

PART II
WRITING ABOUT READING

CHAPTER 10

INTRODUCTION

From time to time in *your* English class you will be asked to write about something *you* have read. It may be about a short story, a poem, an essay, or a short play, but you will be called upon to make a statement or two about its meaning, about your reaction to it, or about the author's way of treating his subject.

It is natural for all of us, after we have read anything, to reflect to some extent upon what we have read. The more we are impressed by what we have read, the more we want to consider it, and the more we want to understand why it has affected us. In many ways, you have not begun to master a piece of literature until you have tried to put into words what it means to you. Nothing is really read until it is thought over. Thus, your writing **about** what you read is a means of *sharpening* your powers to observe and *to* feel, and of developing your ability to express in writing your feelings about the experience you have had.

Serious writing requires serious reading. Most people who write stories, poems, essays, plays, or any kind of writing do so for serious reasons, even if their writing is intended to be humorous. They ask to be read with both *the* eye and the mind; many of our best writers ask to be read with the ear as well.

When *you* are asked *to* write about something you have read, you must begin by adopting a purposeful attitude toward the writing. The best way to start is to take a second look at the selection. Even very good readers can overlook serious points and important details: **most** of us know by experience how unreliable first impressions or first readings can be. You must be **sure** you have really read the selection. A short piece will often become far clearer to *you* through a second reading. Longer pieces need not be read through again in their entirety; but, a scanning or rereading of important passages will help.

Some books that you read in English class will have questions supplied to put **you** "on the right track." However, most books that you yourself choose to read, perhaps to write about, will not contain such questions. Still, it is a good idea to ask yourself some

questions of your own. In this way you are better able to understand the plot, if there is one, the theme or idea of the story, the characters, and the setting. Then, when you write about what you have read, you will have a more organized approach, and your comments will take an added value as informed and interesting observations.

Thinking About Your Reading

Not all books are the same, of course. Different kinds of literature require different kinds of reading and, in most cases, different kinds of reporting. But there are questions that are basic to reading anything with understanding: What is the author trying to do? How well does he manage to do it? Is it worth doing?

The answers to these questions go straight to the heart of any piece of writing.

Here are a few more general suggestions to help you in your approach to write about a selection you have read:

1. Be sure you have read it thoroughly and that you understand it. If the author deals with ideas, make sure you know what he is saying. If he describes something, or tells a story, visualize it, feel it, and relate it to your own experience. (In this connection, however, do not feel that pieces of literature are always full of mysteries that have to be solved. Be relaxed and read attentively to let the selection have its own effects.)

2. After you feel that your reading has been thorough, put selection aside for a while and think about it. Here is an opportunity to ask yourself questions about it. What points do you remember best? What do you think the author did most successfully? Where could he have been more effective? Here, you can think about it critically as well as pleasurably.

3. Before you start to write, take into consideration the size or length of the paper you want to or have been asked to prepare. The length of the paper will usually determine how many points you can make and how fully you can develop them. In any case, you will have to choose which points are most important and write about them. In writing about literature, it is better to limit yourself to those points to which you can do justice rather than to try to cover many and barely touch upon them. Of course, very often you will have been directed

to write on specific points. If so, your task is somewhat easier, since in your survey of the book before you start to write, you will have been able to concentrate on these. Always remember, however, that these points were given to you to provide you with keys to better understanding.

As was said earlier, an author writes with a definite purpose in mind. And so the way in which he writes is an important part of what he says. In many cases, the relationship between what is said and how it is said will be very apparent, and it is well for you to take notice of the relationship. There are many ways of approaching the reader, many “tones” that the writer may adopt, Notice the confidential informality of the following passage from Mark Twain’s “The Fraudulent Ant.”

It seems to me that in the matter of intellect the ant is strangely overrated. During many summers, now, I have watched him, when I ought to have been in better business, and I have not yet come across a living ant that seemed to have any more sense than a dead one. I refer to the ordinary ant, of course; I have had no experience of those wonderful African ones which vote, keep drilled armies, hold slaver, and dispute about religion. Those ants may be all that the naturalist paints them, but I am persuaded that the average ant is a sham. I admit his industry, of course; he is the hardest working creature in the world--when anybody in looking--but his leather-headedness is the point I make against him. (From “The Fraudulent Ant” by Mark Twain, Harper & Row.)

