



CHAPTER 17

the act of reading | essay as argument

We have said that every reader has a **DIALOGUE** with the text and that every text has a **DIALOGUE** with its readers. Every text is also in **DIALOGUE** with other texts. The whole process of writing and reading goes over and over in this circle of communication. The reader is in **DIALOGUE** with the text; the text is in **DIALOGUE** with the reader; each text is in **DIALOGUE** with other texts. We might call this a circle of literary communication.

As we participate in this circle of communication, we find that, at the heart of each communication, there is an argument—not in the contrary sense of the word “argument,” meaning to disagree, but in the sense that an argument is at the core of what that communication wants to say. The **argument** sets the dialogue in motion.

Argument:

Latin: *argumentum*

Arguare = to make clear, to prove

Every essay or fiction should make an argument. Your essay should make something clear. It should prove something.

Look at your **THESIS**. There you have your **argument**. The stronger your **argument**, the more you believe in it, the more vividly you will write. Ask yourself: “Why am I writing this essay?” If the answer to that question gives you something you care about, something that raises your passion, then you will write well.

Even *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* has an **argument**: if a young girl, with a strong imagination, becomes transported to an imaginary, upside-down world, that world could contain all the wild things that this story describes.



When we talked about forming a **THESIS** in Chapter 3, page 31, we saw that a good **THESIS** cannot just state the obvious. It should also state your **argument**. Read the following essay by William Manchester. His **THESIS** fits the model we set forth in Chapter 3: it requires **argument**, proof, evidence, and discussion.

Manchester's argument also contains some ambiguity. However, no idea can be all one-sided. We call this "ambiguity," the idea that no viewpoint is one hundred percent true.

Ambiguous:

From the Latin: *Amb* = both ways
agere = to drive

An ambiguous idea or argument can be understood in two or more possible ways.

During World War II¹, Manchester fought as a U.S. Marine in a horrendous battle on the Southern Japanese island of Okinawa. His essay presents us with a difficult ambiguity. On the one hand, he grew up in a patriotic family and in a culture that valued military service and honored both war and those who fought in it. On the other hand, Manchester sees modern warfare, with its machines of destruction, as a meaningless pursuit. While he certainly respects the Marines he served with and honors those who fell in battle, he sees the loss of life in modern warfare as a waste. Manchester has mixed feelings about his subject. Far from being a negative quality of the essay, that ambiguity strengthens the essay, giving us more to think about and challenging us to respond with our own ideas about war. If you can consider all viewpoints in your essay, you will have a stronger piece of work.

Some of the American and Japanese soldiers who fought in the battle of Okinawa organized a memorial service 55 years later. Manchester begins his essay writing about that memorial ceremony.

The Bloodiest Battle of All

ON OKINAWA TODAY, Flag Day will be observed with an extraordinary ceremony: two groups of elderly men, one Japanese, the other American, will gather for a solemn rite. They could scarcely have less in common.

¹World War II, the deadliest conflict in history, with over seven million casualties, took place around the world between 1939–1945. There were two major alliances in the war. The United States fought with the Allies, while Japan fought with the Axis powers.

Their motives are mirror images; each group honors the memory of men who tried to slay the men honored by those opposite them. But theirs is a common grief. After 42 years the ache is still there. They are really united by death, the one great victor in modern war.

They have come to Okinawa to dedicate a lovely monument in remembrance of the Americans, Japanese, and Okinawans killed there in the last and bloodiest battle of the Pacific war. More than 200,000 perished in the 82-day struggle—twice the number of Japanese lost at Hiroshima² and more American blood than had been shed at Gettysburg³. My own regiment—I was a sergeant in the 29th Marines—lost more than 80 percent of the men who landed on April 1, 1945. Before the battle was over, both the Japanese and American commanding generals lay in shallow graves.

Okinawa lies 330 miles southwest of the southernmost Japanese island of Kyushu; before the war, it was Japanese soil. Had there been no atom bombs—and at that time the most powerful Americans, in Washington and at the Pentagon, doubted that the device would work—the invasion of the Nipponese⁴ homeland would have been staged from Okinawa, beginning with a landing on Kyushu to take place Nov. 1. The six Marine divisions, storming ashore abreast, would lead the way. President Truman⁵ asked Gen. Douglas MacArthur, whose estimates of casualties on the eve of battles had proved uncannily accurate, about Kyushu. The general predicted a million Americans would die in that first phase.

