

Teaching Literary Essays to EFL Students

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Abstract

Research on L1 Arabic students' academic writing has indicated a general weakness in organizing their ideas. At the university level, there are certain academic writing genres that are required and which students find difficult to produce. The literary texts of the L1 Arabic students, following a course of study in the medium of English, often lack a purpose, supporting evidence, analysis and interpretation. Studies have indicated that with carefully designed methods and scaffolding, the English as a foreign learner can improve in writing in the target language. Based on the genre approach and Feez's (1998) five steps, this study gives one method that teachers could use to help students organize and support their ideas in writing the literary essay, one required text in literature courses. Pedagogical recommendations are made for EFL contexts.

Introduction

Studies have reported that EFL students' writing is weak in organization (Al-Khairiy, 2013; Seidlhofer, 2005 among others). Research at the same time abounds with innovative strategies, including the use of technology, used by teachers in tertiary education that have shown to make a difference in developing EFL students' writing proficiency. With more focus in institutions of higher education on writing across and in the disciplines, teachers have become more aware of the importance of the required texts for the academy (e.g. Hyland, 2016). One disciplinary text found difficult by EFL students is the literary analysis. Studies using scaffolding methods along with technology have had varying successes in developing students' writing, but very little or no studies have been done in the L1 Arabic context where students struggle with the organization of their ideas and which researchers debate is either due to negative transfer from L1 or to lack of effective instructional methods (e.g. Kaplan, 1966, Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). This study reports the steps in scaffolding one method in using the five-paragraph essay structure innovatively along with the computer and [www. Turn tin. Com](http://www.turnitin.com) to word process and follow up on their work in organizing, illustrating and interpreting their ideas in response to a literary prompt.

Aim and significance

The aim of the present study is to show through a genre approach the steps in helping EFL students to produce one important text, the literary essay, required in academic settings. EFL students need instruction as it is not to be taken for granted that they know how to organize and interpret ideas from literature in the target language. This is significant for students to develop their organizational skills of this genre for their audiences, engage in critical and analytic thinking to become independent thinkers, and become independent writers, skills necessary for their academic work (Hyland, 2004, 2006, 2007).

Review of Literature

Essay Organization

It has been found that writing with an audience in mind is more challenging than speaking or reading (Halliday, 1985; 1999). In English, the writer has the responsibility to be clear as he/she cannot further explain anything at the time the audience is reading (Hinds, 1987; Grabe, & Kaplan, 1996).

Furthermore, in the micro-organization of the writing process, writers need to be cohesive and coherent in inserting appropriate discourse markers such as firstly, secondly, and cohesive devices (transitions, pronouns, coordinators, subordinators and lexical items that show logical relationships (Halliday & Hassan, 1976; Hoey, 1991). These may differ in other languages (Kaplan, 1966; Hinds, 1987; Johns, 1997). A further challenge to cohesion and coherence, is the macro-organization of essays in different genres (Bacha, 2012; Kroll, 1990; Swales, 1990; Paltridge, 2004). Some research has indicated that written discourse is organized in different rhetorical modes across cultures basically showing the linearity of English organization and the parallelism of Arabic (Kaplan, 1966; Purves, 1988) which studies attribute the cause of difficulties for students writing in a language other than the language in which they normally write. This view, however, has been contested (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Odlin, 1989). Nevertheless, studies continue to show that the organization of written texts in different cultures does influence negatively EFL learners' texts (e.g. Arabic and Japanese) in academic settings (e.g. Hatim, 1997; Hinds, 1983; Zamel, 1997). L1 Arabic students tend to use more description and narration with little support, long introductions and sentences which are mainly coordinated (Al-Qahtani, 2006; Mukattash, 2003).