There are several questions you might ask yourself after reading the preceding passage. What is the author’s manner? That is, what is his vocabulary like? What kind of verbs and adjectives does he use? What kind of comparison does he make? Does his style fit the subject? Why?

Finally, perhaps the most difficult thing in reporting on reading is in the giving of a thoughtful opinion. Too often we tend to dismiss a book as “one we liked” or “one we didn’t like.” From your understanding of the points already mentioned, you should be able to arrive at definite opinions about the structure of the book, the author’s approach, and the interest level it has for you. However, remember that there is always room for opinions that disagree with yours, and you should look for these. What other opinions could be held, and why would yours be a more defensible one?

Writing about what you read will, as noted earlier, help you gain a greater understanding of literature. Often such writing is done as part of a class assignment, and takes the form of a formal written book report. The way you will be asked to do a book report will vary, of course, but it is well to remember the general suggestions for writing about your reading, whatever approach you are asked to follow.

Book reports are assigned for two reasons. One, we have seen, is to give you a chance to express in writing your own understanding of the experience you had in reading the book. Another reason is to inform other students about interesting and worthwhile books. In addition, you frequently come to understand and enjoy a book more yourself if you have to explain and report on it to others, and try to persuade them to your opinion. A book report allows you to communicate with others about important ideas

It is not necessary or even wise to attempt to use all the variety of methods of developing a book report, but rather to select those few, perhaps one or two, which seem to work for the particular book on which you are reporting. Of the following suggestions, you would use whichever seemed appropriate.

1. Give the title, author, and publisher of the book. If the author has written other books you are familiar with, you may want to list these as well. You will probably want to follow this suggestion nearly always.

2. Give a short summary of the plot. Explain the main incidents, including the one incident or situation that starts the action moving. The incidents you choose should be calculated to arouse interest, but you should be careful to avoid giving too much detail or telling parts of the story that make it unnecessary for someone else to read to find out what happened. Include details of the story that relate to the setting and characters of the story. Again, do not overdo it, but tell enough to arouse interest.

3. Sometimes, having given a brief summary of the plot, the retelling of one incident, the most amusing, interesting, exciting, characteristic, or revealing one, is an effective method of getting attention.

4. Select one of the characters in the book and describe him or her in some detail. Show what kind of person he is: describe his actions and attitude, and any unusual things about him. The character may be one you like or dislike, but your description should allow your reader to see why you felt this way.

5. Comment on the information you gathered from the book. If it dealt with a particular way of life, or with a particular period in history, or with a particular problem, discuss it from this angle. What did you personally learn from reading the book? What do you think the author was trying to do? As much as you can, relate your comments to your own reactions.

6. Provide a critical commentary on the book. How successful does the writer carry out his intention? Does he inform you? Make you think? Make you laugh? Again, give your opinion, but be specific.

The Parts of a Report

Let us look at a particular book you may all have read, or might want to read sometime, **The Perilous Journey**, by Humphrey Johnson (Holt, Rinehart&Winston, Inc, 1957). Here are some statements that might illustrate each of the six points that have just been listed:

A summary **of the plot**. Conrad persuades his merchant father to let him accompany his uncle to Nurnberg on a journey to buy and sell goods. The journey **down** the river is indeed a perilous one, for Europe in 1450 is not a peaceful place to live. The travellers have numerous adventures involving pirates, bandits, and greedy barons, in which they were helped by Sir Rupert, a young, impoverished knight. In return, the merchant helps Sir Rupert to win an exciting tournament.

On the return trip, disaster overtakes the caravan, and young Conrad is captured by the evil Baron Lothair, who holds him for ransom. Sir Rupert comes to the rescue once again, however, and in an exciting finish, the Baron is overthrown and the lands he stole from Sir Rupert's father are restored to their rightful owner.

