

The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present Study Guide

The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present by Phillip Lopate

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Plot Summary

The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present by Phillip Lopate is a book that compiles dozens of essays from writers that come from different parts of the world and different eras in time. Each of these essays has been picked for their influence on the way the personal essay has evolved throughout history.

The book begins by looking at essay writers that were born around 3 A.D. and the way that their essays were written. The subjects and language style often make it easy to see how much different things have changed. The subjects by these authors will reflect the times and the culture. There is a man that talks about losing his young daughter and how he is sorry he will miss the funeral because he is in a distant place and cannot make it home in time. There is another author that talks about a temple that he has gone to. Sometimes these essays will contain information about daily life, such as public bathhouses. The next chapter in the book deals with only one author, Michel de Montaigne. There are several essays about Montaigne and he is commented on by other essay writers later on in the book as inspiration.

The book goes in chronological order from when the essayists were born in each chapter. The next chapter in the book focuses on "The Rise of the English Essay." While this chapter deals with essays that are easier to understand it is clear that the era in time is still much different from our own. In this chapter the writers include some that are grouped together, such as Addison and Steele, and Virginia Woolf and George Orwell.

As the book moves on it will look at other cultures and their contributions to the essay. These will include Japanese, Chinese, and German writers, and essayists from many other cultures. These essay writers will touch on things important in their cultures and lives and consequently it is difficult to relate to some of the issues they approach. Some of these authors endured many hardships such as persecution from the Nazis and false imprisonment for their outspoken views.

The final chapter in the book deals with American essay writers and their effect on the personal essay. The subjects talked about in this chapter are much easier for the average person to relate to since they are issues we still deal with today. Their subjects include racial issues, political issues, the effect we are having on the environment and many others.



Chapter 1, Forerunners

Chapter 1, Forerunners Summary and Analysis

The first chapter of the book begins with a section about Seneca the Younger who is born in 3 A.D. and dies in 65 A.D. Seneca the Younger's father is a rhetorician and writer and Seneca the Younger becomes a renowned orator and writer also. He is a philosopher of the Stoics although many of his actions in life are not those of a true Stoic. A Stoic is supposed to be a wise man who plays the cards that are dealt to him and never complains of his station and always has dignity. Much of Seneca's life is very human as he gains wealth, complains about misfortune and curries favor. His death is considered to be a show of his beliefs in that he takes his own life at the request of the king, Nero. Seneca is known as the founder of the essay.

Seneca's essay is titled "On Noise" and delves into a person's need for peace and quiet. Seneca says that there is no peace and quiet for a person outside the world if there is not peace within themselves. He lists off all the things that he hears on a daily basis and how he is able to ignore these things because he has peace within himself. He states that a quiet night will do more to disrupt a person who has no peace within than the loudest of places. Seneca's next essay is titled "Asthma" and describes a health problem that Seneca has. Seneca says that it is called "rehearsing death" by many because you are constantly taking your last breath. Seneca says overcoming an attack of this type is not something that makes you feel happy because it is over since you always know another one is coming. The next essay by Seneca is "Scipio's Villa" about Seneca's time at the temple. The last essay in the book written by Seneca is called "Slaves." In this essay Seneca describes the harsh treatment of slaves and explains that there is no real difference between a slave and his master except how fortune has chosen to visit them. Seneca states that slaves are not acquired as enemies but made to be that way because of the treatment they receive.

Plutarch is born in approximately 46 A.D. and dies around 120. He is a valued diplomat and becomes a priest of the temple of Delphi and teaches philosophy. Plutarch is known as the first great biographer. Plutarch has unique views about the connection between a man and his wife and Plutarch believes marriage to be the greatest human bond. He also is known for his tenderness towards children and sympathy for animal creation.

The essay written by Plutarch is "Consolation to His Wife." This essay is a letter that Plutarch writes to his wife while traveling in Tanagra. It is in Tanagra that Plutarch learns of the death of his daughter. Plutarch explains that although they had several sons it was his daughter that the wife had wanted so badly. They had named the daughter after his wife. Plutarch goes on to explain to his wife that he wants her to not fall apart as other mothers do because their daughter was kind and generous and a joy to them and there is no sense in mourning someone so wonderful who has been liberated from their earthly prison so soon.



Sei Shonagon is a woman who lives in tenth-century Japan and keeps a journal of her likes and dislikes of the things around her. She is very frank about bedroom behavior although she is snobbish in other respects. The essay by Sei Shonagon that is looked at is called "Hateful Things." In this essay Sei explains all the things she hates and it ranges from a mosquito that appears as you are falling asleep, company that will not leave, to lovers that leave in hurry in the middle of the night. Sei says that an attachment to a man depends on the way he takes his leave.

Not much is known about Kenko other than he has a role in the imperial court. He becomes a Buddhist monk in 1324 and is dismayed at the lack of tradition. His work "Essays in Idleness" cover a vast number of subjects and end with the subject of death and how a person faces it. Kenko says in the essay that facing death should be as charging into battle.

Ou-Yank Hsiu is ranked as one of the eight masters of Chinese classical prose and lives 1007-1072. He is promoted and exiled a number of times over his career. He writes essays including, "Old Drunkard's Pavilion," "My Three Zithers," and "Farewell to Yang Shih." "Pleasure Boat Studio" is an essay by Hsiu in which he explains the reason for the name of his room in his governmental office. The room resembles a boat but this is not the only reason he has named the studio "Pleasure Boat Studio." After the explanation Hsiu says that he is worried no one will understand why he named the studio this and has a friend come and write the name on the wall in calligraphy. Underneath the calligraphy Hsiu has this explanation written out.

Analysis for Chapter 1

The title Forerunners for the first chapter of the book is to explain that these are the first essay writers. Much of what they have written is the basis for other authors and essay writers that will come. The author gives examples of where these authors are used and whom they inspire, including Shakespeare. There is background information given on each of these authors. This background information helps the reader to understand many of the views in the essays.

