

Learning Language Arts Through Literature



THE GOLD BOOK

Literary Criticism

By

Erin Evans and Faith Welch



Common Sense Press
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Introduction



The Gold Book – Literary Criticism is written in an easy-to-use format which allows students to work independently. Students will read twenty short stories, three novels, a memoir, two plays, two essays, and a selection of poetry intended to provide them with material for writing literary critiques. During the course the student will be introduced to different methods of literary criticism and given instructions, along with example papers, on writing essays. By the end of the course, the student will have written a short memoir, a college essay, nine five-paragraph essays, three five-page essays, and one ten-page essay.

In keeping with the goal of the *Learning Language Arts Through Literature* series, the student will be introduced to a wide range of classic literature. The authors of the selections in this manual are considered among the best and most influential writers. At this level, study of the classics necessitates introducing students to works that may deal with adult themes. We have tried to be sensitive to this. We suggest that the teacher read a summary of each work and determine if any content may be of concern. If so, choose another work that would support the lesson's goals.

As with all the Gold *Learning Language Arts Through Literature* books, *The Gold Book – Literary Criticism* is written as a college preparation course. Since it is intended to prepare students for first-year college English courses, it should be completed in the 11th or 12th grade.

How to Use This Book



The Gold Book - Literary Criticism is designed for the student and the teacher. The book is written for student self-direction with answers for the teacher in the back of the book.

Since the main goal of this book is to prepare the student for college level writing, the student will be given instructions on how to write a five-paragraph essay, a five-page essay, and a ten-page essay. All the writing assignments will be based on literature intended to challenge the student's ability to think critically. Each lesson consists of a five-day week complete with assignments and questions. Many of the questions may be answered orally or as a written assignment. We encourage the teacher to vary requirements for oral or written answers depending on what will best assist the student in learning. The *Teacher Section*, located in the back of the book following the *Student Section*, is intended to aid the teacher in assessing comprehension and to enable the teacher to participate in oral discussion.

When a literary term is introduced it will be highlighted in bold print, followed by its definition. A list of literary terms is provided at the back of the manual. For convenience, the student will be using *A Literary Criticism Anthology* published by Common Sense Press that takes advantage of works that are in the public domain. Other short stories and poems not in the public domain can easily be found online or at the library.

To complete the assignments in this manual, the student will need the following books as well as access to a library and/or the internet.

A Literary Criticism Anthology, published by Common Sense Press

Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom, published by Broadway Books

Starship Troopers by Robert Heinlein, published by Ace Trade

The Trial by Franz Kafka, translated by Breon Mitchell, published by Schocken Books

No Fear Shakespeare, Macbeth, by William Shakespeare, published by Spark Publishing

The Count of Monte Cristo by Alexandre Dumas, published by Townsend Press, Inc.

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Day 1

For the last few lessons, you have been asking yourself questions about the author and how their beliefs influenced their writing. We now move on to a new form of literary criticism commonly known as **historicism**.

While authors' beliefs and life circumstances clearly affect their writing, the world around them also plays a big part in shaping their work. Historical literary criticism takes into consideration the time period that the literature was written. Understanding the major world events that were taking place when the piece was written can be crucial to interpreting what the author was trying to say. A good example is H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, which was greatly influenced by the Industrial Revolution and Darwin's theory of evolution.

Historical literary criticism asks the following questions:

- In what time period was this written?
 - What was happening at this time? What were the issues/controversies of the day?
 - What in the story reflects or pertains to the issues of the day?
 - How does the author seem to be interpreting the issues of the day?
 - How was the work received at the time? How did readers of that time interpret the work?
- a. Reading from a historical criticism viewpoint, we are going to read four short stories by four very different authors. As you read, be thinking about what was going on during their lifetime and how the culture and those events influenced their writing. Next week, you will choose one of these short stories to research and write a five-paragraph essay on.
 - b. We will start with a story by Rudyard Kipling, written in 1888, called "The Man Who Would be King." The story is about two British explorer/adventurers who want to become rulers of a remote country in Afghanistan.
 - c. Rudyard Kipling was born in 1865 in British India. He is credited with having a significant influence on the development of the short story and was the youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