A single incident. After the merchants have sold their goods in Nurnberg, they attend the tournament that has been proclaimed by the Emperor Frederick. There, Sir Rupert enters the lists aided by Conrad's uncle, who lends him enough money to furnish his arms. Sir Rupert defeats his opponents one by one, the last being the feared Sir Bernhard, and at the end is pronounced the victor by the Emperor, who gives him a ring to show his favor. Later that evening, however, Conrad discovers that Wolff, a man who had troubled them earlier, is plotting further mischief. As it turns out, the Emperor's ring proves to be a fortunate gift.

A comment on one character. Sir Rupert is portrayed as a typical knight of feudal Europe. He is courageous, honorable, and charitable. Like most knights one reads of in fiction, he is also on a quest. In many ways, he has some of the characteristics of the present-day television cowboy, in that he is poor, has been cheated out of his rightful inheritance, and is, despite his calm and simple outward appearance, a bold and resourceful fighter. Perhaps there is a little too much similarity here, but just the same, Sir Rupert is an interesting character, and adds much to the book; and it is around him and his adventures in seeking the lands stolen from his father, as well as around young Conrad, that the plot turns.

A critical commentary. The book is an interesting one, for the action is rapid and the events are unusual enough to make good reading. I do not consider it a very good book, however, because what does happen is too much like the Westerns that we see on television today. The bad man wins for a while, but the good man wins out finally, and only the bad people get hurt, except for one good man who doesn't really matter anyway. The description of where the story took place is a good one, however, and does a lot to make you forget the rather silly plot.

I like especially the description of Baron Lothair's castle, and also the methods of fighting that the feudal lords and soldiers used. The secret tunnels may have been all in the writer's imagination, but it is quite possible that they had such tunnels in those days.

The book reads easily and I am sure anyone else reading it would enjoy it as much as I did, if he assumes that it is far-fetched from the start.

KHUN-CHANG KHUN-PHAN

Summary

Chang and Phan loved Phim. But Phim loved Phan, the capable knight of King Punwasa. She got married with him, Chang was jealous. He tried many dirty ways to become Phim's mate. At last, he dragged Phim who was pregnant away while Phan was in prison. Soon, Phim gave birth to Plai Ngam. He grew up under the care of Phan's mother. He wanted his mother back from Chang. So, he told the king to judge the case. Thus, King Punwasa asked Phim if she would live with Phan or Chang or Plai Ngam permanently. Phim could not make up her mind. The king angrily ordered to execute her.

Single Incident

At the boat landing, Phan was admiring Phim because she had waited for his return. Lao Thong suddenly interrupted that Phim might have lied. Phim was astonished. She asked Phan who Lao Thong was. Phan told her that she was his minor wife. Phim was hurt badly because of Phan's unfaithfulness. She could not control herself. She cursed Phan until he could not bear her anymore. He almost killed her. But Lao Thong pulled his arm. They both left there. Phim ran up to the house and tried to kill herself.

Comment on Khun Phan

Phan is a good knight but not a good husband. He is devoted to the king. And the king likes him. He knows how to use magical incantations very well. So, he always wins in the battle. Phan is handsome. He never lacks of love. He distressed Phim. During his lifetime, he was in the prison for 15 years because of his behavior. Phan is a round character. This helps the story become more realistic, although his story about using the magic is incredible. As a matter of fact, Phan represents Thai men in the old days.

Critical Commentary

Khun Chang-Khun Phan is a valuable literature. The book reflects Thai life in the period of King Rama II. It is the first story about common people. The book was written by many famous writers such as King Rama 11 and Sunthon Poo. Literary techniques are

skilfully used. The readers may learn their styles from reading only this book. Somebody classifies it as a type of romance. Besides the beautiful verse, it gives the detail about Thai history. Khun Chang-Khun Phan is considered to be a Thai masterpiece.

Exercise 1

For any short story or novel you have read, write a book report including (1) a summary of the plot, (2) a single incident, (3) a comment on one character, and (4) a critical commentary.

Exercise 2

Select a short story from your literature book and read it carefully. Then write four paragraphs in which you describe (1) the conflict of the story, (2) the motivation of one of the characters, (3) the point of view, and (4) the author's vocabulary. As a result of your thinking about these matters, see whether or not you can state the meaning of the story.