There is an introduction at the front of the book that further explains the book and the purpose of it. Although these pages are not numbered it does take up several pages. In the introduction the author explains that the purpose of the book is to explain the tradition and use of the personal essay. With this introduction in mind it is easy to see why there is information given about each of the authors. There are definite connections between each of the authors' writings and what is known about their personal lives. The same method will be used later on in the book with the other essay writers that are looked at.

Some of the authors will have more than one essay included but others will only have one. Many of their other works will be listed for the reader as additional information. The title "personal essay" is well illustrated by the chosen examples: Plutarch writes about his daughter dying and Sei Shonagon writes about lovers leaving in the middle of the night.



Chapter 2, Fountainhead

Chapter 2, Fountainhead Summary and Analysis

In chapter two the author introduces Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne is considered by some to be the greatest essayist who ever lived. Both his father and mother's families are prominent people. Montaigne is considered lazy and is greatly indulged by his father. He studies law and practices until he is thirty-eight. Around this time Montaigne suffers the loss of his best friend, Etienne de La Boetie. Montaigne takes his wife and moves to the family estate to retire where he will study and write.

Montaigne's first book is not personal but is a great success and so Montaigne is spurred to write another book. Montaigne gets the idea that he will publish a full portrayal of himself in his books. Montaigne will claim he is the first to do this although it is argued by some that Saint Augustine is actually the first.

Montaigne views humanity as vain, shameful, contradictory but does not advocate condemning people. Montaigne rather supports the idea of generous self-forgiveness. Many of Montaigne's ideas are Stoic in character. In Montaigne's writings he will follow his thoughts regardless of where they lead him. This will often lead him to self-discovery but also makes for a lack of structure. Montaigne could also be called proto-feminist.

Montaigne's essay "Of Books" touches on a vast area of subjects and Montaigne's own personal knowledge of different areas. He is admitting in this essay that there are a lot of people that have much more educated views than he does. In this essay he quotes a number of writers to further expand upon his points. Montaigne explains the kinds of authors that he likes for different subjects.

The next essay by Montaigne is "Of a Monstrous Child." In this essay Montaigne explains how he saw a child in town that had another child's body attached. The body attached to the small child is headless and the nurse of the child says that the boy pees out of both the urine holes. Montaigne then goes on to tell of a man who is in his thirties but has no genitalia at all. The man loves to touch women and has lived a happy life. Montaigne explains that what people call contrary to nature is not, because nothing is contrary to nature. Everything that happens is meant to happen by nature and there are no surprises to anyone but us.

The last essay of Michel de Montaigne given in the book is called "On Some Verses of Virgil." In this essay Montaigne focuses on the subjects of vice, death, poverty, disease, and aging. Montaigne quotes many authors throughout the story, often Virgil, and gives a short excerpt on his thoughts of their statements. In this essay Montaigne also touches on the subject of the opposite sex. He says that males and females are the same in many respects except where custom and education are concerned. He says that for one sex to blame the other for anything is the same as the pot calling the kettle black.



Analysis Chapter 2: Fountainhead

This whole chapter focuses on one essayist rather than several. This may be due in part to the fact that Montaigne is considered the greatest essayist that ever lived although the author's reasons are not divulged. Montaigne often adds excerpts from other writers into his essays but it seems to be more as filler. Sometimes there will be only a sentence or two after he has given a quote but other times he will have a quote from another author and then write for a page or more. In his essay "Of a Monstrous Child" there are no quotes but this is the exception.

In the essay "Of a Monstrous Child" it seems that the author has chosen the name as a contradictory term. He describes the child in gruesome detail even down to where the child is able to urinate from. The imagery used here is very harsh and creates a picture that is hard to ignore. In addition to the child Montaigne goes on to describe a full grown man he knows that was born missing his genitalia. After describing both of these people Montaigne then says that it cannot be a mistake of nature. Montaigne talks about how it is contrary to custom but not to nature. It appears that Montaigne is chastising people that would call these people mistakes of nature although he does not come out and do so directly.

All of the essays shown give a view of the author and his beliefs and desires. They also shows where some of his beliefs stem from and which other authors and writers he agrees with. This will be the only chapter in the book that deals with one author as opposed to several.



Chapter 3, The Rise of the English Essay- Page 113-211

Chapter 3, The Rise of the English Essay- Page 113-211 Summary and Analysis

Chapter three begins with a look at Abraham Cowley. He is a supporter of the Royalists and studies at Cambridge. Abraham Cowley is considered to be one of the earliest masters of a clear and easy English prose style. Cowley's style reflects the common man who talks about things that he himself knows about and does not try to stretch the reader's comprehension of the subject. Cowley's essay "Of Greatness" looks at the role a person plays in the world and how much it takes to make a person feel that they are great. Cowley says that he is in love with littleness and names little things that he enjoys. Cowley also says that he does not want to be in love again because it is such a great passion.

The next essay writers looked at are Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, who are printed together. These two writers compliment each other although their writing styles are very different. Addison is said to be more polished and Steele more spontaneous and intimate. The first essay looked at is "Nicolini and the Lions" by Joseph Addison. This essay has a comical look at Nicolini's story and revolves around the fact that Addison meets with the lion from the story, and the lion will in fact talk to him. "An Hour or Two Sacred to Sorrow" is by Richard Steele and looks at a person's need to sorrow and what it accomplishes for different people. Steele will even go into an attempt he made to sorrow. "Twenty-four Hours in London" is another essay by Richard Steele. This essay looks at how it effects a person if they are able to simply enjoy something without the thought of how it will gain them something in the world. Steele talks about a trip he has recently made to London and the sites that he saw with no thought other than to enjoy them and take them in. "Love Letters" is also an essay by Steele in which he shows two letters, one is from a Careless man and the other from a Constant man to the same woman that they love. Although the woman knows she should have picked Constant she would have picked Careless if they had survived.