His writings, while hugely popular at the time, have since come under criticism for their sense of jingo imperialism. In the late 1800s, Britain was almost unchallenged in its world supremacy and had expanded its colony holdings. The British Empire included all of India and large parts of Africa as well as control of world trade which effectively dominated Asia and Latin America. Social Darwinism was a popular idea which led to

racism and the general feeling that all races and countries other than the British were inferior. Much of this sense of racial pride is evident in Kipling's writing and can be seen in "The Man Who Would be King."

Best known for *The Jungle Book* and the *Just So Stories for Little Children*, Kipling also wrote several speculative fiction short stories as well as hard science fiction which would later influence Robert Heinlein. In particular, Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* shares similarities with Kipling's "The Army of a Dream."

Kipling became a Freemason in 1885 and received all three degrees of Craft Masonry. He uses the ideas of the fraternity and its symbols in "The Man Who Would be King." The first line of the story "Brother to a prince and fellow to a beggar if he be found worthy" refers to the last line of a masonic poem by Kipling called "Banquet Night."



- d. Read the first section of "The Man Who Would Be King" found on page 101 of the *Literary Criticism Anthology*.
- e. Discuss or write answers for the following questions:
 1. How does Kipling's description of the railway classes show imperialism?
 2. Research the British East India Company.
 3. Who is Modred?
 4. Kipling uses images of twirling in the story to show futility. What is the "priest" holding?
 5. What is Peachey rambling about when Kipling mentions the whirligig again?

Day 2




- a. Read the second section of "The Man Who Would Be King" found on page 113 of the *Literary Criticism Anthology*.
 - Please note that Kipling uses a racial slur that today is considered extremely offensive. This word is a derogatory insult to people of color. You might use this time to discuss British Imperialism and racial injustice during this time period.
- b. Discuss or write answers for the following questions:
 1. Why do you think Kipling mentions the whirligig again after the pouring of milk on the ground?
 2. What other examples of the whirligig do you see in the story?
 3. To what Craft is Dravot referring?

4. What do you think about Peachy being all right with taking over the country but uncomfortable about starting a new Freemason Lodge without a warrant?
5. Do you think that Peachy and Dravot naming all the Chiefs after men they had known is another example of jingoism?
6. Why does Dravot say that the people won't cheat him?
7. Who was Rajah Brooke?
8. Do you think Dravot was going mad or was he merely blinded by his own pride?
9. What do you think happened to Dravot's head and crown?

Day 3

- a. We now move about a hundred years past “The Man Who Would be King” to read a short story by Alice Walker. An American novelist, short story writer, and activist, she has received the National Book Award for *The Color Purple*, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Walker was born to sharecroppers during the time of segregation. She was valedictorian of her school and went on to win a full scholarship to college. Her first published book was a book of poetry. In 1982 she published her best-known work, *The Color Purple*, which was turned into a critically acclaimed movie as well as a Broadway musical. She has written several other novels as well as collections of short stories. Her work focuses on the struggles of black women in a racist and patriarchal society.

-  b. Find and read a copy of “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker in the library or read it online by searching for “Everyday Use text.”
- c. Discuss or write answers for the following questions:
 1. How do Dee and her mother relate differently to their culture?
 2. What is Dee's motivation for taking the quilts and the butter churn parts?
 3. What does the title refer to in the story?
 4. Does your family have any heirlooms? What do those items say about your family? How does valuing those items make you part of your family heritage?

Day 4

- a. Kurt Vonnegut was an American novelist, who also wrote short stories, plays, and non-fiction. He dropped out of college to join the army and fight in World War II. He was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge and survived in an internment camp until he was rescued during the bombing of Dresden.