Essay Instruction

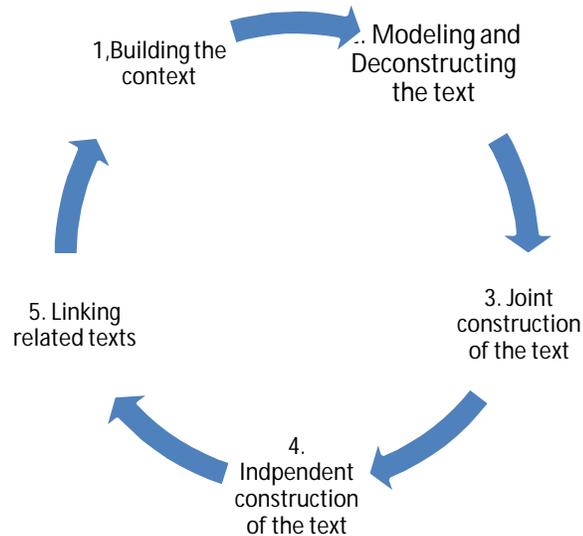
The essay is still considered an important genre in the academy (Bacha, 2002). Much has been written on the organization of the expository five paragraph essay according to the Western tradition and much has been recommended for the teaching/learning situation (e.g. Kroll, 1990; Paltridge, 2004). L1 Arabic students have difficulty in organizing their ideas in their introductions of expository essays (e.g. Bacha, 2002; Mukattash, 2003). In the English tradition, in writing introductions, the writer has a responsibility to gain interest, provide relevant background information on the topic, define any key terms and mention or allude to the main ideas that will be developed in the essay. In addition, the writer needs to show a clear purpose of the piece of discourse as to whether reasons and results, a classification, a process or some other type of explanation will ensue. Typically, in the academy, these four points are included in an introduction which serves as an umbrella to the rest of the essay (Bacha, 2002). The implications of the genre-based pedagogy to the teaching/learning of academic writing, based on the Systemic Functional Linguistic theory, is that students' writing can be developed in steps based on Vygotsky's (1978) and Bruner's (1990) psychological theories of learning. The idea is that scaffolding is very important in moving students' proficiency level to what they can potentially achieve. Given the instruction by the teachers, the students can through activities and procedures reach an effective level to produce the required academic genres. This scaffolding includes explicit instruction and takes many forms but mainly focuses on models of the various types of text genres and discussions. One teaching/learning method is shown in Fig. 4 below which takes the student through five stages. The teacher gradually withdraws support leaving the students to become independent writers with information of how to write the text genre in question. The main purpose of each of the five stages is listed below:

- Setting the context: explaining the different genres and their use
- Modeling: analyzing text genres specifically the organization
- Joint construction: students are guided in writing the text together as a class activity
- Independent construction: students write alone with the teacher as a facilitator
- Comparing and linking: showing similar and different features among different texts

The inspiration for this writing activity in this present study is drawn from EFL students' need to be helped in writing the literary essay through the author's teaching experience as well as research successes of others (Kroll, 1990; Paltridge; 2004), the pedagogical implications of the Systemic Functional Linguists and academic writing conventions (Belcher, 2006; Johns, 1997; 2002; Feez, 1998, Halliday, 1994; Martin, 1992; Swales, 1990). The method has been found appropriate and valuable in the teaching/learning of academic writing where students are expected to produce certain types of writing such as the argumentative, literary, expository and narrative essays, exam essays, and research papers.

It provides the teacher with a way to instruct and scaffold the learning of various genres that EFL learners need and gives them the opportunity to develop their skills (Vygotsky,1978) (through the zone of proximal development) on entering the academy. The five stages, outlined in Figure 4 below, will be adopted in this study.

Figure 4 The teaching-learning cycle (Feez, 1998, p. 28).



