Writing about Fiction

"I know of only one rule of style," wrote the French novelist Stendhal. "Style cannot be too *clear,* too *simple.*" Stendhal's advice remains sound today. Simplicity and clarity are dependable virtues in critical writing. Students can pay no better homage to literature than by writing about it in a commonsensical, unaffected manner. Still, style is the major stumbling block that most students face in writing an effective piece of literary analysis. Self-conscious that their vocabulary and writing skill are less developed than the authors they are studying, students often feel intimidated. How does one begin to write about literature?

The best course for most students is to begin with a style they can understand and control. Write simple and direct sentences. Avoid slang and contractions. Make clear transitions between your own writing and the sources that you cite for supporting evidence. When introducing a secondary source, note the transition with an unambiguous phrase like "One critic notes . . ." Never include a statement from a critical work that you do not understand yourself, and do not hesitate to add a sentence or two after a supporting quote to explain it in your own words.

LITERARY TERMINOLOGY

Literary criticism has its own technical vocabulary, and you need to learn the basic terms of the art. Mastering the key terms is not difficult, and it will probably heighten your enjoyment of literature—both inside and outside the classroom. Many literary terms are discussed and defined throughout this book. (There is even a separate glossary for easy reference.) It makes sense to use the standard vocabulary rather than your homemade terminology. To talk about the "high-point of the story-line" instead of "the climax of the plot" is to invite both confusion and dismay from your reader.

BASIC APPROACHES

As far as the content of your paper is concerned, try to avoid eccentric responses based primarily upon your personal reactions to the text. A brilliant idea concocted in the wee hours may appear less than stunning in the cold light of day. Remember, the point of writing a paper is not to persuade yourself that your conclusions are valid; your job is to persuade the *reader.*

Base your ideas on a careful reading of the text. You may convince yourself, after reading William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," that Emily Grierson's servant is the real murderer of Homer Barron, but you may encounter difficulty in finding support for these conclusions in the text. Also, don't try to identify an author's work too closely with the events of his or her life; literature and autobiography are not identical. Biographical information can sometimes be helpful in examining the circumstances under which a story was written, but it is always a risky proposition to equate life with art. Reading a biography of Edgar Allan Poe may provide some insight into his psychological compulsions and obsessions with certain themes and situations, but the events of a life should not be equated with the events of a story.

EXPLICATION

In general, writing assignments on fiction fall into three broad categories: (1) explication, (2) comparison and contrast, and (3) analysis. *Explication,* which literally means an "unfolding," is a painstaking analysis of the details of a piece of writing. Because of its extremely tight focus, the method is also often called a "close reading." Explication is a consistent favorite for writing assignments on individual scenes or passages in stories. A good explication pays attention to the details of a literary work, especially passages under scrutiny. It will, therefore, inevitably quote key words, phrases, or statements. In an explication, the student attempts to discuss every significant nuance of meaning that the writer has employed.

The most useful aid to explication is the dictionary. A full-scale assignment of this type may involve using the multivolume *Oxford English Dictionary* to demonstrate how a word in a passage may possess several meanings. Such basic research can support your contention that a passage may have multiple interpretations. For example, you might want to focus closely on a single short passage from a story—such as explicating the scene in Kate Chopin's "The Storm" when Calixta first sees her former lover Alcée. How do the images that Chopin provides hint at Calixta's still unacknowledged feelings? How does the author prepare the reader for the outcome of their meeting? If you need interpretive help, you might consult literary scholarship. One useful research tool is the *Explicator,* a scholarly publication devoted to the close reading of troublesome passages in stories, poems, and plays.

Here is a short explication by Michelle Ortiz, a student at Lamar State University in Beaumont, Texas. She explicates the role of colors in Alice Walker's story, "Everyday Use."

Every Color but Purple: An Explication of Descriptive Passages in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker is best known as the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Color Purple. Themes of women's relationships and racial consciousness are common in her work. In "Everyday Use" Walker explores these themes, writing a satirical story about the relationship of an African-American mother to her two daughters. Walker uses color imagery to underline the "everyday" nature of the rural setting and to contrast the personalities of the mother and Maggie, the daughter who has stayed at home, with Dee, the daughter who has gone off to college and become successful. The colors that are used to describe Dee's appearance indicate the showy, superficial quality of her character.