Samuel Johnson, also known as Dr. Johnson, is looked on as one of the heroes of Western intellectual life. He writes many things including compiling the first full English dictionary. He is more of a moral essayist rather than a personal essayist but the characters in the story often have a personal view such as the story of "The Boarding House." "The Solitude of the Country" is a story in which Samuel talks about the views that people have in romanticizing country life and solitude. Samuel puts a lot of his own personal views into this essay.

Maria Edgeworth, 1768-1849, is the eldest of 21 children. She is taught by her father to have nontraditional views and many of her essays reflect that in areas such as a woman's role. Maria never marries. The essay "An Essay on the Noble Science of Self-



Justification" is looked at. In this essay Maria makes jokes about things that a wife should say to her husband that make the sarcastic point that a woman should have no opinion if her husband does not allow it.

Charles Lamb has been called one of the great masters of the English essay and is born in 1775 and dies in 1834. The next several essays in the book are by Charles Lamb. Charles' essays are greatly influenced by his childhood. He is the youngest of seven children although all die but three. Charles is raised by his older sister, Mary, and is forced to quit school at fourteen to go to work. Mary suffers a mental breakdown and kills her mother and wounds their father. Charles would remain a bachelor for the rest of his life and take care of Mary in her old age as she had done for him as children. Charles writes many things and often uses names to hide his identity. He uses a great deal of mockery and buffoonish cataloging, and exaggerates metaphors in his writings. The essays looked at by Charles Lamb are "New Year's Eve," "A Chapter on Ears," "Dream Children: A Reverie," and "The Superannuated Man."

William Hazlitt, 1778-1830, wants to paint but quickly switches to poetry after meeting Coleridge and Wordsworth. Hazlitt is considered part of the history of Romanticism. His likes and dislikes are shown heavily in his essays "On Going a Journey," "On the Pleasure of Hating," and "The Fight."

Analysis Chapter 3: The Rise of the English Essay—Pages 113-211

As the book progresses the writers become more and more contemporary, but the commonality continues to be their crafting of the personal essay. The author has chosen several from different eras and locations so that there is a vast spectrum of examples. In this chapter there are two authors that are looked at together, Steele and Addison. These two writers are paired together often. Despite this it is obvious that they have different ideas and methods in their writing. Steele often capitalizes words in the middle of his sentences. Occasionally this is to give the word a human persona, such as Constant and Careless as the lovers vying for the affection of the woman in "Love Letters." Other times it appears that this is for emphasis of a thing or an idea that the author is trying to convey.

The essayists that are shown in the remainder of chapter three will also be from this same period of time but will continue to be very different in style. Some of the authors chosen will be much more informal with their writings than others. Some will have only one essay shown while others have several that are included.



Chapter 3, The Rise of the English Essay-Page 212-302

Chapter 3, The Rise of the English Essay-Page 212-302 Summary and Analysis

In chapter five the author is continuing his look of the people that influenced "The Rise of the English Essay." The next essayist in the book is Robert Louis Stevenson and his works "The Lantern-Bearers," "An Apology for Idlers," and his essay titled "On Marriage." Stevenson is best known today for his stories "Treasure Island," and "Kidnapped" as well as "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." His focus on innocence and youth is seen in his personal essays as it is in his novels.

Max Beerbohm is called "The incomparable Max." His essays are well known for their comic effect, thoughtfulness and wisdom. Beerbohm is said to be able to use tenderness and spite in the same work. The works examined are "Going Out for a Walk," and "Laughter."

G.K. Chesterton writes around ninety books and essay collections over the course of his life. Chesterton is able to be forceful and cheerful in his satire. Two Chesterton works are examined. One is "A Piece of Chalk" in which Chesterton tells the story of the time he lost a piece of chalk and the events that surrounded this. The other essay is "On Running After One's Hat." This is a humorous work in which Chesterton starts off by telling about a flood that recently happened in a town.

Virginia Woolf lives 1882-1941 and is a writer of modern fiction. Woolf's mother dies when she is young and there would be many more deaths during her life. Her works often focus on the line between life and death and Woolf herself lived with reoccurring bouts of depression. She eventually drowns herself. The two works that are shown in the book reflect Woolf's focus on death, "Street Haunting," and "The Death of the Moth."

George Orwell is the pen name used by Eric Blair. Orwell becomes fed up with the class system and renounces it and his former life. He spends most of his life fighting for the underdog and against such systems. He experiences whatever he writes about including the depression, the fascist threat, and the Spanish Civil War. He is very plainspoken and takes a vocal stance on politics and other areas. The essay "Such, Such Were the Joys..." is Orwell's account of his time in preparatory school when he is a boy. He considers the school to be using him since it is a wealthy school. He states that if he wins any great award or scholarship it looks good for the school. Orwell also talks about the foul treatment he receives compared to the richer children at the school.

Analysis Chapter 3: The Rise of the English Essay—Page 212-302



As the book continues the author looks at writers that have focused on death, such as Virginia Woolf, and those that write essays from a political stand point such as George Orwell. Virginia Woolf is obsessed with death since she has seen so many people close to her die. It is this part of her past that contributes to her growing mental problems, and depression. It is clear to see how this affects her writing.

George Orwell i from a poor family and yet is sent to a wealthy school. In his later years he focuses greatly on politics and the way that the system works. Orwell's piece about his youth and his time at the school is highly political. It passionately explains what the school hopes to gain from his being there, how he is treated from a socioeconomic standpoint and how he takes it as a child.

The next chapter in the book deals with other cultures and their effects on the personal essay. Despite the change, the authors will go in order from the date of their birth. The author will continue to give examples of authors that have helped to mold the personal essay and give examples of their contributions. There will also be explanations given when one of the writers cite a author who influenced their writings. These often point back to writers that have already been mentioned in the book.