Exercise 3

Here is one of the best American short stories, "Old Men Dream Dreams, Young Men See Visions," by John William Corrington. Read the story first, asking yourself the question: What is the author trying to do? How well has he succeeded? Be particularly aware of such details as characterization, the handling of a setting, the dialogue, the dramatic, and the quality of the writing. Then, write a two-or three paragraph book report in which you comment on any one of these details.

Old Men Dream Dreams, Young Men See Visions

I tried to remember if I had ever felt better. No, I had not ever felt better. And I could remember. I was only fifteen. And I was driving alone in my father's 1941 Ford to pick up Helena.

It was the first time I had ever had the car alone. That was a victory. My mother had fenced, thrust, and parried with my father, who said I was too young, too wild, too inexpe-

rienced to take a girl out in a car. Later, he said. How much later, my mother asked. Be reasonable, my father said. That's right, my mother answered. Be reasonable. The girl expects him. In the car. Do you want to shame him? He can be degraded, humiliated and dishonored as far as I'm concerned, my father told her. My mother gave him a distant wintry smile, one of her specialties. Like an advocate cross-examining an acknowledged embezzler or black marketeer. Be reasonable, she said with smooth earth-scoring irony.

• All right, my father shouted, turning to me at last, admitting that I was party to the contest—indeed, the plaintiff vindicated.

Take it. Take the goddamned thing. Go out. Wreck it. Cost me my job. Kill yourself.

And then he tossed me the keys.

I parked in front of Helena's, She lived off Creswell Avenue in a nice part of town with solid houses and large pleasant lawns. We had met at one of those teenage dances sponsored by parents who took great stock in supervised activities. They were awful, except that you could meet girls. The day after, I had walked from Jesuit High over to the girls' school to catch her as classes finished in the afternoon. It was long walk—no, it was a run, because she got out at the same time I did and they would expect her home within an hour. Her parents were very strict, she had told me at the dance.

So when she came upon me as she walked up Kings Highway, she smiled with delight, and wordlessly we walked passed Fairfield, past Line Avenue and down the shallow hill that ran alongside Byrd High School, where the Protestants went, and where eventually I would go when the Jesuits determined that I was bound to end badly, indeed, already bore a bad name. We reached Creswell and slowed down. I took her hand. We stopped at the little bayou where the street dipped, where water stood several feet deep in the road after a heavy rain. We looked down at the brown water and she asked me what kind of fish might live in there. Before I could answer, we realized that we had walked a block past her house. She grinned and lowered her eyes as if admitting to an indiscretion. I shrugged and did not admit knowing all the time that we had passed that stale street, ransoming ten precious minutes more, by my pretense.

We met and walked so almost everyday unless the weather was very bad and her mother drove to the school to pick her up. At last, one day, Helena asked me to come home with her to meet her mother. It was a beautifully furnished house, done in what I know now to have been good unobstrusive taste, though strongly feminine. Today I would put such a furnished house down as the work of a moderately talented interior decorator. But in 1949, I doubt that it was. People in Shreveport then had more substantial vices. They had not yet come to the contradiction of sophistication.

As I waited for Helena to find her mother back in the unknown regions of the house, I stood caught up in a net of feelings that I had never experienced before. I saw Helena's round, bright, unremarkable face, her quick excited smile. I conjured her body, her slender legs and ankles. Sexuality was the least of it. That part was good and without complications because it was no more than an imagining, a vague aura that played around the person of every girl I met without settling into a realizable conception. Because then it seemed that an actual expression of unconcealed desire would surely smash itself and me against an invisible but real obstacle as unsettling as the sound barrier. No, it was something else that made me raise my arms and spread them as I smiled into a gold-framed mirror there in the foyer. I loved someone. It was a feeling composed and balanced between heights and depths that flared through me, leaving me exultant and ready for new things in the midst of a profound and indeterminate sadness. I looked at myself quizzically, arms skimbo, hair badly fingercombed. Was it the one or the other? Neither my own emotional history nor the mind that the Jesuits had already forged in me had warned of ambivalence. It was disquieting and thrilling, somehow better than certainty. It was a victory taken from the flood of moments I lived but could not order. But even as I studied the physical shape of love in my face, I saw in the mirror, watching me from the parlor, a small face, serious, almost suffering, the face of a tiny Cassandra mute and miserable. For just an instant I thought insanely that it was Helena creeping up behind me on her kness. I was hot with embarrassment, chilled by something less personal, more sinister, as if a shade of some tomorrow had fallen explicably into the present. But the tiny disturbed copy of Helena's face vanished and I stood alone again fumbling a dog-eared Latin reader filled with the doings of Caesar.