Teaching the Literary Essay

Studies have shown that literature is of significance in helping students develop not only their language, but also their critical and analytic skills, mandatory in institutions of higher education (Hyland, 2007; Thi My Van, 2009). The literary essay focuses on these skills; however, L1 Arabic students need to be instructed in the organization of ideas in written texts required in the academy (Abdulkhaleq, 2006; Bacha, 2002; 2010; Mukattash, 2003). The essay has proved to be still useful in teaching and learning various types of academic genres (Bacha, 2002; Jonson, Thompson, Smagorinsky, & Fry, 2003). Although reading and writing literature in English may be difficult for the foreign learner, students have expressed interest in literature when certain methods are used (Bacha, 2010; 2016; Yilmaz, 2012). As part of this instruction, Bean (2011) further emphasized that the use of technology can support the learning of a foreign language and motivate the learner. There have also been a great deal of suggested methods using technology on how to teach literature in the EFL classroom (see Clan field 2016; Yilmaz, 2012). In research in progress, Bacha (2017) in investigating the use of technology, specifically the use of the computer, in the learning process, found that students face very little difficulty in using the computer when word processing their assignments in class and even under set time conditions rather than hand write. In fact, the students mentioned on a likert scale (from 1 none to 5 a lot) their experience in using the computer and to what extent it has now become an integral part of their daily learning support at the university. Also, the originality check www.turnitin.com can also be an effective tool for students to check their work for any flaws in their own writing (Brown, 2004).

Method

The method focuses on five stages in teaching the organization of a literary essay based on a literary prompt and according to Feez's (1998) five part construction process. In this context Hyland (2007) quotes that in teaching a text one "...first considers how a text is structured and organised at the level of the whole text in relation to its purpose, audience and message. It then considers how all parts of the text, such as paragraphs and sentences, are structured, organised and coded so as to make the text effective as written communication. (In Knapp & Watkins, 1994, p. 8)." Over a four week period for three hours each week, teacher and L1 Arabic students focus on the five stages as outlined below. The novel is used in the modeling below as it provides extensive discussions of character, theme, symbols, setting and other elements which allow students to develop both their writing and critical thinking skills.

The participants were twenty five students attending a literature general university requirement course at one English medium university in Lebanon. The literature course was one that focused on the 20th century American novel. The students were a mixture of female and male and were attending various major studies at the university. At the end of the four weeks, students answered two questions on any difficulty they had use and type of experience with the computer. This was necessary in order to determine whether the computer negatively affected their performance in the assignment.

Stage 1 Considering the Context

- Part of a literary text to be read out of class is assigned.
- Teacher leads class discussions on the piece of literature. One text used is the novel such as *The Great Gatsby* or *The Good Earth* or *A Farewell to Arms*.
- Discussions center on the historical background, author's life, and literary elements.
- Students identify with characters and situations and discuss issues.
- Teacher explains what the literary essay is, its purpose and its use in the academy

Stage 2. Modeling and Deconstructing the text

- A good model literary essay is projected and deconstructed.
- **Introduction** is made up of three main parts Gaining attention Background Definition of key terms Thesis statement with two main ideas
- **Two body paragraphs** each with a topic sentence Two illustrations supporting each topic sentence are paraphrased or summarized Memorable and relevant quote can be added with a comment as to how the meaning relates to the theme. Interpretation of the illustrations (Important to comment on the value of the illustration using met is course markers such as This indicates that...The character has shown ...It is important to note that the actionThis underestimates the character's legacy in thatX claims that**Note:** There should be no telling of the story nor descriptions as the audience is an informed one and has read the text. What is required is an analysis of the topic.

Conclusion

Restatement of the main ideas Final word opening the essay for further thought Effective vocabulary is discussed Discourse and met discourse markers are identified Sentence variety and variety of construction are identified

Examples of three essays in Appendix 1 written by the same student. Teachers could make use of them as samples (student permission obtained).

Stage 3 Joint construction of the text

- Teacher and students write a literary essay based on the above steps in Stage 2. It can be projected.
- Students can also write the essay in groups
- Students can also write parts of the essay in groups and then it is put together as a class activity

Stage 4 Independent construction of the text

- Students write an essay in class using the computer and then uploading the work on turnitin
- Teacher acts as a facilitator
- One or two of the essays can be projected and assessed together according to certain literary rubrics given to the students when the essay was modeled.