Chapter 4, Other Cultures, Other Continents

Chapter 4, Other Cultures, Other Continents Summary and Analysis

In chapter four the author begins by looking at Ivan Turgenev, a Russian writer and his essay "The Execution of Tropmann." Turgenev watches the execution of a man, Tropmann, who is put to death January 19, 1870, for killing his wife and their six children. In this story Turgenev talks about the crowds and the death of the man. Turgenev discusses the importance of the subject of capital punishment and voices that there should be an end to Public executions. Turgenev is raised watching his mother's harsh treatment of all of those around her. It is said that this may have been a source of the views that Turgenev had on how servants were to be treated.

Lu Hsun, 1881-1936, is called the greatest modern Chinese writer. Hsun's father is sick when Hsun is a boy and his father eventually dies. Many of Hsun's works focus on the struggle that people at the poverty level have. He wants to become a doctor because of his father's death but eventually gives it up to become a writer. He is praised by Maoists although Hsun never joins the communist party. Hsun is often in trouble with the government because of his writings. The essays in the book by Hsun, "This Tool is Life" and "Death," are both written while Hsun is losing a battle to an illness. In them he conveys the need to share a dying man's last thoughts regardless of how it comes across. In "Death" Hsun gives his family a list of things that he wants them to be sure and do after his death.

Junichiro Tanizaki, 1886-1965, is born and raised in Tokya and is called "one of the giants of modern Japanese fiction." Tanizaki is said to be cruel and perverse in his stories but that it is done in such a way that comes across as enjoyable to the reader. Tanizaki's essay, "In Praise of Shadow's," Tanizaki looks at the dying of the old ways of his culture and the modern age that is approaching. Tanizaki knows that it is going to happen but hopes that there is one place somewhere, even if only in literature, where some of the old ways might survive unchanged.

Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940, is a German critic and called one of the most important social critics. He writes on the influence of technology on art, urbanism, Baudelaire and the Paris Arcade, and many others. He is Jewish and this contributes to his trouble when his dissertation is rejected. Benjamin is urged to flee when the Nazis take control but he has amassed a library in Paris and is reluctant to go. When Benjamin decides to flee he finds the borders closed and commits suicide in despair. The essay by Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," tells the story of how Benjamin unpacks his precious books. Benjamin's essay, "Hashis in Marseilles" is another work that is examined.



Jorge Luis Borges, 1899-1986, grows up in Buenos Aires. Borges is going blind and seems to act as though it is an opportunity. In his essay "Blindness." Borges talks about his ever waning sight. Borges says that his blindness has brought him many gifts. It is the knowledge that his sight is leaving him that drives him to do everything he can and so he must appreciate what it has brought him.

Hubert Butler's works "Beside the Nore" and "Aunt Harriet" are looked at as well as E.M. Cioran's "Some Blind Alleys: A Letter." Roland Barthes' "Leaving the Movie Theater," Barthes looks at immersion in pleasure. This work will switch between third and first person in the story.

Natalia Ginzburg's essay "He and I" is another example in the book as well as Carlos Fuentes' "How to Start to Write." "How to Start to Write" is from the collection "Myself with Others." In it Fuentes focuses largely on the combination of personalization with professionalism.

Wole Soyinka and Sara Suleri are the last two writers looked at in the story. Both of these essayists write about things that are difficult events in their lives. Wole is imprisoned and Sara lives in Pakistan but has a Welsh mother and a Muslim father.

Analysis Chapter Four: Other Cultures, Other Continents

The essayists in this chapter range from those that have emotional problems to those that commit suicide rather than being taken captive by the Nazis, to those that are dealing with blindness. The author's purpose in this book is to make the reader look at the reason for a personal essay.

In the next chapter the author focuses on "The American Scene": essayists that come from America. There is a change in what the people write about since the views in varied cultures can differ so much. However, there is also much that remains the same. Politics, love, and human relationships and characteristics will be looked at in American essays the same as it was in those from other cultures and times.



Chapter 5, The American Scene-Page 479-585

Chapter 5, The American Scene-Page 479-585 Summary and Analysis

Henry David Thoreau is well known for his views on nonconformity. He stresses the importance of living your own life as you feel directed. His sentences are long but easily understood. In his piece, "Walking," Thoreau describes not a physical walk but a mental stroll.

H.L. Mencken works for the Baltimore Sun and that is where his essay "On Being an American" is first published. Mencken calls his collection of writings "prejudices." He, much like Thoreau, is a freethinker. James Thurber is known more for his humor in his essays and it is said that he inspired nonsense in American essay prose. Many of Thurber's views focus on the battle between the male and female sexes. Thurber is also a cartoonist. "The Secret Life of James Thurber" is based largely on Thurber's own life with much humor thrown in.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is referred to as "one of the great American fiction writers of the twentieth century" (page 519). He generalizes in his essays and writes short stories. "The Crack-Up" is Fitzgerald's essay in which he talks about the many steps of life and how all of them are actually different pieces that are broken down.

E.B. White is a well known journalist, writer, and essayist. His essay "Once More to the Lake" is based on White's memories of going to the lake he frequented as a child. White compares the lake and the view he has of it between when he was a child and when he was an adult. White talks ill of the effect that technology and progress have had on the lake. "The Ring of Time" is another White story in which his past experiences are put into essay form. White often bases his writings on his own life and memories.

M.F.K. Fisher is looked at as a serious writer by a few but also as a cult figure by others. She does a lot of writing about food and it is her primary subject. Fisher writes a book about her failed marriage and the death of her second husband and many other hard times she endures. Fisher's essay, "Once a Tramp, Always..." is largely focused on food and other things that people lust after. Fisher makes mention of Mark Twain in her essay and includes food recipes.

Mary McCarthy is another woman writer. In her essay, "My Confession," McCarthy is willing to show her own character in a negative way if necessary. McCarthy is willing to attack seemingly all views and subjects for her writings. Seymour Krim, like McCarthy, loses both of his parents at a young age. He begins as a critic but as he continues to write his essays become more personal. Much of what Krim bases his writings on are the loss of his parents and the emptiness that it leaves him as well as his failed dreams.