The topic of the essay is clearly announced in the opening paragraph.

Walker establishes the color contrasts carefully. The opening paragraph describes the clean-swept "hard clay" of the front yard, which the mother says "is like an extended living room." She describes how she wears "flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day." Maggie, the daughter who has been scarred by a fire, wears a "pink skirt and red blouse." The items in the house that Dee wants to take away are drably colored, an old wooden bench and a wooden churn top. The quilts that become a bone of contention between the mother and Dee are made from old scraps of clothing.

The story's opening paragraph is explicated with attention to the central topic of colors.

The only colors Walker mentions are "one teeny faded blue piece" that came from a Civil War uniform and some "lavender ones" from her great-grandmother's old clothes. With the exception of Maggie's outfit, all of the colors associated with the mother and the family home are muted and soft, suggesting old, worn-out clothing and the earthy tones of the farm setting.

More specific colors are noted to support the thesis.

Good observation.

Walker sets up the story carefully. The reader knows quite a bit about Dee before she actually appears. Dee has always been ashamed of her country "roots." In describing her clothing as a teenager, Walker uses bright colors to foreshadow the way she will look as an adult: "Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she'd made from an old suit somebody gave me." When she finally does appear, Walker describes her almost entirely in terms of the garish colors she wears:

Dee's entry scene is explicated with special attention to colors.

> A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings, too, gold and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of her dress out of her armpits.

A key passage is quoted in full.

The mother and Maggie are both stunned by Dee's dress, but Walker wants the reader to know that her appearance is not a pleasant one. The mother says the dress is "so loud it hurts my eyes." The colors glare brightly like "the light of the sun." Her face is uncomfortably warmed by "the heat waves it throws out."

The passage is further explicated with exact observation and quotation.

Throughout the story Walker indicates that Dee is a phony. She has changed her name to "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo." Her boyfriend (possibly her new husband), whom the mother refers to as "Hakim-a-barber," says that "pork is unclean," but Dee/Wangero makes a pig of herself at the dinner table. Dee tries to take the handmade quilts that the mother has been saving for Maggie's wedding present, saying that she would "hang them" like exhibits in a museum.

The character of Dee is discussed.

Two observations from the story support the thesis.

At the climax of the story, Dee angrily accuses her mother of not understanding "her heritage." And in the story's final glimpse of her, she puts on "sunglasses that hid everything" and drives off like a celebrity. Walker shows that blindness to heritage is Dee's problem, not her mother's. The heritage that the mother wants to pass on to Maggie has little to do with brightly-colored clothing and fashionable attitudes. The heritage she passes on is the kind of love that can endure years of "everyday use."

The conclusion of the discussion is tied to the conclusion of the story.

Final summary of arguments.

ANALYSIS

The term *analysis* is derived from a Greek word that means "to break up." Critical analysis, therefore, is the process of breaking a literary work into its components in order to study the whole. Since even short literary works operate on many levels, it is difficult to analyze every aspect. We usually focus on a single element of a work to analyze. A well-defined topic is essential to a successful student essay. The proper focus allows a student to cover his or her subject well in a few pages.

The techniques used in analysis are similar to those for explication. The student must pay careful attention to the details of the text. In analysis, however, the student is not required to focus on a single passage or detail of the story. He or she can range across the entire text in pursuit of a single idea.

Examining Kafka's *The Metamorphosis,* for example, a student might choose a single idea such as the author's use of physical space in Gregor Samsa's room as a sign of the protagonist's alienation from his family. Or in analyzing John Cheever's "The Swimmer," a student might analyze how the time of day determines the protagonist's situation throughout the story.

In writing an analysis, it is important to state your overall idea at the beginning of your essay. Then you should develop the idea while supporting your argument with examples from the text. Here is an analysis written by Samantha Brown, a student at El Camino College in Torrance, California. She discusses the symbolism in "The Chrysanthemums" by John Steinbeck. Notice how she clearly states her thesis by her second sentence.