Stage 5 Linking to other texts

- Different types of essays are modeled and deconstructed to show students the difference in organization and content such as the expository essays (e.g. comparison and contrast, process, cause and effect, illustration), narratives and descriptions.

Results and discussion

The results are given in two parts: first the students' response to the use of the computer to write the essays and comments on one essay selected at random. Two questions on whether the students find it difficult to use the computer to write on their essays and the extent of the experience they have with the use of the computer. The questions were on a likert scale of 1-4 with 4 representing a lot.

Use of Technology

Table 1 indicates that students liked word processing and had a lot of experience with the computer without much difficulty. Also, Table 1 shows that students used word processing quite a lot in and out of the classroom. Figures 1 and 2 actually show this more clearly and Figure 3 indicates that this result is highly significant ($p=0.000$). This confirms the research in the field that students on the whole like using technology as a tool for learning and find it easy to do so (Bailin, 1995; Jamieson, Kajs, & Agee, 1996; Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Oxford, 2006; Whithaus, 2004).

Table 1 General difficulty and experience

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Difficult	1.2110	.54558	1.00	4.00
Experience	3.5046	.84573	1.00	4.00
Classwork	2.2936	.93594	1.00	4.00
Outsideclass	3.0092	1.01375	1.00	4.00
Liketyping	3.3853	.82673	1.00	4.00

Figure 1

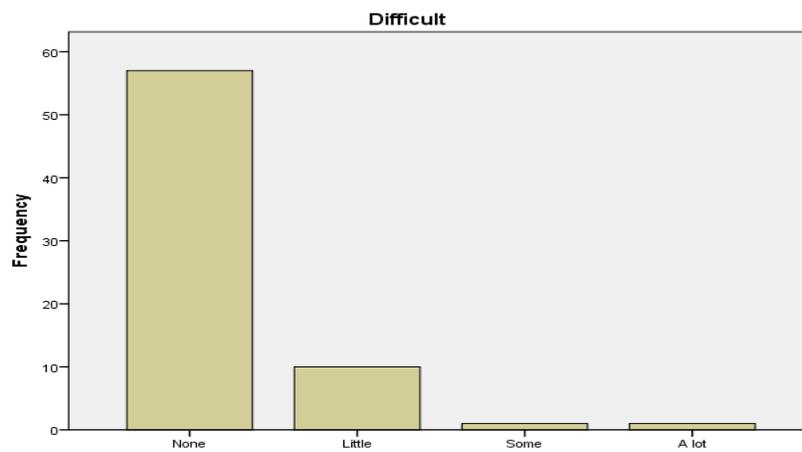


Figure 2

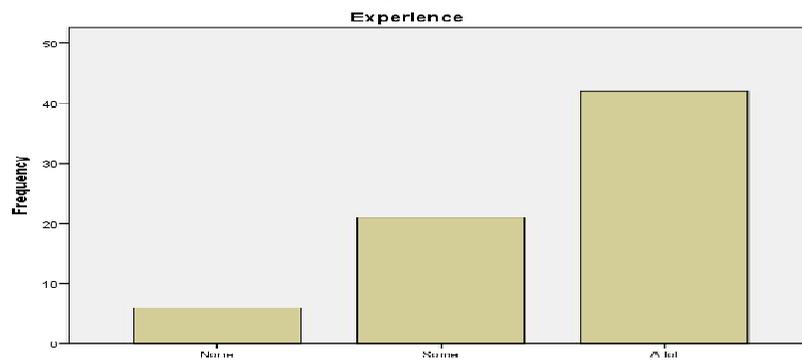


Figure 3

Test Statistics ^a	
N	109
Chi-Square	243.749
Df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000
a. Friedman Test	

Discussion of a Sample Literary Essay

The three essays in the appendix were written by the same student; the first after the four week period, the second at the eighth week and the third at the end of the 15 week semester. It is apparent there is some development in the organization: introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion – the thesis, topic sentences and restatement of the thesis in the concluding paragraph. A few comments are made below on each. Teachers could use these literary essays as models in the teaching/learning situation.