His essay entitled "For My Brothers and Sisters in the Failure Business" focuses on the fact that Krim thinks himself to be a gigantic failure. He wants so badly to write the big novels that he is unwilling to see the success he has in reference to the personal essays.

Analysis Chapter 5: The American Scene—Page 479-585

There are female and male contemporary essayists examined in this section of the book and since they are from a more modern time in some respects they are easier for the reader to relate to. Earlier essays sometimes cover subjects found only in other countries or past times, to the point that the reader is too unsure what the subject is about to form an opinion. More often than not the essay writers that are looked at will have a central focus that they write about. E.B. White, for instance, tends to focus on youth and innocence and times past—a fairly broad range of topics. Other essay writers will have a much narrower topical spectrum and remain in their comfort zone.

All the essay writers depicted in the book have something in common, regardless of time, place, culture, or beliefs. All the writers have a strong need to convey information they feel strongly about. Sometimes it is as simple as the pain that they feel over the loss of a loved one. Other times it is to show humor or anger or explain how to do something the writer feels is important, or to make the reader feel that the author is important. The essays are the writer's way of reaching out to the world.



Chapter 5, The American Scene: Page 586-770

Chapter 5, The American Scene: Page 586-770 Summary and Analysis

James Baldwin is an essayist who focuses largely on racism to fuel his essays. While he often is well spoken he will sometimes begin preaching in his essays with few references to his argument. The essay looked at by Baldwin is "Notes of a Native Son." This essay focuses on Baldwin's life and the race riots that are breaking out in Harlem. It is centered around the death of his father and the events that follow. The other essay by Baldwin used in the book is "Alas Poor Richard." In this essay race is again an issue.

Gore Vidal is fascinated by politics and runs for public office. His essay "Some Memories of the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self" is given as an example of his work in the book. Adrienne Rich is also looked at. She is an antiwar activist and lesbian feminist and the example of her work that is included is "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity." In this essay Rich talks about her youth as a half Jewish child in a culture that was filled with gentile beliefs. After explaining her beliefs to the reader for sometime she poses a question for the reader to consider of how people hide those parts of themselves that might be an object of ridicule or persecution such as race, culture, or social status.

Edward Hoagland is very successful as an essay writer and two of his essays, "The Courage of Turtles" and "The Threshold and the Jolt of Pain" are looked at as examples of his work. He is greatly influenced by Thoreau's writings. Hoagland writes on nature although not exclusively. "The Courage of Turtles" is an essay that is based purely on turtles and the memories and personal experiences Hoagland has with turtles as well as his views on what they are like. The essay "The Threshold and the Jolt of Pain" take a much different view. It is about pain and the different kinds of pain and how people experience them. Hoagland tells a story in this essay about a friend of his whom he helped during childbirth.

Wendell Berry is also a nature writer although he takes a much different view than that of Hoagland. Berry seldom uses humor or irony. His own farming experiences add to his personal essays and their ecological view. Berry talks about the life he is living and the way that the woods look and make him feel. His feelings and the way that things appear to him are the main basis of the story and it is written in first person.

Joan Didion is a writer in the sixties who is quick to question the meaning and purpose of our lives. In her essay "Goodbye to All That," Didion describes her coming to New York as a child and the changes that had happened between that time and a few years later. Didion explains her initial response to the city and the way that it affects her, both good and bad.



Annie Dillard's style is a reflective image of poetry in many respects. Dillard plays with pauses and silence in her works using it as a literary tool. She is a described seeker and her work often reflects her life searching. "Seeing" reflects her life searching as she tells the story of her growing up in Pittsburgh. In this essay Dillard focuses on the things she has seen during the course of her life and she uses vast imagery to convey these things.

Richard Selzer is set apart by his willingness to write about his feelings in addition to his knowledge. He is a practicing surgeon. "The Knife" is Selzer's essay and the connection between Selzer's surgical training and his desire to convey his feelings are shown here. In this he talks about the different metaphors that can be used for a surgical knife and the way that it contradicts itself.

Phillip Lopate writes about a vast array of subjects from friendship, movies, families, rationalization and others. His essay titled "Against Joie de Vivre" is based largely on Montaigne's works. Joie de Vivre is translated as the "Joy of Living." In this work Lopate explains that he writes this not because he believes everything he writes but he is trying to push himself. In this essay Lopate talks about a trip on a houseboat and other subjects including making love. Lopate ends his essay by explaining that he feels he cannot enjoy what there is in life because no matter what he has enjoyed he will still want more.

Scott Russell Sanders stands out among other essay writers because he is modest and at times it seems that he is unwilling to dive deep within himself and then reveal it to the reader. Despite his modesty and quiet nature Sanders gives the reader a first hand view of what it is like living as the child of an alcoholic. This story explains the pains and troubles that it causes a child. In this recounting of his childhood Sanders explains that he now avoids places where alcohol is used and that it is not odd that he should avoid it since he watched it tear his father apart.

Gayle Pemberton is compared to James Baldwin as a strong African-American essayist. Pemberton talks, as Baldwin did, about the struggles that a black family has and the way that society poses challenges and she often focuses on her family and the dynamics there. Her essay "Do He Have Your Number, Mr. Jeffrey" is the story of Pemberton's realization that Hollywood, i.e. California, has had an effect on racial issues. The name of the essay stems from an Alfred Hitchcock movie, Rear Window, in which there is a black maid that is not even given a face or name, just one line. Pemberton says that that is an example of how imagery has worked to put a black image where the audience would have been most comfortable with it.

Richard Rodriguez begins his essay, "Late Victorians," by discussing life in San Francisco and the first gay march that he sees. Rodriguez goes on to explain the effect that the gay movement is having on the rest of America as well as the way that they are seen. Rodriguez even says that a man he hired to paint his shutters is rumored to have AIDS. Rodriguez goes on to explain the life that a gay person lives and the life that he lives.