Helena's mother was neat, attractive. The very picture of an efficient mother and housewife. Her eyes were dark, her face unlined in that metastatic poise of a woman who had passed forty by chronology but remains for months or a year as she must have been at thirty. She met me graciously, prepared Cokes for the three of us, and introduced me to Helena's small sister. I recognized the wraith in the foyer mirror. She did indeed look like Helena. Only without the smile, without the capacity to be excited and filled by a moment. I tousled her hair patronizingly, seeing in her eyes even as I did so a look that might have meant either I know what you're really like-or help.

It was a few days later that I asked Helena for a date. I had had a few dates before: humiliating affairs where my father drove me to the girl's house, took us to the movie, then came back and took us home afterward. But this would be different. This would be my first real date. And with someone I loved.

When I reached her house it was already dark. The air was chill. It was November, and the wind swept across my face as I opened the old car's door. Her porch light burned beyond the trees like an altar candle and I moved from the car toward it, key in my hand like power, into the circle of weak light close to Helena. When I rang, it was her mother who opened the door. Even entranced by the current of my triumphs and the size of coming pressure, I noticed that her smile was forced. Had she had a tiring day? Or had she heard ill of me somewhere? That was possible. I had already the first stirrings of a bad name in certain Shreveport circles. But I forgot her expression as she introduced me to her husband, Helena's father.

He stood up heavily, a short red-faced man without charm or presence. He had reddish hair and that odd parti-colored complexion of certain redheaded farmers I knew who were most sensitive to the sun and yet obliged by their calling to work under it always. He looked at me as if I had come to clean the drains and was for some reason he could not fathom intruding into his parlor.

He shook hands with me perfunctorily and began at once to give me instructions as to where Helena and I might go, where we couldn't go. He brushed aside an attempt by his

wife to make conversation and continued, making certain that I knew the time Helena was to be home. Eleven o'clock. He asked me to repeat the time back to him. I did so automatically, paying little attention because as he spoke I could make out the rank smell of whiskey on his breath, as if every word he uttered were being propelled up from his spreading shirtfront by the borrowed force of alcohol. As he went on talking, he looked not at me but past me toward the door, as if the effort of actually seeing me was more than he could bear. I stood silent, glancing at his wife. She was gnawing at the corner of her lip and looking down the hall toward the back of the house. At the edge of the dark hall I thought I could see, dim and distant, the face of Helena's little sister.

Then Helena came. She was dressed in a pale red woolen suit, high heels, a piece of gold jewelry like a bird of paradise on her shoulder. Her father turned from me, studied her, and said nothing. There was a flurry of last words and we were outside walking toward the car. As soon as the door closed, our hands met and clasped. We said nothing because both of us were back in the foyer of her house, the tension, her father and mother, vanished, annulled, decomposed by the look that had passed between us as we saw each other. We had sensed the whole garden of possibilities into which we were about to step. She came from her room assuming a schoolboy awaited her, only to find a slightly nervous young man in a sports jacket standing before her father armed with the key to an ancient car. I had been waiting for a girl but a young woman came to meet me. What joined us then, a current of our spirits, was all the stronger because neither of us had ever felt it flow forth to meet its counterpart before.

We reached the car. As I slid under the wheel, I turned to Helena. She was looking at me and her hand moved to meet mine again. We sat for a long moment until, embarrassed by the weight of our feeling, we drew apart and I started the car. Helena noticed that the inner door handle on her side was missing.

- That's to keep you in, I tried to joke, suddenly ashamed of my father's old car, seeing for the first time its shabbiness, the dusty dashboard, the stained head light.

- I don't want to get out. **Except** with you, Helena said, her eyes large, the beginning of a smile on her lips.