He published several semi-positively received books until *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It became a critical success because of its anti-war sentiment during the time of the Vietnam War. Vonnegut was an atheist and a socialist, themes that appear frequently in his writing. He also often dealt with the idea of suicide and the meaning of life.



“2BR02B (Two B R naught two B)” is a short story about population control and volunteered suicide and asks the question “Are lives interchangeable in value?” Find a copy in the library or read it online by searching for “2BR02B text.”

- b. Discuss or write answers for the following questions:
1. How do the blank faces in the garden painting represent the government’s idea that individuality is a bad thing and that people are interchangeable?
 2. Dystopian fiction is often an exaggerated commentary on culture. What do you think Vonnegut is commenting on or criticizing in our culture?
 3. The first few sentences of the story paint a utopian society. Do you think Vonnegut actually thought this was utopia? Is a utopian society possible?
 4. The painter thinks about the alternative to volunteered suicide: war, plague, and starvation. Why do you think he ultimately decides to call 2BR02B?

Day 5

a. The French novelist, poet, and playwright Jean Giono (1895-1970) was a nature lover who set most of his stories in Provence. After his experience fighting in World War I, Giono became a pacifist. He refused to fight in World War II and was arrested for opposing the war. His best-known work is “The Man Who Planted Trees” which was made into an animated film in 1987. It won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 1988.




b. Read “The Man Who Planted Trees” found on page 125 in the *Literary Criticism Anthology*.

c. Discuss or write answers for the following questions:

1. Where and when does the story take place?
2. Describe Elzeard Bouffier. What does he do and why?
3. What impact did Bouffier’s actions have?
4. What lessons can be learned from this short story?

Day 1

- a. Kipling, Walker, Vonnegut, and Giono all wrote during politically and socially interesting periods of history that heavily influenced their work. Choose one of the four stories you read last week to write a five-paragraph essay from a historical criticism viewpoint.
-  b. Do a little more research about the author and the time period of the story that you have chosen. Writing a historical critique on a work of literature requires you to understand the time period in which the author was writing.
- c. As you research, ask yourself these questions about the story:
- In what time period was this written?
 - What were the issues/controversies of the day?
 - What in the story reflects or pertains to the issues of the day?
 - How does the author seem to be interpreting the issues of the day?
 - How was the work received at the time? How did readers of that time period interpret the work?
- d. For reference on writing a historical criticism essay, read the following paper on Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, also known as *The Children's Crusade*, was published in 1969. The main character, Billy Pilgrim, has become "unstuck in time," which allows him to jump around to different points of his own timeline. Pilgrim's life mirrors Vonnegut's in a way, as they were both prisoners-of-war in Dresden, Germany, when it was bombed during World War II. Pilgrim is also at one point abducted by aliens, called the Tralfamadorians, and held in an alien zoo.

Slaughterhouse-Five as Science Fiction:

A Pilgrim Through Time and Space

Many critics and readers of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* view Pilgrim's claims of alien abductions and time jumping to be the rantings of a mad man suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. They fail to consider the possibility that the events in Pilgrim's life are actually real, because they fail to exercise the method of reading literature coined by Coleridge: suspension of disbelief. This method calls for the reader to forget what he or she knows as being real or physically possible and simply accepting what the narrator says is true, an element commonly found in science fiction.

Slaughterhouse-Five can be read as a work of science fiction instead of just an anti-war novel because the author was greatly influenced by the science fiction writers of his day, Pilgrim's war experience is historically based, and Vonnegut, as the narrator, seems to say that anti-war novels are pointless.

Traditionally, there are two ways to read the novel: as a tragic tale of a soldier who suffered the rest of his life from PTSD or as a genius story that fits nicely into the science fiction genre. *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written at a time when many influential science fiction writers were publishing their classic stories. The genre was being finely molded in this era. *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published in 1969, which fell in the middle of science fiction writer Isaac Asimov's most active period. The bulk of Asimov's work was published between the 1950s and the 1990s. Also, famous science fiction works such as *Dune*, by Frank Herbert and *Babel-17*, by Samuel R. Delany, were published in the 1960s, shortly before Vonnegut's novel. It is not hard to see how Vonnegut's novel slides easily into the genre that was so popular in this time period.