Analysis Chapter 5: The American Scene-Page 586-770

Throughout the book the issues voiced by the authors evolve; the last essay is largely based on the issue of homosexuality and its effect on society. This issue would not have been openly discussed a century or more back. While the subjects often are determined by the essay writers desires and life experiences it should be noted that each essay is chosen because of its structure and its long term effect on the way that essays are written.

Many of the essay writers in the book are well known authors, for their essays as well as other works that they have written, such as *Treasure Island* and *Charlotte's Web*. Others are teachers or scholars. The author makes a point to signify the impact that each essayist has in history and, if possible, where their drive comes from.



Characters

Michel de Montaigne

Michel de Montaigne is the author most closely looked at in the book. While there are no main characters there is not another author singled out in the same way as Montaigne. In addition to this Montaigne is spoken of many times throughout the book by other authors who cite Montaigne as a source of inspiration. There are even some that will admit that they do not agree with Montaigne's views but use him as a source of inspiration because Montaigne's writing is so effective.

Montaigne is considered the greatest essayist who ever lived. He lives 1533-1592 in France. Montaigne's family is wealthy and Montaigne is doted on by his father. When Montaigne is old enough he is sent to law school and he practices law until he is in his thirties. It is about this time that he retires and moves with his wife to live on a family estate. Montaigne knows that he is going to write but does not know about what. He is considered lazy and is not described in the most flattering of words. Despite his seeming lack of direction and drive, Montaigne does begin writing and crafts many essays that become extremely well known. Montaigne decides to make it his mission to create a literary portrait of himself to have published. Although Montaigne says he is the first to do this, there are those that argue that Saint Augustine is actually the first. Regardless of this fact Montaigne's writings are a large success in his time and have continued to be successful throughout history.

Seneca

Seneca lives 3 A.D. to 65 A.D. and is born in Cordoba Spain. Seneca is a follower of Stoicism which states that a man is supposed to be content with whatever life he has and not complain, living each day with dignity regardless of social standing, physical ailment, or wealth. As a result of Seneca's growing popularity he is exiled by Claudius but brought back eight years later by Claudius' son, Nero. Seneca teaches Nero is was his tutor for many years until Nero begins his bloody rampage and murders his mother and brother. Seneca is then exiled again and Nero demands that Seneca kill himself. In compliance with Seneca's Stoic principles, he does kill himself to appease the wishes of Nero.

Seneca is considered a great Stoic by some, although there are many aspects of the philosophy that he did not adhere to. Seneca often complains about his illnesses, as seen in his essay "Asthma." He dedicates this essay to explaining the pain and terror the illness gives him. The Stoics believe you are not to complain and it is hard to see that Seneca is doing anything other than complaining. In addition to this in Seneca's own life he gains great wealth and seems to vie for the attention of those in political standing. While many of the aspects of his personal life do not match up with his Stoic



principles, Seneca's writings are still looked for inspiration and as a guide to the personal essay.

E. B. White

E. B. White is a journalist and a talented writer. He is well known for his books as well as his essays. Much of what he bases his writings on are youth and the passing of time and the effect that it has. It is explained that White does a lot to help keep the art of the personal essay alive when much of the interest in it had dissipated. E. B. White is known by many for his books "Stuart Little," and "Charlotte's Web."

The two essays looked at that were written by White are "Once More to the Lake," and "The Ring of Time." Each of these stories show White's tendencies to focus on the past.

Charles Lamb

Charles Lamb is an essay writer who lives in London from 1775-1834. He is from a very poor family and is raised by his older sister. When Lamb is fourteen he has to quit school to go to work. When Lamb is a little older he witnesses a family tragedy; Lamb's older sister kills his mother and badly wounds his father before Lamb can stop her. Although she is not put into prison Lamb takes care of her for the rest of her life, just as she had taken care of him when they were younger. Lamb never marries although he is in love with a woman that he speaks about in some of his essays. She marries another man. Lamb's essays, and plays, are filled with self-mockery.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Robert Louis Stevenson, much like E. B. White, is best known for his books "Treasure Island" and "Kidnapped" as well as "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." He lives 1850-1894. Stevenson focused on the subjects of youth, nature, and exotic climes. Stevenson's essays included in the book reflect these interests.

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf lives 1882-1941. She suffers the loss of many people she loves throughout her life and seemingly becomes obsessed with death. The many tragedies that she endures may also have contributed to her mental illness. Virginia Woolf has bouts of depression and eventually kills herself. In most of her writings it is clear that she has a fascination with death and the thin line between death and life. She is considered one of the pioneers of modern fiction.



Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin is of Jewish decent living 1892-1940. He is called the greatest German critic. His essay "Unpacking My Library" gives the reader an insight into how much Benjamin loved literature and loved to read. He reveals much about his feelings and inner thoughts in this essay. Benjamin is urged to flee Paris where he is staying when the Nazis were beginning to take over. Benjamin is reluctant to leave his library that he depends on for so much. When Benjamin decides to leave he finds the escape routes have been temporarily cut off. Benjamin, in a desperate act, kills himself rather than risk being taken by Nazis.

Scott Russell Sanders

Scott Russell Sanders is born in 1945 and is called one of the most consistent practitioners of the personal essay in America. Scott Russell's essay "Under the Influence" is his look back at his childhood and the effect that living with an alcoholic father has on him as a child. Scott explains at the end of the story that he avoids anywhere that has drinking even in a social setting. He compares this to someone that wants to stay away from wild animals after watching their father be torn apart by one.

Phillip Lopate

Phillip Lopate has a very short section in the book with only one essay included. Despite this, his effect on the book is far reaching since Phillip Lopate is the author of the book. This is mentioned only briefly in the biography of the author. Lopate is said to be a writer about love and friendship, movies, family, neurotic resistance and other areas. His essay shown in the book, "Against Joie de Vivre," is based largely on Montaigne's works.

Edward Hoagland

Edward Hoagland is known for his writing about nature among other topics. He enjoys walking and writing about his experiences. Hoagland's essay "The Courage of Turtles" gives an account of his time finding turtles in different areas. There is very little comic relief in his writing and he generally takes a more serious tone. However, Hoagland restrains himself from trying to persuade readers that the country life is the way people should live.