For a while we drove. I headed in toward the city, driving up Highland Avenue past Causey's Music Shop, where I had learned the wherewithal of my bad name. I played trumpet every so often in a roadhouse across the Red River in Bossier Parish. It was called the Skyway Club and had bad name enough to splotch any number of fifteen year-olds who could talk Earl Blessey, the bank leader, into letting them limp through a chorus of "Blue Prelude" or "Georgia on my Mind." Before the Skyway Club and I were done with each other, I would have lost and gained things there enough to be worth any number of bad names.

We drove into downtown and looked at the marquee of the Don and Strand theaters.

- What would you like to see, I asked Helena.
- I don't think I want to go to the movies, she said.
- What would you like to do?
- Could we just go somewhere? And talk?
- Sure, I said. We could go to the Ming Tree over in Bossier No, your father

As I turned the car, I reached for her shoulder and drew her close to me. The lake was where people went when they had no reason to waste time with football games or movies. They went there to be alone, to construct within their cars apartments, places to be solitary and share one another for a few hours.

Cross Lake was cold and motionless, a bright sheet under the autumn stars. Around us, trees rustled in the light breeze. But we were warm and I lit a cigarette and listened to Helena talk. She told me that she was sorry about her father. I said it was nothing. He was only thinking of her. He didn't know me. No, she said, he was thinking of himself. He drank at night. He sat drinking in the parlor, talking to himself, cursing his wife and children sometimes. Sometimes it was worse than that. She said she wanted me to know. Because if I were to think less of her

- That's crazy, I said, turning her to face me. And we kissed.

It would not surprise me to find that moment, that kiss, the final indelible sensation last to fade from my mind as I lie dying. Not because I am sentimental. I have used and misused kisses and promises, truths and lies, honor and fraud and violence as the years

moved on. That world where I knew Helena recedes from me more rapidly each day, each year, shifting red with the sting of its velocity, but never vanishing, its mass increasing in my soul toward infinity as, one who has managed the world as it is better than well, I am subtle enough to recover those fragments from the past which at the moment of their transaction were free from plan or prophecy or the well-deep cynicism of one who recognizes the piquancy of an apparently innocent moment precisely because he knows not only that it will not, cannot last, but because he has long before taken that fragility, that ephemeral certainty, into account in order to enjoy his instant all the more.

And so I remember that kiss. It was well-done. Our lips fused, moving together as if contained in them was the sum of our bodies. Without the conscious thought of sex we achieved a degree of sensuality unmatched in all the embraces I had still to seek or to endure.

- I love you, I told her.
- You can't mean it, she said.

We kissed again and then sat looking at the water, each of us touched beyond speech. We held ourselves close and sent our happiness, our exultation, out to move among the pines, over the water, toward the cold observant stars, keeping a time of their own. We sat that way for a long while.

In retrospect the appearances of banality are simple to determine. But the fact of it was not present between us that night. Banality presumes a certain self-consciousness, a kind of *deja vu*, a realization explicit or implied that what one is doing has values other than those which seem. Or that certain values are missing. There must be a sly knowledge that the game in hand is not only not worth the candle, but hardly worth striking the match.

But Helena and I knew nothing then but each and the shape of our victory. We were not repeating for the tenth or even the second time a ritual tarnished in its parts and lethally sure in its conclusion. We had for this moment conquered chance and youth, our fathers, the traps and distances laid for us. We were alone beside Cross Lake and no one on earth knew where we were. We belonged to ourselves, to each other. We did not know that neither of us, together or apart, would ever find this time and place, find each other like this again, It will

always be exactly like this, we would have thought. Had we thought. It was not banal. The rest of our lives might be so, but not tonight.

Tonight we told each other of our troubles and our hopes. We said, each in a different way, that our fathers made us unhappy. That one day we would leave Shreveport, journey to London and Paris, to the farthest places we could imagine. Only now, after tonight, we would go together. We talked about much more, words cascading over each other as we exchanged all that we had been and done apart, all we planned, and wished for together. Until, amidst a moment of silence, a pause of breath, Helena looked at her watch.

Oh God, she gasped, her face stricken.

What?

• It's.....

We're going to be late?

• It's almost four o'clock. In the morning.

