

# The Lyric Essay

## Writer's Motives

- “The essay concerns a personal episode in which the author lacked power. Lyric moves, particularly fragmentation and passive voice, enact a lack of agency on the page. ...
- The author does not have access to sources for key aspects of the traditional "story." Lyric moves, particularly litany and stimulative truth, bridge these troublesome gaps.
- The language and images are the driving motivation of the piece, and stream-of-consciousness observation, sacrificing traditional narrative, is the only way to go."

Sandra Beasley

As a work gets more autobiographical, more intimate, more confessional, more embarrassing, it breaks into fragments. Our lives aren't prepackaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, reality-based art—underprocessed, underproduced—splinters and explodes. (27)

David Shields

“Retrospective reflection, in this case, might be exactly beside the point, because there is no stable emotional place from which to perform the act of making sense. There is only the poetic weight of being sad...”

Susannah Mintz, “Forms of Self Disclosure in the Lyric Essay”

## Definitions

1. The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form... Its voice, spoken from a privacy that we overhear and enter, has the intimacy we have come to expect in the personal essay. Yet in the lyric essay the voice is often more reticent, almost coy, aware of the compliment it pays the reader by dint of understatement.

Deborah Tall

2. Loyal to that original sense of essay as a test or a quest, an attempt at making sense, the lyric essay sets off on an uncharted course through interlocking webs of ideas, circumstance, language—a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning.

Martha Ronk

3. The lyric essay doesn't look too long at itself in the mirror. It is not "self-reflective," in that it does not really reflect the self who scribbles it down. Rather it *is* the mirror, the silver film reflecting whatever passes its way.

Lia Purpura

4. First, let's deal with the difference between a lyrical essay and a lyric essay. Any essay may be lyrical, as long as it pays attention to the sound of its language, or the sweep of its cadences. But a lyrical essay is often using its lyrics to serve a different end. A lyric essay, however, functions a *lyric*. Can be held in the mind—must, in fact, be held in the mind—intact. It means as an entity. It swallows you, the way a poem swallows you, until you reside inside it.

Judith Kitchen

5. It "forsake[s] narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation...It might move by association, leaping from one path of thought to another by way of imagery or connotation, advancing by juxtaposition or sidwinding poetic logic. Generally it is short, concise and punchy like a prose poem. But it may meander, making use of other genres when they serve its purpose: recombinant, it samples the techniques of fiction, drama, journalism, song, and film."

D'Agata and Tall

## Skeptics

What bothers me more is the lyric's essay's refusal to let thought accrue to some purpose. Over the years I have come to feel that what interests me most in the classical essay, including the memoirist personal essay, is the quality of rumination. It is the writer's thought, or consciousness, let us call it, which hooks me, not the ostensible plot...The pressure to answer such internalized-reader questions as "Why are you tell us this?" and "What are you getting at?" can help drive an essay, can give it pleasurable suspense and momentum.

Philip Lopate

I think it's possible that the lyric essay as a term was plucked from nowhere and set up as a gimmick so writers who usually write poems can \*publish\* their work somewhere other than in places that typically publish poetry.

Some guy (whose name I can't find at the moment)

Holes in an essay, I tell my students, flaws in the logic, contradictions, unanswered questions, loose associations may all be necessary because of what they ultimately make possible. I believe this, but I also have my doubts. I am suspicious of gaps, of silences, of contradictions because I know how easily they hid unfinished thinking and insufficient research

Eula Bliss

## Exercises

1. Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. Trace the outline of your head (ear against the paper), your hands, or your feet. Within these lines, I invite you to write about your body (e.g. how you see/saw it, what stories and memories it evokes, ways that you inhabit it). Write whatever comes to mind. Trace more hands, more faces, more feet, or even other parts of your body as the need arises. When done writing, number these.
2. Take a straight-edge and sketch a floor of the house you grew up in or some other house or structure that is significant to you. Like a blueprint, sketch in windows and doors. Use each room as a space for writing about it evokes: a specific event, a list, scene, story, reflection. Move around the rooms, filling each with writing. Draw another floor if you're moved to and do the same.
3. Make a collage of three scenes that you associate with one of the following "f" words: fear, friends, falling, failure, fallout. Think of moments, stories, or places that the word evokes from any time in your life. Draft each in one or two paragraphs. Skip a line, then go onto the next segment without worrying about transitions or chronology. Number each one.