Objects/Places

Personal Essay

The focus of the book is the Personal Essay. Philip Lopate gives a short biography about each essayist, explaining their contribution to the Personal Essay. The essay writers come from different times and places and write about a wide variety of subjects. One of the only things that these authors have in common is the Personal Essay.

Food

There are several essays in the book that deal with food. The way that food is used in the essays is different. In one, food is used as a symbol for religion. In another, the essay writer compares food to other lusts that people have.

California

This is the place where Richard Rodriguez grows up. He explains the gay movement here and how it effects the rest of the country.

The Knife

The Knife is the subject of an essay written by Richard Selzer. In this essay the knife is described and there are many different names and attributes given to the knife. Selzer had been a surgeon.

Turtles

There are turtles in the essay by Edward Hoagland "The Courage of Turtles." He describes the turtles and their attributes and how they are a good pet.

The Lion

The lions in "Nicolini and the Lions" are comical lions who can talk and are described as actors. One of the lions is a tailor who rips his outfit on purpose during a show so that he can mend it later.



Noise

Noise and the effect that noise has on a person is discussed in Seneca's essay. It is Seneca's view that noise should not bother a person because if there is peace within there is nothing that can bother a person.

Pleasure Boat Studio

Pleasure Boat Studio is the name of the room that Ou-Yang Hsiu has in his government office. He has a friend write the name Pleasure Boat Studio on the wall in calligraphy and then Ou-Yang Hsiu puts an explanation for the name below it.

Monstrous Child

The monstrous child is one that is described by Montaigne. The child has part of his twin stuck to him. It is described as a fully intact body without a head. The two boys are connected at the chest. The nurse tells Montaigne that the boy pees out of both urine holes. Montaigne explains why this child is not a mistake of nature.

Execution

Ivan Turgenev gives his account of an execution that he sees take place. The person executed is a man who has killed his wife and six children.



Themes

To Educate

While the stories in the book all have different topics, the author who has compiled the different essays has a purpose—to illuminate the art of the personal essay. The biography of the essay writers explains what it is about this writer that caused the inclusion of their work in the book and what significant change the writer wrought in the art of the personal essay. In the Introduction into the book there are several sections on different aspects that should be looked at when writing a personal essay. These subjects include honesty, privacy, confession, conversational element, quotations, questions and many other subjects.

The author uses each of these authors to show how the personal essay has been written in times past and the changes that have come about. It seems that this book is almost a personal essay in itself; the author also writes personal essays and one of his is included in this book. In addition there is an essay in the book titled "How I Started To Write" by Carlos Fuentes. This educates the reader to some extent about how to write.

The Need to be Heard

The objective of the personal essay is to share something of yourself with the outside world. Some of the authors talk about very personal things that might embarrass others, such as their love lives or fears that they have. Others speak openly about things that they feel strongly about, such as politics. There are also others who simply write about things that they have loved and enjoyed in their lives and have a desire to share about. E. B. White writes about his childhood and the way that things have changed.

The personal essay is used almost as a microphone through which the author can broadcast anything that he desires. There are no limitations or rules when writing a personal essay but these writers seem to be baring their souls to those reading. There are even some that talk about hard issues such as growing up with an alcoholic parent or people they love dying. The voice that the personal essay gives is a way for these people to reach out and find others that agree with them. In many ways it is more far reaching than any other medium could be.

Change

There are many essays in the story that deal with change that is happening. E. B. White describes the changes that have happened to the places he used to visit as a child. "Blindness" by Jorge Luis Borges deals with the changes he is undergoing as he becomes blind. There are changes in people, their homes, relationships and even cultures. There is even a more recently written essay about the changes that are happening in California and the effect that it is having on the rest of the country. With all

of these changes easily seen throughout the essays it is clear that change can be called a central theme.

In addition to the individual essays, change is also a theme for the overall book. The purpose of the book is to explain the personal essay. The author does this by describing the changes that the personal essay has undergone. The personal essay starts out much different than it is now. The author gives explanation for each of the authors and the way that they have changed the essay. This appears to be a large reason that Phillip Lopate chooses to put his writers in chronological order, so that the reader can understand each persons contribution to the art of the personal essay. One of the examples of this is Michel de Montaigne. He influences many writers and is given credit for his influence throughout the book. It would have been much harder to understand this influence if the reader had not been given the opportunity to read Michel de Montaigne's essays.

Style

Perspective

The point of view in the book varies in each of the essays. Some are in first person and some are in third. They also vary in present and past tense since some are talking about current feelings while others are looking at past events. The point of view is most often limited to the essay writer's point of view. Phillip Lopate puts together the essays and the introduction in the front of the book is written in first person in present tense. In the introduction Phillip admits that it is possible that his own prejudice has affected the authors chosen.

The essays that are chosen are picked because of their significance and the impact they have had on the molding of the personal essay up to this point in history. Each of the essay perspectives depend on the author's background, culture, religion, life experiences, and what era in time they live in. There are many that focus on more modern issues while some look at past places and people. The background given on each author will help the reader to understand their individual perspective.

Tone

Phillip Lopate's tone in the book is very calm and precise since the objective of the book is to inform. While Lopate's tone is a formal one that is meant to educate, the essay writers in the book do not all have the same tone. The tone is very different from essay to essay.

In the essay "The Execution of Tropmann" the tone becomes very somber and serious. The essay is showing the execution through the first hand experiences of Ivan Turgenev and so the reader is given the information the same way he sees it. It becomes obvious that it is very hard for Turgenev to watch this man's death. The essay "Hateful Things" by Sei Shonagon seems to have a very harsh tone. She is talking about things that she truly hates and there is no humor or lighthearted attempt at making her seem any less angered by these things. With so many different authors in the book there is a vast array of tones used in the book.