Sample Essay 1

- The opening statement could have more impact and gain more interest
- Insufficient background
- Clear thesis statement with two main ideas
- Body paragraphs do not have topic sentences that relate to the thesis
- There is an attempt at illustrating the spiritual and material aspects of these two women
- There is also an attempt at interpretation in relating the illustrations to the theme of love

Sample Essay 2

- Background information in the introduction has improved
- Thesis is clear
- Body paragraphs still need more specific topic sentences
- More of an attempt at interpretation

Sample Essay 3

- Clear thesis and topic sentences
- Use of discourse markers
- Illustrations and interpretation are more focused
- More of an awareness of the organization of the genre

Implications and Recommendations

Implications of the above model are far reaching in EFL classrooms. Teachers have at their fingertips a rigorous way to induct the foreign learner to the English system of writing and to understand the difference between academic genres. It is recommended that students be instructed in the organization and structure of text genres in the academy so as to secure their success. This cannot be left to chance or to the learner to wade through. It goes without saying that the essay is still a popular framework to work with even though some researchers remind us that it is only used in the academy. It is, however, the structure, the logical relationships behind the format that guides the learner to fill it with content in the 'right' way in order to be able to express coherently the thoughts, opinions, evidence, interpretations that otherwise might be confusing to the reader; perhaps the most important part of the writing cycle. It is recommended that teachers try this method in their classrooms and improve upon it. Also, more research in this area would provide more information and feedback. Larger samples of students would also add to the evidence gained from this approach and published results would be available in wider EFL contexts. The above article is based on a paper presented at the 23rd TESOL Arabia International Conference and Exhibition, Dubai, UAE, March 9-11 2017 and sponsored by the university where the study was done.

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Appendix Assignment 1

Topic: Show how the authors treat the theme of love differently through Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms* and Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*.

We all fall in love, but the meaning of love is relatively different to each one of us. Authors were always interested in writing about love. It was illustrated as one of the foremost themes in both novels. Both Catherine and Daisy were in love, however, they valued it differently. Catherine had a pure spiritual sense of endless love and Daisy had a materialistic perspective of temporary love. In both cases, however, reality kills their love. The name Catherine meant purity; Catherine was pure and innocent throughout her love story. She loved Henry till the end of her life. Although he asked her to marry him, she thought marriage was not important. She believed that marriage matters for those who are Christians, but she was not. She did not believe in God, she only believed in her love. She said "You are my God", and ran away with him. One can conclude that her love was strong and solid that nothing was able to break except death. She wanted to live with Henry, have his baby, and marry him when the war is over. Nevertheless, death was stronger than her. It took away her baby and then her. It separated her physically from her love, but her feelings of love was alive in the heart of her lover. It was a memory that will never fade, but will never become a reality. Daisy on the other hand, was in love with poor Gatsby but married to someone from her social class "Tom". When Gatsby comes back to her life, he is rich and wealthy. Blaming her of not marrying him, she replies "Rich girls don't marry poor boys, haven't you heard?" She loves Gatsby, however, chooses her rich husband over him. One can infer that love to Daisy is a short lasting moment, and a value that is not worth fighting for. Instead, money is what lasts. Money had the power to hinder her from marrying Gatsby when he was poor, fall in love with him, and leave him to stay with her husband. Both authors prove that love is not eternal. It dies for different reasons, sometimes for the death of lovers and sometimes for the death of passion. Reality is not a pink dream where lovers end up together. Even if people are in love, reality sometimes takes it away from them. That is why we have to be careful not to be dreamy and to be realistic when we fall in love.