We stared at each other. I lit a **match** and looked at her watch. It was eight minutes to four. I closed my eyes. We were supposed to be home by eleven. Even my father would be aroused, knowing that I wasn't at the Skyway **Club** with Earl. I tried not to think about Helena's father but his squat body, his nearly angry face, rose in my mind again and again like a looped strip of film.

O God, I do love you, Helena said.

We kissed again, touched, embraced. Her nylon-covered legs rose and touched my body. My hand found her breasts. None of **this** had we intended. The fruit of the tree in that garden we entered was the knowledge of time, of duration: time lost. Even then, in those hysterical seconds, we trying not so much to hasten passage from recognition to fulfillment as to claim what we might before it was too late, before we were separated and everything died.

But we stopped. We were not brave enough. We were too wise. We could not bring ourselves to wager what we had found against the sullen covenant of all our fathers. We kissed one last time hastily and I started the car, the beginning of an anguish inside me even as my heart **beat** insanely from her touch.

I cut the engine and coasted up in front of Helena's house. It seemed as if I had not seen it in centuries. Inside, many lights were on and I could see that the front door was a little ajar. Helena turned to me and touched my arm. I could see that there were tears on her cheeks, and the anguish grew.

- Go on, she said. Don't come up to the house with me. He'll be awful, really
- No, I said without thought. I'm going to take you to the door.

I was not frightened, only apprehensive. I had been in too many hassles to spook before the event. There was always time to flush, sometimes only a second or two but always time. Anyhow, I had that fifty-yard walk to make, I knew. My bad name did not include cowardice, at least not of the overt and measurable kind. More important, there would be nothing left if I drove away, left the field and Helena upon it to her father. Our triumph would dwindle to an absurdity. I was not yet old enough to weigh those things against reality. What we had found in each other was real, I thought. And I was not a boy any longer. What you do not defend, you cannot keep: the oldest of all rules.

We walked toward the lights. Out of our world back into theirs. We did not walk hand in hand and later I would wonder how much of the future had been bent around that smallest of omissions. As we reached the door we could hear Helena's father. He was now very drunk and he was cursing and bullying her mother.

• Nice. Oh yes, Jesus son of God what do you reckon he's done my baby. That little bastard. Telling her it's all right, taking off her . . . clothes

I closed my eyes and blushed as if I were guilty of it. All and more. Helena looked down at the concrete steps. Then she pushed open the door and stepped into the foyer to forestall any more of his raving.

• Hello, everybody, she said loudly, almost brightly, in that tone she used to greet me when we met after school each day.

Her father whirled about, his face red, thick, inarticulate with anger. Standing just behind Helena, I could not quite see the look that passed between them but it seemed to me that she nearly smiled, pale and upset as she was.

Get to your room, her father spat out, swaying from side to side as he moved toward us. Toward me. No, don't say anything. I'll see to you later.

Helena's mother shook her head and signaled Helena to go, to leave it alone. But Helena wasn't ready.

▪ No, I want to say

But her father pushed her out of the way roughly in order to face me. Her mother stepped forward behind him and took her from the foyer. She was beginning to cry.

What did you do, he rasped. Where did you **take** her? What kind of dirt

He clenched his fists in front of my face. I thought coldly that he could smash me to pieces easily. But for some reason the realization meant nothing.

▪ We talked, I said. I'm sorry we

▪ Talked? You liar you

Helena's mother, her face anxious, truly frightened, came back into the foyer. She touched her husband's arm. He shook her off. Now he was swaying, blinking.

Nothing happened, I said, considering the immensity of that lie.

▪ I think you'd better go now, Bill, Helena's mother said, motioning me toward the door with her anxious eyes.

I started to say something more, but I **could** think of nothing more to say. Then I backed toward the door, too old by far in the ways of **Caddo** and **Bossier** Parishes to show my back to a drunk who held a score against me, a blood score. The occasions of my bad name had me cautious. Before I reached the door, there in the gloom of the dark hallway I saw, dressed in a long nightgown, the figure of Helena's little sister. Her face was pinched and no larger than an orange, it seemed. Her eyes were wide with excitement and certainty.

As I stepped outside, Helena's father, who had followed me with his inflamed eyes, began to weep. He twisted his fists into his eyes, his shoulders quaking. He turned to his wife, who looked after me one last time and then gave her attention to her husband, who leaned against her like a child swallowed in the skirts of its mother. Behind, the little girl **stood** alone, one hand pressed against that duplicate of Helena's face.