An Analysis of the Symbolism in Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums"

Symbols are used in literature to convey a special meaning to the reader. In his short story "The Chrysanthemums," John Steinbeck uses chrysanthemums for both realistic and

symbolic purposes. The chrysanthemums advance the plot by creating the story's central conflict. They also help define the character of Elisa, provide a greater understanding of the setting, and play a vital part in revealing the story's theme.

The topic is stated and briefly explained.

In the plot, the chrysanthemums cause the conflict that animates the story. The only reason Elisa talked to the tinker was because of his admiration of her chrysanthemums. Their conversation initiates the story's central conflict. The reader sees that Elisa is unhappy and emotionally isolated from her husband. When she is talking with the tinker, she feels that she has finally met someone she can be intimate with emotionally. This illusion is shattered, however, when she discovers her plant starts on the side of the road. The discarded, dying plants symbolize her shortened life.

The thesis is supported by an example from the plot.

The image of the chrysanthemums is tied to the beginning and the end of the story.

The chrysanthemums also provide the reader with insight into Elisa. The reader better understands her character through her gardening, her discussion with the tinker, and her realization of what the tinker had done with her plant starts. Elisa is a passionate person. When she is gardening, one can see where her passion is funneled. She channels her sexual energy into her flowers. The tinker's admiration causes her to develop sexual feelings about him. Furthermore, when she sees her plant starts discarded on the side of the road, the reader can deduce two things about her character. First, one can see that Elisa does not have an emotional bond with her husband. Second, one comprehends how deeply she feels defeated. Once again, the chrysanthemums initiate both insights. Without the flowers, the reader would not understand Elisa. Her reaction concerning her flowers define her character.

The central argument is developed.

A key incident in the story is explicated in relation to the topic.

"The Chrysanthemums" is set in rural Monterey in the 1930s. The isolated rural setting has great importance to the story. Details of her house and garden help the reader understand the separation of Elisa from the world. Her isolation is also implied in Elisa's comment to the tinker that

The story's setting is connected to the general argument.

A meaningful detail.

she didn't know the woman down the road. One would assume that Elisa would know the women on neighboring farms. The chrysanthemums help define the setting of Elisa's physical and emotional isolation.

The second part of the paper states the story's theme.

The theme of a story is the main message the writer hopes to convey to the reader. The chrysanthemums are vital to Steinbeck's presentation of the theme. The function of this story is to reveal Elisa's real character. At the beginning of the story, Elisa is presented as a strong woman, one who is strong enough to break the back of a calf. She regards herself as strong, as does her husband. At the end of story, Elisa is seen huddled like an old woman, crying weakly. The newly revealed Elisa is not the strong woman that she or her husband thought she was. She has overestimated her emotional strength. It wasn't until Elisa saw the plant starts on the side of the road that she felt the sting of her rejection and isolation. Until that moment, her gardening had protected--or at least distracted--her from her loneliness, isolation and feelings of inadequacy.

Good examples are given to explain the emotional structure of the story.

The story's climax is related to its theme.

Elisa's chrysanthemums play a critical role in illuminating the story's theme. Without the scene of the sprouts on the side of the road, the reader could not have had two major insights about the story. First, Elisa is a sad, lonely woman. Second, she is emotionally detached from her husband. That is the picture Steinbeck intended his reader to understand. This lonely, emotionally detached woman puts all her passion and energy into her flowers.

The role of the central symbol is explained in relation to the theme.

Elisa's chrysanthemums are central to this story. Understanding how they function as a symbol is imperative to understanding the story. Elisa's character completely revolves around her flowers. The conflict in the story is created through the flowers. Finally, the theme emerges from understanding this woman and the importance of her chrysanthemums. To understand Steinbeck's symbolism, therefore, is essential to understanding how the story works.

Two aspects of the protagonist's character are cited.

Restatement of thesis and summary of key arguments.