Another evidence for reading the novel as science fiction is the overwhelming amount of proof that everything described in the novel is true, at least in the world of Billy Pilgrim and his family and friends. First, the narrator claims to be Vonnegut himself, working right alongside Pilgrim, digging up bodies buried in the aftermath of the bombing of Dresden. Vonnegut was, in fact, present at this historical event. Secondly, the narrator begins the story by claiming that everything in the book is true, so it may be assumed that everything, in fact, is indeed true. If the reader accepts that the entire novel takes place in a reality different than his own, it is easy to see how Pilgrim's abductions and time jumping is a reality in the story, not a symptom of his PTSD.

Finally, if the novel is read as an anti-war novel, showing how war will have a horrible effect on people, such as leaving them with PTSD, then the novel is significantly more pointless than if it is read as science fiction. In the opening chapter, Harrison Starr, a man that the narrator encounters at a party, says that writing an anti-war novel is comparable to writing an anti-glacier novel. Both war and glaciers


are unstoppable. He is insinuating that it is pointless to write an anti-war novel, because they are going to happen anyway. Starr's view on war is very similar to the Tralfamadorian view on life: "So it goes." The narrator says that he agrees with this view on war. He says, "And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death" (Vonnegut 14). So how can it be said that this novel is an anti-war book when the narrator himself so obviously feels that anti-war novels are pointless?

Although the more commonly accepted view of interpreting *Slaughterhouse-Five* as the bizarre ravings of a madman, the philosophical approach of "making sense of experience rather than discovering ultimate reality" (Coleman 683) is perhaps more useful when analyzing this novel. "The question is not 'what is reality?' or 'what is really real?' but rather 'what is the meaning of this particular experience?' or 'what is going on here?'" (Coleman 684). The time period that the novel was written in—when science fiction was influential, war was prevalent, and anti-war novels were thought useless—supports the novel's being taken at face value and a possible addition to the science fiction genre.



- e. Begin work on your thesis statement.




Day 2-3

- 
- a. Polish and refine your thesis statement.
-
- b. The following is the outline with topic sentences for the
- Slaughterhouse-Five*
- paper in Day 1d.
-
- I. Introduction
-
- a. The book is usually read as an anti-war novel.
-
- b. There is good reason to read the book as a science fiction novel.



Thesis statement: *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be read as a work of science fiction instead of just an anti-war novel because the author was greatly influenced by the science fiction writers of his day, Pilgrim's war experience is historically based, and Vonnegut, as the narrator, seems to say that anti-war novels are pointless.

- II. Popularity of science fiction
a. Published in 1969
b. Famous science fiction authors Asimov, Herbert, and Delany
- III. Historically based
a. War in Dresden
b. Vonnegut parallels his own war experience.
- IV. Anti-war novels were considered pointless
a. Character Harrison Starr's statement
b. Narrator agrees with Starr
- V. Conclusion
a. Narrator can be believed
b. Coleman quote

Reworded thesis statement: The time period that the novel was written in—when science fiction was influential, war was a reality, and anti-war novels were thought useless—supports the novel's being taken at face value and a possible addition to the science fiction genre.

- 
- c. Create your outline for your essay. Refer back to Lesson 1 for outline help.
-
- 
- d. Write your topic sentences.
-
- 
- e. Begin writing your essay.

Day 4

-  a. Finish writing your five-paragraph essay.
-  b. Create your Works Cited page, if you used any sources in your essay. Remember to cite the story you are writing about if you use direct quotes. Refer back to Lesson 1 for help on formatting your Works Cited.

Day 5

- a. Go over your paper again. Check for the following:
 - Misspelled words
 - Missing words
 - Awkward sentences
 - Sentences that do not fit the topic sentence
- b. Read your paper out loud, make sure that it flows smoothly and logically from one point to the next.
- c. Share your paper with someone else.