Topic: How is the theme of ethics symbolized in *The Good Earth*

Assignment 2

Ethics is the first topic parents introduce to their kids. What is right and wrong is what our teachers always guides us to think of while making decisions. However, ethics is relevant to society's culture and norms. Pearl S. Buck in *The Good Earth* tries to convey the Chinese culture to the American readers with a microscopic eye.

This theme of ethics is symbolized by two main symbols; the land which presents the "good earth" and the pearls of O-lan.

Through those two symbols, the writer shows how O-lan was ethical through those two symbols, and how Wang Lung's ethic fluctuates in the story. Wang Lung was a hardworking man who respected the family's tradition in keeping and taking care of the land. His loyalty to the land made him wealthier when they had a good harvest. His wife O-lan was also very devoted to the land. She worked with him even after giving birth to her first child. This had its influence on Wang Lung's morals and the way he treated his wife. She was also loving and respectful although she was a quiet person who barely has a say. This goes back to the constructions and rules of their society where being a male is already a privilege and thereby women's opinions are not important. However, they were happy together because the land connected them with love and respect. It had the power to bring them together and make them work even harder for a better life to them and to their children. As a result to their hard work and the efforts they contributed to the land, the land brought them good life and wealth. When O-lan stole jewelries from a rich man's house during the civil war, it was a turning point in their financial status. Becoming rich did not affect O-lan's morals. She was still loyal to the land and she wore the same clothes she used to wear. Wang Lung, on the other hand, bought the House of Hwang and he started acting in a materialistic sense. He bought slaves to do the work for him so he lost the direct connection with the earth.

He gradually started to lose his morals. At this point he started describing his woman as ugly because she has "huge feet". Moreover, he was seduced by Lotus and married her thereby acting carelessly towards his wife who was the reason behind his sudden wealth in the first place. Going away from the land made him unthankful to his wife's good traits. O-lan was an angel who perfectly symbolized the earth. The earth which gives birth to you, produce fruits to make you survive and then enfolds you in her heart even when you betrayed it. O-lan was never tired of giving even when she was not appreciated. She was ethical and modest even when they were rich and had a huge house. One can infer that she had a very close relationship with the land to be ethical and kind throughout the story. When they first became rich, she wanted to possess some pearls. Wang Lung was receptive to this desire and gave her the pearls immediately. Gradually, as he moved away from the land to the wealth, he took the pearls from her and have it to Lotus. The pearls were symbols of his connection to his wife, to the earth and was directly related to him being ethical. Ripping it off from her was an act of "raping the earth", taking away its fruits while not taking care of it. Especially that O-lan didn't show ownership of anything before.

The pearls were the only symbol to her life and happiness. The selfishness of Wang Lung made him look for his happiness without being considerable to the others. This is not what the land and the good earth teaches one. We can see that O-lan learnt from the earth the non-stop giving, and because Wang Lung is not obeying the earth's ethics, he experiences a downfall in his wealth. Wang Lung understands later on that the land is the source of ethical standards one should follow to live. However, he understands the lesson very late. When he overhears his sons that they will sell the land after his death, he tells them "If you sell the land it is the end". Because his sons were raised in a materialistic conditions, they won't appreciate the land. But they will learn the hard way just like their father did, one day. Pearl S. Buck wanted to say that wealth can be achieved as a result of love to the land, but it can be a downfall on its own. The earth was always supportive even during the hard times. It was their back, their lending hand and the womb. It was the mother which raised them, and mothers are always right. When they listened to their mother's voice, they were rescued. When they listened to the materials, they fail.

Assignment 3

The 20th century was one of many changes. From the novel Fahrenheit 451 and two other novels of your choice show how one common change affected the lives of three characters.

The 20th century was a turning point of many values people embraced at the time. It was a rich age for authors to write about family, love, knowledge, women and many other themes. Love made a notable change in the lives of Montag, Henry and Gatsby. It was the seeds that helped them grow and prosper in different ways. Love increased Montag's consciousness and made him find his true happiness, it changed Henry's perception of it when love hit his heart and gave him peace in the times of war, and it changed Gatsby from a poor to a wealthy man to reach his love. Love had a controversial effect on the characters. It led some to their happiness but also had a dark impact on some characters as well. So how did it change each of those characters and what was the result of their love lives?