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

Comparison and contrast employ the same general techniques as explication and analysis. They use specific details from the text to support a particular interpretation of the story. But whereas explication attempts to exhaust the widest possible range of meanings, comparison and contrast are more selective in their focus, requiring that you examine how a single element—a theme, a technique, a structural device—functions in two works or in a related group of works. Instead of being assigned to analyze Kafka's use of physical space in *The Metamorphosis* as a way of demonstrating Gregor Samsa's alienation from his familiar surroundings, a comparison and contrast topic might add a second story by Kafka, "The Hunger Artist," to demonstrate that the author uses similar techniques.

Assignments for compare and contrast essays can be quite specific: "Compare and contrast 'Barn Burning' and 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' as examples of initiation stories." Here you might note both differences and similarities. At first glance, the stories might seem to have little in common: the different gender, economic status, and level of sophistication of the protagonists; the rural versus urban settings; Faulkner's "period" details in "Barn Burning" as contrasted with those that we recognize from our own lives in Oates's story. On the other hand, both stories, as do all initiation stories, have adolescent protagonists, involve a confrontation with evil, and demand that the protagonists make difficult moral choices that involve other family members. Furthermore, both protagonists have troubled relationships with parents yet act in a manner that displays some sacrifice on their own part for what they think will be for the good of their families. Most importantly, both stories chronicle the transition from childhood to adulthood in the actions that both Sarty and Connie perform, and both end in a deliberately inconclusive way: what will happen to these young persons in the future?

Since you must analyze two stories in a single paper, you should take special care to narrow your topic in a comparison and contrast essay. Too broad a topic will send your paper sprawling in several directions at once. Here is an exceptionally well-focused essay by Karen Humphrey, a student at California State University at Long Beach. She compares the depiction of two elderly women in two classic modern stories.

Comparing Miss Emily and Miss Brill

In both William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill," the reader is given a glimpse into the lives of two old women living in different worlds but sharing many similar characteristics. Both Miss Emily and Miss Brill attempt to adapt to a changing environment, as they grow older. Through the authors' use of language, imagery, and plot, it becomes

Clear statement of the thesis.

A summary of how the two characters resemble each other.

clear to the reader that Miss Brill is more successful at adapting to the world around her and finding happiness.

In "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner's use of language paints an unflattering picture of Miss Emily. His tone evokes pity and disgust rather than sympathy. The reader identifies with the narrator of the story and shares the townspeople's opinion that Miss Emily is somehow "perverse." In "Miss Brill," however, the reader can identify with the title character and feel sympathy for her because of the lonely life she leads. Mansfield's attitude toward the young couple at the end makes the reader hate them for ruining the happiness that Miss Brill has found, however small it may be.

The imagery in "A Rose for Emily" keeps the reader from further identifying with Miss Emily by creating several morbid images of her. For example, there are several images of decay throughout the story. The house she lived in is falling apart and described as "filled with dust and shades . . . an eyesore among eyesores." Emily herself is described as being "bloated like a body long submerged in motionless water." Faulkner also uses words like "skeleton," "dank," "decay," and "cold" to reinforce these morbid, deathly images.

In "Miss Brill," however, Mansfield uses more cheerful imagery. The music and the lively action in the park make Miss Brill feel alive inside. She notices the other old people that are in the park are "still as statues," "odd," and "silent." She says they "looked like they'd just come from dark little rooms or even—oven cupboards." Her own room is later described as a "cupboard," but during the action of the story she does not include herself as one of those other old people. She still feels alive.

Through the plots of both stories the reader can also see that Miss Brill is more successful in adapting to her environment. Miss Emily loses her sanity and ends up committing a crime in order to control her environment. Throughout the story, she refuses to adapt to any of the changes going on in the town such as the taxes or the mailboxes. Miss Brill is able to find her own special place in society where she can be happy and remain sane.