The stories are all personal essays and so each one of the stories is true in some respect although some of the stories are obvious fabrications, such as those by Steele and Addison. In the book there are other authors and books that are referenced, as well as events, to give a better understanding of what is being discussed.

Structure

The book consists of 770 pages and is divided into five chapters. Each chapter has a title that reflects the type of essays and authors found in that chapter. In addition to the



chapters, there are sections within each chapter. These sections are not named and are identified by the changing of the author. Each even numbered page will contain the current author's name and the odd numbered pages will have the title of the current essay that is being reviewed. There is also an introduction at the front of the book. The introduction at the front of the book uses roman numerals and contains fifty-four pages. The introduction gives the reason for the book as well as what is focused on in regards to the personal essay.

Many of the essays deal with subjects that are such long ago history that the author must give a brief note explaining the event that is being spoken about. There are also notations at the bottom of the page where an essay quotes another author or book, such as the Bible. Also, many of the essays were originally in a language other than English. At the end of these essays there will be a note explaining who translated each essay.

There is a table of contents for quick reference. This table gives a list of the essays in the order that they appear in the book and which chapter they are located in. There is also another section of the table of contents where the essays are broken down into contents by theme and form. At the end of the book the reader will find a bibliography for further references.

Quotes

"This book attempts to put forward and interpret a tradition: the personal essay."
Introduction, p. xxiii.

"These charming musings are not, strictly speaking, essays in the Western sense of the term, but fragments of ranging from a line to several pages—the primary matter of essays, so to speak." Chapter 1, p. 29.

"Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-1592) may well have been the greatest essayist who ever lived." Chapter 2, p. 43.

"Most critics have viewed Dr. Johnson as a moral essayist rather than a personal essayist. Still, we see him cutting a personal figure in the essay of the fragility of friendship and procrastination seem to keenly observed not to have been drawn from his own experience." Chapter 4, p. 137.

"Addison and Steele typically took a patronizing tone toward women, ridiculing their dependence on supposedly absurd new fashions and their alleged illogical and changeable natures. Edgeworth, seeming to agree at first with these male critics, actually puts the problem in a more subversive light: given the unfair disparity of power between the sexes, she suggests, 'unreasonable' arguments become a logical weapon for a woman to use." Chapter 4, p. 145.

"Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) is known today chiefly for his adventure stories for youth (Treasure Island, Kidnapped) and his horror classic, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Yet it was not so long ago that his essays were held up in the classroom as models of the form." Chapter 4, p. 212.

"Woolf, inspired by Dostoevsky and convinced that the realist novel dwelled too much on surface detail and did not capture the 'myriad impressions' to which the mind was exposed, developed her own stream-of-consciousness technique in novels such as To the Lighthouse, Mrs. Dalloway, and The Waves, which plumbed the shifting consciousness and inner states of her character." Chapter 4, p. 253.

"Tanizaki's magnificent personal essay 'In Praise of Shadows' demonstrates all his characteristic traits: urbanity, wryness, learning, perversity, humanity, respect for tradition, innovative freshness, and a stimulating, wide-ranging mind." Chapter 4, p. 334.

"Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) is one of the seminal figures in American literature. His stubborn insistence on living one's own life and fighting free of the pressures of materialism and conformity have had a profound influence on writers that followed him, from Whitman to the Beats to members of the current school of nature writing such as Edward Hoagland, Wendell Berry, and Annie Dillard." Chapter 5, p. 479.



"Ironically, part of Krim's sense of failure came from never having realized his youthful ambition, to write big American novels; essay writing seemed to him something of a compromise, a minor art. Had he valued it more highly, he might have realized what a genuine success he was." Chapter 5, p. 577.

"Berry's farming experience has given him the insights to write knowledgeably and technically about agriculture and animal husbandry. His many essay collections, including *The Long-Legged House*, *A Continuous Harmony*, *The Unsettling of America*, *Recollected Essays* (a selection), *Gift of Good Land*, *Standing by Words*, and *Home Economics*, amply demonstrate his dedication to the essay form, although he has also written novels and poetry." Chapter 5, p. 669.

"A practicing surgeon, Selzer is one of the new wave of literary scientist-clinicians (Steven Jay Gould, Lewis Thomas, F. Gonzalez-Crussi, Oliver Sacks) who have brought a wealth of knowledge about the natural world to the essay form. What sets Selzer apart from these others is his willingness to write much more personally, even confessionally, about his feelings, reactions, and motives, in the tradition of the idiosyncratic first-person essay." Chapter 5, p. 707.

"In pieces such as 'Late Victorians,' he detaches himself from the sentimental clichés and comforts of group identity (whether ethnic or sexual), while at the same time castigating himself for remaining an observer, sitting on the fence." Chapter 5, p. 755.



Topics for Discussion

Why was there an entire chapter dedicated to Michel de Montaigne? Explain his significance.

The chapters have individual names. 1—Forerunners, 2—Fountainhead, 3—The Rise of the English Essay, 4—Other Cultures, Other Continents, and 5—The American Scene.

Explain the importance of each title.

Could any of the titles been improved upon? If so which and why?

In the Introduction, Lopate says "The hardest job I have had was selecting personal essays written by my contemporaries. We are too close to the present to make accurate judgments about what will last or can comfortably stand with the masters of old."

Explain what Lopate meant when he said "...will last or can comfortably stand with the masters of old." Do you agree with Lopate? Explain your reasoning.

In chapter one Seneca writes an essay titled "Slaves." What does Seneca intend to convey with this essay? Explain your answer.

Describe what the title "Meatless Days" (page 459) means.

What is this story about? What title or metaphor could have been used in the story other than meatless? Explain.

In what ways did the subjects of the essays change over the years? In what ways did they remain the same? Explain.

Why does Lopate not give a longer biography on himself on page 713?

What does this reveal about his character and the direction he wants the book to take?

Which essay was the most meaningful to you? Explain your answer.

Define the term "personal essay." Which essay do you feel is the poorest example of a personal essay? Explain your answer.