

*Essay to Myself: What the heck is a personal essay?*

*Part I*

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I enjoy writing personal essays. This nonfiction genre keeps me mentally active. I have had plenty of experience writing such nonfiction material, yet, I have this nagging feeling that I can't shut off. After my last essay, I finally realized that this nagging feeling was the fact that I didn't have a clue about what the heck is a personal essay. After all, I am somewhat literary challenged, made evident by attending such educational institutions with applied science and technology in their names. I came to realize that my limited background / education falls short of what I feel is required for someone writing in this specific genre. So, I started my quest to research what the heck is a personal essay.

The very first book I researched revealed that I was on the right track. Its title is '*The Art of the Personal Essay*' edited by Phillip Lopate. His introduction mentioned that one is compelled to write to answer an internal question or to solve a problem. What is it that you don't know? In my case, what the heck is the personal essay is my top question / problem? I thus intend to make it so...answer / solve it!

I then tried to get an idea of the history of this genre. Review of related literature revealed that the genre started 5000 years ago with a non-fiction letter in Mesopotamia. It was considered the non-fiction alternative, a form not propelled by information; but propelled instead by inquiry, by wonder, by doubt, etc.

Per the supposed father of the modern essay, Montaigne, who established this genre in 1580 in France, tried describing the essay. He wrote 27 essays trying to describe this genre. At least he was persistent.

Next, I still needed clarification about what defines this genre. Thus, sought out a definition even I could understand. Per *'The Complete Idiot's Guide to Creative Writing'* by Laurie Rozaklis, Ph.D. 'an essay is a brief writing on a particular subject or idea. It's prose, includes work that is not fantasy, poetry, drama, or song.' I know, you are thinking that you would have used the more advanced Dummies Guide; but for me it was too advanced for my comprehensive level. So there!

Okay, I found out what it is not. Now, the mission seeking a clearer definition still motivates me. My next research material included 'The Lost Origins of the Essay'. The editor, John D'agata, proclaimed that 'we've never pinpointed the beginning of this genre because we've never agreed on what this genre really is'. "Thanks a lot...John." Yet, John does allude to a method of understanding this genre. He states...'To get a true understanding of this genre, one has to answer / ponder / decide whether this non-fiction is read for obtaining information, entertainment, knowledge, or read to experience an art form?'

Okay, enough of this philosophical analysis, and onto the sources that matters. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definition...'a short piece of writing typically expressing a point of view.'

The American Heritage Dictionary, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, defines an essay as... 'a short literary composition on a single subject, usually presenting a personal view of the author.' They add that essayistic; 'relates to an analytic and less systematic, less formal composition'. Sir Edmund Gosse, in the Encyclopedia Britannica relates... 'as a form of literature, the essay is a composition of moderate length, usually in prose, which deals in an easy, cursory way with the external conditions of a subject, and in strictness, with that subject only as it affects the writer.' Okay? Per William Tanner, '*Essay and Essay Writing*' (1918), 'naturalness and ease of style and the personality of the author are additional characteristics of the essay'. This adds a psychological aspect to the definition of the personal essay.

For those that are really into writing personal essays, one should go to the source of the American Essay Awards program, Mr. Robert Atwan. He recently stated in a speech (*Notes towards the Definition of an Essay*) that: "I would say the essay, whether long or short, narrative, expository, or polemical, is a literary genre that enacts the processes and possibilities of thought and self disclosure in a distinctive prose style." "But don't quote me!" (speech by Robert Atwan, Founding Editor of the Best American Essay series awards). "Whoops, I quoted him as well as some others to include: The Father of the English essay, Francis Bacon... 'The word is new, but the thing (essay) itself is ancient.' Okay, that fits in with my 5000-year-old definition as mentioned before. Sir William Cornwallis the younger (1579-1614) considered the first genuine essayist; alluded to the root meaning of an essay as a trial or attempt. 'It is a manner of writing well befitting undigested motion...' "I wonder if he added a clearer definition when he got older?"

I will keep searching for a more down to earth definition. Again, I am not the most gifted literary person; so, I must really get a more precise / down to earth description. Is looking for such a general definition of an essay enough? I should go further...so off to the library. Yes, there are still some of us who must look at / touch an actual book. I found over 20 plus relevant books, both old and new. I hate to admit it; but I felt a sort of euphoric moment handling, touching, perusing, admiring...whoops, my apologies for being so forthright / excited about my feelings. On with my findings.

In *Essayist on the Essay*, edited by Carl Klaus, E.B. White wrote 'there are many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes' (2012: page xxvii). "Well, that is at least a start." Further research/reviewing of these 20 plus books revealed that essays have been sub-classified as either formal or informal with each having many classifications, categories, themes, etc. The formal subclassification is characterized by 'serious purpose, dignity, logical organization, length...'. They are usually academic/scholarly in nature and written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person's (author's) point of view (told by someone afar). You know...the he, she, it, they dialogue. Whereas the informal/personal sub-classification per Thrall and Hubbard, *A Handbook to Literature* (2001:163), is characterized by 'the personal/familiar element (self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, a confident manner), humor, graceful style, a rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme, etc.' The first-person point of view (I or me) is usually used for informal / personal essays. Yet, after reading 50 plus selected (non-fiction) personal essays, "I" determined that only 53% used the 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view, 23% used the 3<sup>rd</sup> person (He, She, It, They) and 21% used both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> point of view. Three percent (3%) used all

three to include the 2<sup>nd</sup> (you, your, you're). Note: writers sometimes interchange the words point of view with voice. About this information, the personal essay has one caveat; one that it is (per Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*) unified by a strong "I" perspective (either an actual first-person narrator or an implied one). Again, the fiction writer usually omits this first person (1<sup>st</sup> person point of view).