In "A Rose for Emily" and "Miss Brill" the authors' use of language and the plots of the stories illustrate that Miss Brill is more successful in her story. Instead of hiding herself away she emerges from the "cupboard" to participate in life. She adapts to the world that is changing as she grows older, without losing her sanity or committing crimes, as Miss Emily does. The language of "Miss Brill" allows the reader to sympathize with the main character. The imagery in the story is lighter and less morbid than "A Rose for Emily."

A summary of how they differ.

Examples from each story support the thesis.

"Miss Brill" is contrasted to "A Rose for Emily."

More details are provided from Faulkner's story to support argument.

Analysis of physical description.

Contrasting details are given to characterize Mansfield's story.

Analysis of setting.

The two characters are contrasted with examples drawn from text.

The final conclusion is stated and the thesis is restated.

OTHER ADVICE

One last word of warning: please note that nowhere above do we mention primarily biographical essays as possible writing assignments. Research assignments may ask you to discuss how the particular circumstances of a writer's life may have influenced his or her works, but for the most part biographical information should reside in the background, not the foreground, of literary analysis. An explication of a passage from "The Tell-Tale Heart" that begins "Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 in Boston . . ." gives the erroneous impression that you are writing about the author's life instead of about his work. It is almost as ruinous as the assigned theme that opens with "In this theme I have been assigned to . . . ."

Writing assignments differ greatly, and your instructor's requirements may range from general ("Discuss the roles of three minor characters in any of the stories we have read.") to very specific ("Contrast, in not less than 500 words, the major differences in the plot, characterization, and setting between Joyce Carol Oates's short story 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' and Joyce Chopra's *Smooth Talk*, the 1985 film version of the story."). In some cases, especially on essay-type examinations, your instructor may give the class the same topic; in others, you may be allowed considerable freedom in selecting one. Length requirements may range from a single paragraph to the standard 500-word theme (sometimes written during a class period) to a full-scale research paper of three or four times that length. The assignment may ask you to sup-

port your assertions with quotations from the story; or it may require that you add further supporting quotations from secondary critical sources. There is no way to predict the precise kinds of papers you may have to write in a literature course. There are, however, a few simple guidelines to remember that may keep the waters from being totally unfamiliar.

FINDING A TOPIC

Consider a typical assignment for an essay: "Discuss any three stories in our book that share a similar theme." This is a topic that allows you some latitude in selecting the stories you wish to write on, but paradoxically it is just this type of assignment that causes students the most distress. Why is this so? Simply because there are many stories in this book, and it is usually impossible for the instructors to cover more than a fraction of them in a semester. As one of our own students once complained about such an assignment, "Freedom's just another word for much too much to choose."

Before despairing, though, consider the different ways the topic could be limited. Instead of "three stories" you might narrow the field by selecting a more specific group. Choose, for example, "three tales of the fantastic," "three detective stories," or "three stories by contemporary African-American women writers." It is usually best to settle on a group that is focused but still allows you some latitude. Choosing "three stories about dying" would allow you to pick from several stories in this book. If you decide to compare three stories written by different authors in the same genre—say Magic Realism—you can choose the works from the "Listing of Stories by Narrative Form and Genre" found in the back of the book.

FOCUSING YOUR TOPIC

After reading several stories, you may decide that Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" and Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" interest you. Further, you may have noted that the authors deal with the approach of death differently by their manipulation of time in the stories. "The Death of Ivan Ilych" begins at the protagonist's wake and flashes back to tell the full story of his life; "The Story of an Hour" deals with how death changes a character's sense of time. After hearing a report (which will proce to be untrue) that her husband has died, Mrs. Mallard imagines her future life. (Ironically, she will have no future since she, like Ilych, is about to die.) By now you have limited your choice in several important ways: you have selected stories that share theme and situation; you have focused on the authors' departure from a strictly chronological approach; and you have probably decided to emphasize plot structure and character development in your analysis.

