

Annotated Bibliography

Agee, James. *A Death in the Family*.

A Death in the Family is a novel about children's innocence and indignant self-righteousness, and their coming-to-age into the adult world of misunderstandings and lies. The text explores the idea that chaos and hate bind people together stronger than order and love do. Rufus realizes at the end that Andrew "hates Mother ... [and] Aunt Hannah, too ... He loves them, just as much as they love him, but he hates them, too" (309)— it is this confused hate in their relationship that keeps the family together just as much as hate in the trying time after Jay's death. This is similar to the *Book of Job*, in which Job's tumultuous relationship with God following his misfortunes gives him the incentive to question God's authority, but which also allows him to understand more about the nature of God and grow more faithful than ever before.

Bruckner, Pascal. "The Art of Suffering."

"The Art of Suffering" is about detaching society from its obsession over the idea that suffering and punishment will lead to an improvement of the individual, and attaching it to more of a system valuing trying ordeals and toil to achieve the same ends. This article explores the idea that the greatest learning occurs in one's independent and free experiences, not in the forced labor of others. Bruckner asserts that "contrary to the idea that one must have suffered greatly in order to know human beings ... suffering does not teach people anything" (15) — rather, it is free, hard work that achieves this. This is in contrast to Hammer's "On Modern Time," who focuses on the uniqueness and unexpectedness as traits of the best learning experiences rather than independence.

Begley, Sharon. "Adventures in Good and Evil."

"Adventures in Good and Evil" is about the roots of our sense of morality, mainly locked in the joint ideas of forgiveness and revenge that governs a person's ethical processes. The text emphasizes the idea that every person has the capacity to change based on the experiences they face, no matter how strongly-rooted their beliefs. Begley incorporates scientific research about "neuroplasticity" (3), or the property that "the brain is able to be altered by experience in fundamental ways" (3), to support this claim. In *In Cold Blood*, a dramatic change in the two murderers is shown following the murder, especially with a sense of regret in Perry, which also supports Begley's claim of the fundamental change of a person's behavior, even that of a cold-hearted killer.

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*.

The Stranger is an absurdist novel about the arbitrary nature of one's actions, with the protagonist Meursault often acting on a whim, even killing someone for no clear purpose. The book emphasizes not only the random motion of life and a person's actions, but also claims that death is a common and trivial matter that actually acts as an enhancement to one's experiences. Meursault believes that "so close to death, [a person] must have felt free then and ready to live it all again" (122)— this idea is echoed by Andrew in *A Death in the Family*, who believed that Jay's sudden death probably made him "more alive than ever before" (Agee 157).

Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*.

The book *In Cold Blood* is the chronology of a true story of two jail-mates who kill a family for an alleged fortune and about how they learn their lesson that money is something to be earned and valued. A major theme of the book is the prevalence of good conscience in everyone; a criminal just has the mental weakness that allows him to override. Cold-blooded killer Perry Smith proclaiming that “there must be something wrong with people who’d do [the murder like Perry and Richard had done]” (108), showing that he has a conscience; his weakness is exploited through Dick, who refutes this statement and tells Perry that the deed was not too wrong. This is similar to Gletkin in *Darkness at Noon*, who begins his investigation of Rubashov with harsh tactics but starts to let up on the intensity after a while, showing that Gletkin is also human and cannot let the mechanical, evil facade continue forever because there is some good in him too; his deficiency of morality and conscience stems from his party loyalties.

Cunningham, Vinson. “What Makes an Essay American.”

“What Makes an Essay American” illustrates the necessity of an essay— in order to comply with the modern, American sense— to contain and support a strong and provocative claim. Cunningham discovers that essay-writing is an art form, and explores the idea that all art forms contain an argument as their purpose and must be carefully crafted— the reader or viewer must be drawn over to the author’s side via ethos before the argument begins, or they risk being on opposite sides of the argument. He explains that “each [essay] achieves its purpose via a slowly but strategically earned trust” (2). This is apparent through the evolution of the “Divinity School Address” by Emerson; he creates a strong claim about the necessity of continued scholastic achievement by drawing the reader in with alluring universal descriptions before giving instructions to the graduates.

