contain a particular perspective, belief or strategy, or contain a gap, obscurity, inconsistency, or contradiction, something you need to “figure out,” a puzzle that
demands your answer, your explanation of how and why. This passage may be anywhere from two lines to a couple of paragraphs.

3. Briefly, in a couple of sentences, tell why you choose this passage.

4. Make sure you “sign” your online exercise somewhere (at the top is preferable). And take the opportunity to try out some good title ideas—really risky, intriguing, provocative stuff. Not “Online Exercise 1.1.” The title can appear in your email subject line.

**Online Exercise 1.2, due Friday, 27 June, 5 PM**

1. Analytical question: Pose—and write out—a specific analytical question (or questions) on your chosen passage. Here are some general analytical questions to help you get started; you might ask a more specific version of one of these: What does the passage reveal of its author’s attitude toward his or her topic? Is the author’s attitude positive or negative—the simplest evaluative terms—or something else? Is this attitude consistent through the whole text? Does the text work to resolve a problem? What is that problem? Does the text show that no resolution is possible?

2. Close reading: In one or two paragraphs, “close read” strategic bits of the passage (depending on its length; if your passage is short, you might read it entirely). This will be a first interpretation that answers your analytical question. Include evidence from your passage for your conclusions, and explain explicitly how you arrive at your conclusions. The evidence from your passage may be a single term or passages of several lines that you quote directly. If you do quote four lines or more, use block quotation style (see Writing with Sources). You can begin your analysis like this: “It seem clear that...” or ”A preliminary interpretation suggests that....” (It is possible that your revised essay will present not only this “preliminary interpretation,” but also a more refined interpretation that lends complexity to your analysis. We will try to work on this in class.)

**Essay I Assignment**

**Rough draft due Tuesday, 1 July (3 pages minimum, 3 copies)**

**Conferences Tuesday, 1 July-Thursday, 3 July**

**Final draft due Tuesday, 8 July (3-5 pages; place in folder with rough draft and instructor and peer evaluations)**

Based on your online writing assignments, construct a draft of your essay. This will offer an argument on the text (or texts) you’ve chosen. You will aim at a specific version, which you develop independently, of this two-part question: how and why does your chosen passage work? How does your interpretation help to understand the text as a whole? You should offer a fresh argument in clear, vivid prose that articulates precisely how and why the text or texts imagine the dangers and wonders, complexities and possibilities of knowledge and the imagination.

**Methods**

Please cite the essay you’ve chosen at least three times. One citation will come from your original passage. The two other citations may also come from your original passage, or from another passage; they may be merely terms or short phrases. Be sensitive to evidence from the text that doesn’t fit your analytical work in the online exercises. Are there further complications, contradictions to consider? You may find that your first interpretation from Online Exercise 1.2 needs refinement when you consider evidence from the rest of the text.

Bear in mind that a narrow focus, rather than a broad one, will allow you to develop powerful insights. Stick closely to what you find in your quoted passages, which illustrate your argument and lend it specificity. This is the essence of close reading. Be sure your thesis stems from the evidence you’ve studied in your close reading.
Paper Format
The rough draft should be at least three pages, the final draft three to five pages. Both are double-spaced with one-inch margins. Use MLA citation style (consult Writing with Sources, page 37). Number pages in the upper right hand corner after the first page, with your last name preceding the page number. No separate title page is necessary; a format for heading your paper is suggested at the top of this assignment. Be sure to include my name and list “Essay 1 Rough Draft” or “Essay 1 Final Draft” as appropriate. Staple your work in the top left corner. Save your work to disc frequently as you write it so that you always have a copy.