BRAINSTORMING AND DISCUSSION

What comes next? A certain amount of informal preparation is always useful, especially "brainstorming." By taking notes on random ideas and talking to your peers and instructors, you refine your ideas further. Even if your class does not use formal group discussion as part of its pre-writing activities, there is still nothing to prevent you from talking over your ideas informally with classmates or scheduling a conference with your instructor. The conference is an especially good idea, since it allows you to get a clearer sense of what is expected in your paper. You may discover that you need to focus your topic even further or that you should select other more pertinent examples to support your thesis. You might discover that your instructor favors an emphasis on the socioeconomic circumstances of characters in fiction and can recommend several books on the subject that may be useful to you. Instructors are usually helpful in giving advice about the structure of a paper and the order in which you should discuss the stories you have chosen.

RESEARCH

A full discussion of research methods lies outside the scope of this brief discussion, but you should be aware of several reference works that are invaluable for students writing on fiction. We have already mentioned the *Explicator,* a journal devoted to "close reading" of passages from stories, poems, and plays. Also useful is Gale Research's *Short Story Criticism,* a multivolume reference series that adds new volumes on a yearly basis. This helpful reference set, which is found in most libraries and is also available online, provides not only general information about an author's career but also well-chosen passages from reviews and critical articles that focus on individual stories. An exhaustive index provides much help in locating comments on specific stories.

With established writers, there will usually be individual books available on their work. But beware: many recent critical books are so specialized that they are not very useful to undergraduates. You should probably examine each critical book to make sure it is right for your needs. The Twayne Authors Series provides helpful introductory overviews of careers, and often includes extended analysis of key stories. The *MLA [Modern Language Association] Index,* which exists in most libraries in CD-ROM versions, provides a huge database of criticism about authors and individual works. Also useful are the various Internet search engines, which may steer you to individual author pages and links to other critical materials. Whatever methods you employ, remember that careful documentation of sources is required of all research assignments. With the advent of copying machines and computer printouts of critical essays, the time-consuming process of keeping note cards may well be a thing of the past, but you should be sure that you have the documentary information you will need for your bibliography before you leave the library.

DOCUMENTING YOUR SOURCES

When you quote from other writers, when you borrow their information, or when you summarize or paraphrase their ideas, make sure you give them their due. Document everything you take. Identify the writer by name; cite not only the book, magazine, newspaper, pamphlet, letter, or other source you are using but also the page or pages you are quoting. The latest and more efficient way for writers to document their sources is that recommended in the fifth edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* by Joseph Gibaldi (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1999). Whether you write a long term paper citing dozens of sources or a short paper citing only three of four, the MLA's advice will save you and your reader time and trouble.

FINAL LIST OF WORKS CITED

As you write, keep a list of all your sources. Later when you type your paper in finished form, you should include a complete list of all the works you have cited at the end. The *MLA Handbook* provides complete instructions for citing a myriad of different types of sources from books to online databases. Here are a baker's dozen of the most commonly used type of citations in the MLA style.

One Author

Middlebrook, Diane Wood. Anne Sexton: A Biography. Boston: Houghton, 1991.

Two Books by the Same Author

Bawer, Bruce. The Aspect of Eternity. St. Paul: Graywolf, 1993.

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Two or Three Authors

Jarman, Mark, and Robert McDowell. The Reaper: Essays. Brownsville, OR: Story Line, 1996.

One Editor

Donaldson, Scott, ed. Conversations with John Cheever. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1987.

Two Editors

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Chekhov, Anton. Selected Stories. Trans. Ann Dunnigan. New York: Signet, 1960.

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McPhillips, Robert. "Timothy Steele." The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English. Ed. Ian Hamilton. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

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"Ernest Hemingway." The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia. 15th ed. 1987.

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Gioia, Dana. "Studying with Miss Bishop." New Yorker 5 Sept. 1986: 90-101.

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Balée, Susan. "Flannery O'Connor Resurrected." Hudson Review 47 (1994): 377-93.

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Harper, John. "Well-Crafted Tales with Tabloid Titles." Rev. of Tabloid Dreams, by Robert Olen Butler. Orlando Sentinel 15 Dec. 1996: D4.

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Online Scholarly Project or Information Database

Voice of the Shuttle. Ed. Alan Liu. 10 Jan, 2000. U of California, Santa Barbara. 15 Jan. 2000 <http://vos.ucsb.edu/>.

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