Didion, Joan. “Fixed Opinions, or the Hinge of History.”

“Fixed Opinions, or the Hinge of History” is a story about the negative effects of the gullibility of society and the importance of argument. Didion’s experiences with traumatic American history and politics lead her to discover that the act of censorship by government, while ostensibly being the better option by preventing panic, harms society in the long run by hiding the important issues that only manifest themselves more seriously in the future; in other words, the idea of lies born by lies. Didion describes this negative influence as a “screen that slides into place whenever actual discussion threatens to surface” (8). The stubbornness of American politics to openly discuss the glaring issues is analogous to the stubbornness in “Personal” — the poem shows that this arrogance will only cause tensions with people in the future when the unheard views from the censorship cause conflict.

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is about Dillard’s discoveries of the general truths in life through her experiences in nature. Her endless speculation into every observable aspect of nature, as well as additional context that they provide, evolve the idea that a the creativity and size of a person’s mind is limited not by the physical size of their observable world, but by the depth of their observation. To Dillard, the small creeks next to her home bear “the mystery of continuous creation and all that providence implies ... [and] the world with all its stimulus and beauty” (4), whereas these creeks would likely have less value to the more average observer. This relates to the average, gullible American that is oblivious to the manipulations of American politics, as is

described by Didion in “Fixed Opinions or the Hinge of History”; to the average citizen, whose world focused on daily living and is not interested to transcend into the idealistic, political one, politics scarcely exists and the world is justifiably limited by government censorship; this lack of observation and care is the root of the problem that Didion delineates.

Douglass, Frederick. “Learning to Read and Write.”

“Learning to Read and Write” is an essay from Frederick Douglass’s autobiography that details his rise to mental prowess through his own hard work. A major theme of the narrative is that the greatest pleasures in life lie in teaching oneself simple skills and becoming more self-confident, even if it does not immediately appear to be so. Douglass had the negative thought that “learning to read had been more of a curse than a blessing” (168) at first— however, as his reading and writing improved, hopes of freedom and running away surfaced and matured, which built up his confidence to his eventual escape to a more hopeful life. This relates to “Dehumanized” because Douglass derives an almost divine importance out of learning the humanities, something that Slouka would agree with— in both of their cases, the humanities offer a greater usefulness and happiness in life.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The American Scholar.”

Similar to his speech “The Divinity School Address,” “The American Scholar” is another effort by Emerson to delineate an ideal “American scholar” as one who is an always-inventing genius and one who toils through societal pressures with a high level of self-confidence. He explores the idea that any object alone is unimportant and variable without a correct interpretation. Specifically, he mentions that books “are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst” (8) — it is up to the reader to determine how good a book truly is. This is very similar to Nabokov’s “Good Readers and Good Writers,” in which a story written by a “good writer” is not necessarily a good story, unless the reader is a “good reader” who actively participates in interpreting the story.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The Divinity School Address.”

“The Divinity School Address” is a speech of encouragement to newly-graduated students from a prestigious school, urging them to stay true to the “sentiment of virtue” (1). Emerson is a proponent of the idea that, with religion becoming increasingly sparse, a faith in the pursuit of knowledge is even more holy and pure than religion itself, which is tainted by a dutiful need to preserve conventional and aging ideas. These old values “aim at what is usual, and not at what is necessary and eternal” (7), Emerson claims, which he believes to be the downfall of religion. A similarly non-religious belief is carried by Begley in “Adventures in Good and Evil,” in which she uses logic and science to introduce progressive, rational thought; this is the kind of personality Emerson is attempting to induce.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. “Echoes of the Jazz Age.”

“Echoes of the Jazz Age” is an article that details the initial hype of the “Jazz age” and its gradual decline into an infamy and disinterest. The article explores the idea that something too good to be true— namely, the Jazz age— cannot last in history but inevitably lasts forever in memory. He states that “it seems rosy and romantic to us ... because we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings any more” (6); it leaves a lasting impression that is especially strong because of its short passing and the lack of it. In *All the Pretty Horses*, a similar phenomenon exists when the

short-term love affair between John Grady and Alejandra is only magnified in intensity when the two are separated by cultural necessity; as with Fitzgerald and his unwilling parting with the Jazz age, it is perhaps the brevity that makes the memory so important, the longing for something short to last.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*.

