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"What a Strange and Wonderful Story!": Literary Research and College Writing

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Literary Argument

Taking a literature class is more than merely reading stories. When we pick up a novel or a poem, we enter into a conversation. Kenneth Burke calls it an “unending conversation” and describes it this way:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

This paper requires the author to not only read the assigned piece of literature but also to read the corresponding conversation about that work in academic journals. The literary critics who write academic articles always respond to the ideas of other scholars, and the purpose of this paper is describe this conversation and choose a side of the issue to argue. This paper is not merely a summary or an evaluation; instead, the author must make an argument about some aspect of the literary work.