Given the assumption that nuclear weapons would contribute nothing to victory, the battle of Okinawa had to be fought. No one doubted the need to bring Japan to its knees. But some Americans came to hate the things we had to do, even when convinced that doing them was absolutely necessary; they had never understood the bestial, monstrous and vile means required to reach the objective—an unconditional Japanese surrender. As for me, I could not reconcile the romanticized view of war that runs like a red streak through our literature—and the glowing aura of selfless patriotism that had led us to put our lives at forfeit—with the wet, green hell from which I had barely escaped. Today, I understand. I was there, and was twice wounded. This is the story of what I knew and when I knew it.

If all Americans understood the nature of battle, they might be vulnerable to truth. But the myths of warfare are embedded deep in our ancestral memories. By the time children have reached the age of awareness, they regard uniforms, decorations and Sousa marches as exalted, and those who argue otherwise are regarded as unpatriotic.

²On August 6, 1945, the Americans dropped the first atomic bomb on the Japanese city Hiroshima, ending World War II.

³The Battle of Gettysburg, in the American Civil War, took place July 1–3, 1863. There were over 50,000 casualties in those three days.

⁴Another name for Japan.

⁵Harry S. Truman, 33rd President of the United States, 1945–1953.

General MacArthur, quoting Plato, said: “Only the dead have seen the end of war.” One hopes he was wrong, for war, as it had existed for over 4,000 years, is now obsolete. As late as the spring of 1945, it was possible for one man, with a rifle, to make a difference, however infinitesimal, in the struggle to defeat an enemy who had attacked us and threatened our West Coast. The bomb dropped on Hiroshima made that man ludicrous, even pitiful. Soldiering has been relegated to Sartre’s theater of the absurd⁶. The image of the man as protector and defender of the home has been destroyed (and I suggest that that seed of thought eventually led women to re-examine their own role in society).

dialogue of text with text(s)

We have talked about how you, the reader, have a dialogue with the text that you read. We have talked about how your readers, those who read what you write, have a dialogue with your text. Now, let’s look finally at how all texts are always in dialogue with all other texts. Manchester quotes General MacArthur, a famous American General who fought in World War II. Gen. MacArthur quoted Plato, the 5th–4th Century BCE Greek philosopher, who said, “Only the dead have seen the end of war.” These texts from Plato, General MacArthur, and William Manchester are all in dialogue with each other.

Manchester, in the full essay reprinted on page 293, recounts some of the history of war, referring to the famous Battle of Agincourt, the Battle of Gettysburg, and others. He got all that information from other texts. Manchester even criticizes the “romanticized view of war that runs like a red streak through our literature,” making reference to all American literature, perhaps all of world literature. In his dialogue with those texts that portray a “romanticized view of war that runs like a red streak through our literature,” Manchester’s dialogue becomes a critique. He disagrees with and criticizes those texts that romanticize war. In the full essay, Manchester gives us an example of this kind of text: John Wayne’s 1949 movie about World War II, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, which glorifies war.

The dialogue among texts is just like the dialogue among people—full of agreement, disagreement, analysis, and discussion. In bringing different texts into his essay, Manchester sustains an active dialogue with other books. Others, in turn, will now quote Manchester in their books/essays, continuing that dialogue into the future.

All texts are in some sense in dialogue with *all other* texts. Let’s take an unlikely example to see if this thesis proves true. How can William Manchester’s essay “The Bloodiest Battle” enter into a dialogue with, for example, N. Scott Momaday’s essay “The Way to Rainy Mountain”? We might, at first glance, say they have nothing in common, nothing to talk about. But, a closer look reveals a different reality. Both write about nature. Momaday writes lovingly about the landscape he comes

⁶Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), French writer who, among others, developed the “theater of the absurd” after World War II. Following the immense destruction of WW II, the theater of the absurd represented a view of life that war had made us see that life was meaningless, and that we had to search for new kinds of meaning.

from. “Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.” Momaday portrays nature lovingly, while Manchester, who has a similar reverence for nature, writes about what war does to a beautiful landscape: “All greenery had vanished; as far as one could see, heavy shellfire had denuded the scene of shrubbery. What was left resembled a cratered moonscape. But the craters were vanishing, because the rain had transformed the earth into a thin porridge—too thin even to dig foxholes.”

Chapter Review: Essay As Argument

We have a **DIALOGUE WITH THE TEXT** that we read. All texts also carry on a **DIALOGUE** with all other texts. When we read we participate in an ongoing circle of communication.

Every **THESIS** makes an **ARGUMENT**. When you know what the **ARGUMENT** of your essay is, you can write more clearly, and you will write with more passion. But your **ARGUMENT** does not need to be all one-sided; it can be ambiguous, requiring you to write about the different sides of your argument and perhaps incorporating counter-arguments.