The Great Gatsby is a novel about Nick Carraway and the complex social and romantic relationships with multiple other characters, especially his eccentric neighbor Jay Gatsby, in the West Egg neighborhood of Long Island in the 1920s. Fitzgerald explores the idea of the random spontaneity of the world with the extramarital love affairs of Myrtle and Gatsby with Tom and Daisy, as well as with the catastrophe of Gatsby's death. Nick discovers that "they were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness" (179), as well as the catastrophe of Gatsby's death that made Nick "want the world to be in uniform" (2). This is in contrast to the world of Frederick Douglass in his essay, *Learning to Read and Write*, who earned his freedom in a controlled manner of perseverance through many years, which goes against the idea that events are spontaneous but rather as a logical consequence of toil.

Hammer, Espen. "On Modern Time."

Hammer's article, "On Modern Time," analyzes the way people have attempted to capture and quantify the abstract entity of time. He comes to the conclusion that, in order to escape the monotony of ordinary clock time, people need to invent narratives—personal ones, especially, that break this aforementioned dull continuity of time. He states that moments of discontinuity "explode the repetition of standard clock time" and offer opportunity into one's life. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* has many excellent examples of this, as Dillard expands many of the ordinary environmental observations she notes with historical anecdotes; the narrative she tells is not strictly chronological, but follows a logical train of thought that expands upon the present with more detail, creating a more modern sense of time according to Hammer.

Hoagland, Tony. "Personal."

"Personal" is a poem about the narrator's frustrations towards the world because he stubbornly rejects outside views and takes everything for granted, arrogantly. It emphasizes the idea that sometimes pure independence from others often leads to unhappiness—that a person needs to cooperate with others, even if it temporarily clashes against one's own beliefs, in order to live a happier life. The author feels that he is a "dog, chained in some fool's backyard" because of his stubborn personal views. However, this idea is contradicted in "Adventures in Good and Evil," which believes that a person should follow their moral instincts regardless of the situation, which would have resulted in less of the horrors such as the Holocaust caused by following other people's intentions.

Hughes, Langston. "Salvation."

"Salvation" is the story of a boy who is disappointed when his long-held religious beliefs are disproven when he failed to sense God as he had hoped to do. The story explores the theme that a person believes only what he or she sees, and not the other way around. Hughes' only interpretation of God is based on that night, and therefore his faith was weakened. The story finish with Langston's admitting that "[he] didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since

[Jesus] hadn't come to help [Langston]" (2) — in other words, God had not tangibly appeared to Langston. This is the phenomenon that Ouellette describes in "The Life and Death of the American Imagination," in which imagination was waning in American children— according to Ouellette, had Langston been able to *imagine* God and continue based off of his invented belief, as his religious forebears such as his aunt presumably did, then he would have had a healthy relationship with God, even if it was just founded on imagination and creativity.

King James Text. *The Book of Job*.

The Book of Job is a biblical allegory that explains that a person should be entirely faithful to God forever through the story of a man learning his lesson of humility and deference to God. The text explores the idea that humility always allows for the most rational thought and the best outcomes. Job is humbled by God, so that he "abhor[s] [him]self, and repent[s] in dust and ashes" (19), and receives all of his lost possessions back (and with interest). This is not the case in "Salvation" — Hughes looks to be saved by God, ever so humbly and with a childish innocence, but he receives no indication or noticeable help from God in response.

Koestler, Arthur. *Darkness at Noon*.

Darkness at Noon is about a man's struggle to get over his regretful and narrow-minded past in his time in jail. The book focuses on the idea that people are limited by their physical nature in their ability to resist pressure to succumb to other people's intentions. Rubashov's investigator Gletkin is a champion of this idea, stating that "human beings able to resist any amount of physical pressure do not exist" (102). This relates to "What Makes an Essay American," in which Cunningham describes an argumentative essay flow that will most often greatly influence the reader via psychological pressure, given that the essayist builds ethos properly at the beginning; while this is mental and not physical persuasion, the concept of building pressure to an irresistible level is the same.

McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*.

All the Pretty Horses is a story about the stereotypical "American Dream" as carried out by two cowboys in the American South and Mexico, but also the realization that such dreams are restricted by practical and cultural boundaries. The story captures the idea of how in times of difficulty in new and unfamiliar situations, it is the old friends that have the power to keep people true to their roots and new friends that cause too much adverse change and too many distractions. This is the case with Alejandra, whose love with John Grady pitted her aunt and father against the cowboys, and with Blevins, for whose kidnapping and death grieved Rawlins incurably, who "ke[pt] thinkin about old Blevins" (212). This similar to *The Stranger*, in which Meursault's weak friendships with Raymond tangled him up with a murder that eventually led to Meursault's death.

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. "Good Readers and Good Writers."

Nabokov explains in "Good Readers and Good Writers" that for the best literary experience, a "good writer" must be able to fully enchant the reader by meticulously building a world from scratch with his words, and that the reader must follow this act by attempting to imagine the author's world. A main idea that Nabokov highlights is the importance of deceiving others (artfully) — this is what allows creativity to exist and prosper, because a dull world without tricks and devious trinkets would hardly be interesting and inspirational at all. He uses the "arch-cheat

Nature” (3) as an example, mentioning its intricate mysteries of propagation and patterns. His thinking is similar to Fitzgerald’s in “Echoes of the Jazz Age”; Fitzgerald knows that the Jazz age was too good to last, and it did not last for very long; however, because the people talked themselves into and tricked themselves into believing that it was glorious and youthful, it has the lasting impression on Fitzgerald and other people of that era.

Ouellette, Jeannine. “The Life and Death of American Imagination.”

“The Life and Death of American Imagination” is about the innovative power that imagination has, and the decreasing grip we have on imagination as children’s freedoms become limited. The article explores the theme that freedom fosters more freedom in a virtuous cycle, with the freedom of thought and create (creativity) leading to the freedom to act (through innovation). Pure imagination, she claims, is “the ability to imagine alternatives and make them real—literally to change the world” (3) — a physical result from a metaphysical trait. This is contradicted by “Reading Philosophy at Night,” which emphasizes the search for historical knowledge rather than imagination and creativity as the most important factors to a child’s education; Ouellette stresses necessary modern innovation as the outcome of imagination, while Simic uses renowned, less modern philosophers to stress his idea of knowledge.

Simic, Charles. “Reading Philosophy at Night.”

“Reading Philosophy at Night” is about Simic’s creation of a better-informed model of philosophy based on complexity of thought, solidarity, and historical knowledge. He explores the idea that even more important to philosophy and a person’s mental development is the unending search for truth and a knowledge-hungry state of mind. He quotes the philosopher Descartes, who mentions that he will continue searching for the truth “until [he] ha[s] met with something which is certain ... [or] until [he] ha[s] learned for certain that there’s nothing in the world that is certain” (137). This is similar to *The Great Gatsby* in that there is a constant precariousness about the situation with the extramarital love affairs of Tom and Daisy—however, there is little philosophy or rational thought applied to the situation in *The Great Gatsby*, and everything goes haywire; this shows that the uncertainty must be set to a controlled level for the philosophical development that Simic describes to happen.

Slouka, Mark. “Dehumanized.”

“Dehumanized” describes the gradual rise of the STEM fields to dominate and even make a business out of the educational system, while the humanities— which Slouka believes are the more important fields— are increasingly sidelined. The article explores the idea that the most important people to society are not the ones who can blindly follow directions (as the STEM fields teach people to do) but one who can independently think and invent (which the humanities cultivate). In other words, “[the humanities] teach us, incrementally, endlessly, not what to do but how to be” (36), giving us a proper guidance with real-life knowledge rather than information learned by rote and less practical in day-to-day living. This relates to “The Art of Suffering,” in which Bruckner stresses that the religious appeal to suffering and penance is idealistic but not practical; it is rather the value of hard work that will benefit society practically.