



CHAPTER 18

the act of writing | dialogue with text(s)

Language Expresses Identity

The artists who painted the Cave at Lascaux expressed their identity, their culture, through painting. Even earlier than Lascaux, primitive people expressed their identity through the simple act of putting their hand against a cave wall, and with fingers outspread, splattering paint over their hand. When they took their hand away, an **image** of their hand remained on the wall. In this simple way, they left their mark. Many of us did this in kindergarten. It was the first expression of our identity, of saying who we are, of saying, “I am here.”

Throughout our book, we have given you essays by authors who have expressed in language their identity and the identity of their cultures. All of these essays express this kind of identity.

In “The Bloodiest Battle of All,” William Manchester sees his own cultural identity as connected to patriotism, and through patriotism, to his heritage of soldiering and war. By the end of the essay, Manchester has come to see war as futile, and patriotism as perhaps a questionable value, but one which he upholds.

From his youth, Manchester remembers the patriotic atmosphere of the Memorial Day parade in his hometown of Attleboro, Mass. He describes all the military pride of that parade, including his own “father, hero of the 5th Marines and Belleau Wood,” who “lost his arm in the Argonne.” For Manchester, patriotism is rooted in military glory.

Yet, Manchester sees war as miserable and even calls it “obsolete” in modern culture. He criticizes books that see a “romanticized view of war” with the “glowing aura of selfless patriotism.” He writes, “Soldiering has been relegated to Sartre’s theater of the absurd.” If war is obsolete, if soldiering is absurd, is patriotism also dead? Has that patriotism Manchester identified with as a child become no longer a valid identity?



dialogue of the text with the text (s)

If Manchester's essay, "The Bloodiest Battle," is about a search for his own identity as he discusses patriotism, soldiering, family, and warfare, each of the other essays we have read also searches for a personal and cultural identity in some form. All of these texts, M. Scott Momaday's "The Way to Rainy Mountain," Jack London's "The Story of an Eyewitness: The San Francisco Earthquake," Diane Ackerman's "Modern Love," Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, John Seabrook's "Renaissance Pears," and William Manchester's "The Bloodiest Battle" carry on a dialogue with each other about identity.

Both Manchester's and London's essays are about the *loss of* some aspect of their identity. Manchester sees his identity as a soldier and a patriot, formed in his youth, fade into insignificance. London sees his identity as he identifies with San Francisco, the city of his youth, destroyed by earthquake and fire. This identification with the city may be why London gives his essay the dramatic title "The Story of an Eyewitness: The San Francisco Earthquake." It may be the reason that he writes in such powerful terms of observation. We could form a **THESIS** from this analysis: William Manchester and Jack London both write about a loss of identity based on historical and natural changes they witness.

Or, we could form a broader **THESIS** and use their pieces as **EVIDENCE** for that **THESIS**:

In our youth, we form personal identities based on the culture around us. As that culture changes, we are challenged to re-think our own identities.

Before we begin writing, let's review the **STEPS FOR DEVELOPING AN ESSAY**.

PARTS OF AN ESSAY: STEPS FOR DEVELOPING YOUR ESSAY

- STEP 1.** Present your thesis
- STEP 2.** Present examples as evidence that *prove* your thesis
- STEP 3.** Discuss the evidence
- STEP 4.** Discuss *how* the evidence proves your thesis
- STEP 5.** Move on to further develop your evidence
or
Present new evidence

Writing & Identity

In our youth, we form personal identities based on the culture around us. As that culture changes, we are challenged to re-think our own identities.

William Manchester, who was a “sergeant in the 29th Marines” during World War II, came from a patriotic and military culture in Massachusetts (Manchester). During his childhood, in the town of Attleboro, the whole town “would turn out to cheer the procession on Memorial Day” (Manchester). That procession included the local police and those veterans still living from all the American wars going back to the Civil War of 1860-1865. It also included William Manchester’s own father, who, in World War I (1917–1919), was a “hero of the 5th Marines” (Manchester). Manchester’s childhood was filled with noble images of patriotism, soldiering, and war.