It looks like the focus for this / my non-fiction / personal / informal essay is the use of all three points of view with a touch / a pinch of formal aspects. I/she/he/you will call it formally- Informal. Again, Per Jameson, (*Essays Old and New*), 'First person singular (I) is normally omitted for most books and discouraged for academic writing...yet, used in the nonfiction personal essay'. Per William Tanner, *Essays on Essay-Writing*, 'a sharp distinction between formal and informal/familiar essays is not maintained at all times. "What a relief" ...this essay is a combination of both.

As mentioned before, Montaigne (1533-1592) was the father of modern / personal essay. It was also called the informal or familiar essay. It meant a brief, not an exhaustive treatment of a single idea. 'The essay is notoriously flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions!' 'This freedom can be daunting, not only for the novice ("like myself") essayist, confronting such latitude, but for the critic/judge/evaluator attempting to pin down its formal and/or informal properties'. 'The personal essay sought to puncture the stiffness of the formal discourse with language that is casual, every day, and direct'. Per William Hazlitt, essayist, 'no big words used'. Other essayists have given me an insight into the personal essay.

They are as follows:

Carl Klaus, editor of *Essayist on the Essay*, wrote that a true personal essay is 'free from a systemized form of thinking or writing'. Jodi Helmer's class on *The Art of the Personal Essay*, revealed that "essays allow writers to chronicle important moments, recall lessons learned, or share their point of views / opinions of the world around them." 'Personal essays tell versus show unlike the short story / fiction.' 'The personal essay challenges formal analysis by what Walter Pater, English Essayist (1839-1894), called the "unmethodical method", open to discussion and promiscuous meandering.' Per Phillip Lopate, Editor of '*The Art of the Personal Essay*', 'The personal essayist converse with the reader. This aspect is attributed to Plato.' Phillip also wrote that the essay 'speaks to the reader's ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Shares desires, thoughts, memories, complaints, whimsies...a friendship with the reader.'

An essay writes Paul Graham, essayist, (*Essays on the Essay*), that 'an essay is something you write to figure something out' which is my aim for this personal essay. Also, helpful for me were Robert Jameson's editor's notes in '*Essays Old and New*'. They included a useful working definition which states that 'the essay is a short piece of prose, seldom longer than five to six thousand words, usually devoted to the expression and development of an idea, sometimes formal, sometimes informal, sometimes abstract, sometimes factual, and at its best distinguished by superior literary style'. "Note that I am working on this last point". 'It should be good reading.' I like Carl Klaus's, editor of '*Essayist on the Essay*', comments that 'an essay appears to be organic, artful thoughts without regard to order, meditative, the author thinking out loud in

a concise and coherent way.' Finally, R.W. Emerson...'essays make an essay into a narrative disclosure of thoughts,' 'One's essay is a sculptor from the mind.'

About content of the essay; Aldous Huxley, essayist, notes that 'the essay is a short literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything.' He also added that the 'most satisfying essay conveys /makes the most / best not of one type, not of two, or even three categories for the essay to excel'. Cynthia Ozick, 'She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body', writes 'that the theme of an essay can be anything under the sun, however trivial'. Per Francis Bacon, *Essays and the New Atlantis*, 'the essay deals with many phases of human life; politics, economics, love, religion, marriage, friendship, education, travel' and above all...what the heck is an essay?

In conclusion, I must ask myself, did I answer my question? did I reduce my nagging thoughts about what the heck is a personal essay? Also, what can I write about? I now realize that I can write about anything, a person, place, or any subject that interests me. One that excites my inner being...one that energizes. I can write to solve a problem that frustrates, to inform/educate, entertain, inspire, persuade, answer, etc. I must start writing, write free flowingly with the passion that I have inside me. Must unleash the beast inside me, kick up some turf, take names...whoops, sorry, I got carried away with my inner being. My inner being tells me to write to an audience of one...me, myself and I. At least I will have one interested reader.



The personal essay gives you the freedom to be yourself and that is okay. To be uncertain, undecided, tolerant of one's own flaws of being human. Write what you want...criticize, compare, analyze to your hearts content. Hey, I paraphrased this from my own mind. While I am still in the zone; my inner being tells me that writing essays is merely synchronizing your thoughts, desires, ideas, personality, tone/voice, thought process, hang ups, opinions, observations, character, and human values with an edit/proofing module (me) then sending them to his/her digitized medium. Okay, I still sync them to a piece of paper using a number 2 pencil then to the computer's software program. "Wow! I realized this paragraph is in the three percent (3%) category. It includes all three points of view (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>)."

As far as my writing an essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson says it best, "writers are relieved and gay when they put their hearts into their writing and done their best," (Essay II, P.47). The creation and expression process can be very cathartic. Remember, the principle here per D. David Farmington, *'The Essay, How to Study and Write It'*, 'the essay permits the author to give his/her personality free play. Instead of suppressing one's own individuality, it allows one to breath the free air of self-expression.' He writes that the 'most important principle though is that it is not a science, but an art form...it is not acquisition of information, but the expression of oneself'. Again, it is 'the sculpture of the mind', (Emerson). Added benefits of writing a personal essay writes Henrietta Anne Klauser, "*Healing Power of Writing*", it is therapeutic, especially when one expresses deepest feelings.' She claims that writing 'obstructs one's problems.' Lastly, I no longer have that nagging feeling that the literary police will cite me for not following the essay protocol. For me, the personal essay is alive and well.