▪ My little girl, her father sobbed, as if he knew Helena to be dead. ▪ my baby

I turned then and breathed deeply, walking slowly toward the black mass of my father's sequestered Ford. I stooped at the car door and looked back at Helena's house under two cedar trees, dwarfed by a sweep of sky pricked with distant stars. I breathed again, taking in the chill early-morning air like one who stares down from some great height at the place where his lover sleeps or the field where his enemy lies broken. Then, full of some large uncertain joy, I sat down in the old car and jammed the ignition key home.

Exercise 4

Read the following short story carefully. Then write two paragraphs in which you give

1. a summary of the story
2. a critical commentary

THE PERFECT MATCH

by

Stephen Makler

I walked into the office and shook hands with a smiling man named Mr. Bleaucher. He was dressed very well, compared to me. He shuffled a pile of papers like they were so many pancakes.

'I'm sure you'll be very pleased with her,' he said. "She was picked by our compatibility computer out of over one hundred ten million eligible women in the United States. We categorize by race, religion, ethnic and regional background . . ."

I sat there interestedly, wishing I had taken a shower before I came. It was a very nice office but the chair wasn't too comfortable.

"And now . . ." he said. He flung open the door to the next room like a magician. He needed a cape, though. I was expecting a rabbit but I got a surprise.

She was pretty. Really, she was pretty.

“Mr. Walker, this is Miss **Dunfield** of Laughing Lake, Montana. Miss Dunfield, this is Mr. Franklin Walker of New York.”

“Really Frank. Franklin is something else again,” I said. I was a little nervous. She was pretty, you see.

Mr. **Bleacher** left and we were able to talk.

“Hello.”

“Hello,” she said.

“I’m very pleased with the choice, I said. I was trying to be suave. Maybe she didn’t like being called a choice. “I mean . . . I’m glad the way things turned out.”

She smiled. She had a nice smile. Good teeth.

“Thank you,” she said. “So am I.” She was shy.

“I’m thirty one,” I blurted out.

“Yes, I know,” she said. “It’s all on the cards.”

It seemed like the conversation was about over. Everything was on the cards. So there wasn’t really much to talk about.

“How about children ?” she said.

“Three. Two boys and a girl.”

“That’s exactly what I want,” she said. “It’s down on the file under ‘Future Planning’. That one there.”

I suddenly noticed that sheaf of papers in my hands. On the first page was glued an IBM card* with vital statistics about her. I guessed the thing she was holding was the same thing on me. I began looking through it and so did she. The turning pages made a lot of noise.

It said she like classical music. (This was in “Preferences and Habits.”) “You like classical music?” I asked her.

“Well . . . better than anything else. I also have the complete collection of Frankie Laine records.”

“He was a great old singer,” I agreed.

* IBM card is a computer card

I went on looking through the file and so did she. She liked books, football, sitting near the front in movies, sleeping with windows closed, dogs, cats, goldfish, **tuna** fish, salami sandwiches, simple clothes, private schools for children (our children, really) living in the suburbs, art museums ...

She looked up. "It seems we like the same things," she said.

"The exact same things," I said.

I read the report titled "Psychology." She was shy, avoided arguments, wasn't outspoken, a good mother type.

"I'm glad you don't drink or smoke," she said.

"I don't. I don't like to. Sometimes I have beer, though."

"It doesn't say down here."

"Well, maybe I forgot to put that down." I hoped she didn't mind.

We finished reading the reports on each other.

"We're very much alike," she said.

Alice and I have been married for nine years now. We have the three kids already, two boys and a girl. We live in the suburbs and listen to a lot of classical and Frankie Laine records. The last time we had argument is too far back to remember. We agree on practically everything. She's been a good wife and, if I may say so, I've been a good husband. Our marriage is perfect.

We're getting divorced next month. I can't stand it.

Exercise 5

Read the short story below. Then write

- a) a summary of the story, including a description of one character or a description of any interesting moment in the story;
- b) a critical commentary, including your own opinion of the story or what you believe the author wants to say to the reader.