Jack London was born in a house on 3rd and Brannan Street in San Francisco in 1876 (London), 46 years before William Manchester was born in Massachusetts. As opposed to Manchester’s stable youth, drenched in the social values of duty and service, London’s turbulent early years began with his birth. When Jack London’s unmarried mother, Flora Wellman, became pregnant by William Chaney, Chaney demanded she have an abortion. In despair, Flora Wellman tried to commit suicide by shooting herself. She failed in her suicide attempt, but when she gave birth to Jack, she turned him over for care to an ex-slave, Virginia Prentiss. Eventually, Jack’s mother, Flora, took him back to raise him, but Virginia Prentiss remained an important figure in Jack London’s life. Jack’s mother, Flora, eventually married John London, a partially disabled Civil War veteran, and Jack became Jack London (London).

After living in different parts of San Francisco and the Bay Area, London went to college at the University of California at Berkeley, across the Bay from San Francisco. After finding his biological father through newspaper accounts of his mother’s attempted suicide, his biological father, William Cheney, denied that Jack was his son. London, devastated, dropped out of college and traveled north to Alaska (“Jack London”).

Eventually, London became a successful journalist and novelist, writing some of the most important stories and novels we have in American Literature. As he grew up, he had little stability. The only thing that remained constant throughout his youth, indeed, throughout his life, was San Francisco, the city in which he was born, and to which he often returned.

Given the stability of William Manchester’s childhood, it comes as no surprise that he chose a military life. As he proudly watched his father in his dress uniform march in the Memorial Day parades of Manchester’s youth, Manchester’s “own military future was already determined” (Manchester). Manchester had formed his identity as a patriot, a soldier, a Marine. After World War II, however, Manchester came to question that identity. Always proud of it, he yet realized that it was an old-fashioned identity of a world gone by. For war, what Winston Churchill had once called “cruel and magnificent,” had become just “cruel and

squalid.” Modern technology, especially the atomic bomb that fell first in World War II at Hiroshima, Japan, had made war “obsolete” (Manchester).

In 1907, 31 years after Jack London’s birth in San Francisco, the massive San Francisco earthquake demolished the city that had given him the greatest stability of his youth, it had given him an identity and a sense of himself that he cherished. When called to write about that earthquake, London took the opportunity to express his love for the city. He wrote about the earthquake and about the city with a tremendous power. His gives his piece an almost Biblical title, “The Story of an Eyewitness: The San Francisco Earthquake.” He becomes the eyewitness not only to the destruction of San Francisco, in which his house at 3rd and Bannan Street burned down, but to the turbulence of his own origins. His turbulence has now become the chaos of the earthquake. He writes that, “Not in history has a modern imperial city been so completely destroyed. San Francisco is gone. Nothing remains of it but memories and a fringe of dwelling-houses on its outskirts” (London). He writes to salvage his own memories from the ruins of his city.

William Manchester also writes to salvage the memories of his youth from the passing of the values and sense of history and duty that gave him his identity. These essays—“The Bloodiest Battle of All” and “The Story of an Eyewitness: The San Francisco Earthquake”—in dialogue with each other—speak to and with each other. They say to each other: though time changes and disrupts our identities, through writing we can salvage our sense of who we were, and develop a sense of who are.

Works Cited

- Manchester, William. “The Bloodiest Battle of All.” *New York Times* 14 June 1987. *New York Times*. 21 August 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/14/magazine/the-bloodiest-battle-of-all.html>>. 30 May 2010.
- , “Jack London.” *Wikipedia*. 21 August 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_london>. 30 May 2010.
- London, Jack. “Story of an Eyewitness: The San Francisco Earthquake.” *Collier’s* (2006). *The Jack London Online Collection*. Roy Tennant and Clarice Stasz. Web. 30 May 2010. <<http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/Journalism/sfearthquake.html>>.

Chapter Review: Dialogue of Text with Text(s)

Language Expresses Identity

We use language as a tool to struggle with and express our identity.

Parts of an Essay: Steps for Developing Your Essay

- STEP 1. Present your thesis
- STEP 2. Present examples as evidence that *prove* your thesis
- STEP 3. Discuss the evidence
- STEP 4. Discuss *how* the evidence proves your thesis
- STEP 5. Move on to further develop your evidence
or
Present new evidence