Clarisse, when entered Montag's life, changed it vividly. With her innocent spontaneous questions she made him question his beliefs. A simple question "Are you happy?" was challenging Montag to find an answer to it. Since then, he knew that the beliefs he had for so long as a fireman were not original. He realized that he was fed forcefully until he became numb and doesn't feel it anymore. After his love to the scent of kerosene and the act of burning books, Clarisse voice was an awakening sign for him to experience reading and to question the rules imposed on him and the empty norms of the society. When Clarisse died by a car accident, Montag realized that he loved her. His emotional pain turned to a physical illness. During this, he reflected back on the death of Clarisse and the death of the woman who died for her principles and made a decision to quit his job. This indicates that Montag was affected dramatically by Clarisse character since she was a mirror to himself which showed him what values he had to change for. Even though he lost his love, love was his internal voice to stop the evil and the emptiness and to look for his true happiness represented in reading and knowledge. It was the call for his emancipation from mental slavery. Since love is about giving back, so what can he return to her except finding an answer to her questions and stopping the suffering of other people like her?

Love in the age of war, hatred and conflict changed the perception of Henry, who was convinced that love is merely about sexual satisfaction. It shows that this was not his personal perception but what society implemented in the minds of people. Rinaldi as well was obsessed with women and sex. Women were materials that satisfied men's desires. The experience he went through beside Catherine, starting from taking her for granted to falling in love with her, gave him an evidence of how love can resemble the meaning of life. First, he had a conflict within himself of whether he loved her or if he is just using her as a distraction from the war's pain. He then came to a self-confrontation that he loved her truly. To him, she was the dream he escaped from reality to. While people at the time did not accept cohabitation, Henry was willing to live with Catherine and have her baby out of love, regardless of people's judgements. After Catherine's death, Henry felt the meaningless of life especially that he had nothing to believe in except her. This describes that the 20th century was the age of war and chaos, and it was the age of absent religion or other values people can clutch to. Henry found peace in only love, and when he lost it again he went through self-conflict again to find an answer to the purpose of his existence.

Gatsby as well was changed significantly by love through building his own wealth to win Daisy's heart. Materialism was a mean for him to win her heart. Daisy was in love with pearls and the materialistic world, and she would not accept to marry Gatsby because he was a poor guy. She told him "Rich girls don't marry poor boys, haven't you heard?" One can infer that love in that century was love of money and greed, and Gatsby had to do something to adapt with the definition of love back then. Hence, that was what changed him and pushed him to gain wealth through illegal means. Daisy went through an ambivalent phase of trying to choose between her rich husband whom she doesn't love and her lover, Gatsby. In the end, money wins rather than true love. The melancholic ending of Gatsby's death is only a proof of the love of materialism and the carelessness of emotions and human relations. It also portrays that Gatsby worked hard towards love through materialistic means but love does not exist in such a materialistic world. Daisy's cold reaction to his death significantly shows how love was temporary. Love in this case made Gatsby lose in the end, even if he grew in terms of wealth and materials. Gatsby's death is a reflection of the death of love in a materialistic world, and the continuity of the daily lives of people after dramatic events. Love exists in all centuries, it only changes in meaning. The 20th century's definition of love was very polemic. It was the source of inspiration in Montag's eyes, and the peace of mind in Henry's perception, but it was also the cause of Gatsby's death. This reveals how the love in the materialistic world can be dangerously hopeless, but it can have positive results if it was pure and unconditional love. It was the reason to live for both Henry and Montag, but it was also the reason to die in Gatsby's case. In the three cases, however, love is only temporary, because of the death of lovers or the death of the person himself. Nevertheless, it is often worth it! (Students' permission has been obtained to reprint the above essays as they were written)