Chapter 7: Creative Nonfiction, the Fourth Genre

# Creative Nonfiction as a Genre

**Creative nonfiction** seems to have existed for as long as poetry, fiction, and drama have, but only in the last forty years or so has the term become common as a label for *creative*, *factual prose*. The length is not a factor in characterizing this genre: Such prose can take the form of an essay or a book. For this chapter’s discussion, we will focus on the *essay*, since not only will this shorter version of the form allow us to examine multiple examples for a better understanding of the genre, but also, you may have written creative nonfiction essays yourself. Looking carefully at the strategies exhibited by some successful essay writers will give us new ideas for achieving goals in our own writing.

First, let’s do what we can to more clearly define the creative nonfiction **essay**. What is the difference between this kind of essay and a…well, what shall we call essays outside this category? *Non*-creative nonfiction essays? This title does not work very well for our purposes; the distinction is a muddy one, since even a researched academic essay can exhibit creativity. However, we can make some general observations about the differences between creative nonfiction and works that do not fit neatly into this genre: Although written in prose form (**prose** is writing *not* visually broken into distinct lines as poetry is), the creative nonfiction essay often strives for a poetic *effect*, employing a kind of compressed, distilled language so that most words carry more meaning than their simple denotation (or literal meaning). Generally, this kind of essay is not heavy with researched information or formal argument; its priority, instead, is to generate a powerful emotional and **aesthetic** effect (*aesthetic* referring to *artistic* and/or *beautiful* qualities).

Virginia Woolf’s 1942 “The Death of the Moth” is an illuminating example of such a work. While the essay does not present a stated argument and proceed to offer evidence in the same way conventional academic argument would, it does strive to *persuade*. Consider this piece carefully at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks12/1203811h.html#ch-02>and see if you can detect the theme that Woolf is developing.

The title of Woolf’s essay, “The Death of the Moth,” offers us, from the start, the knowledge of the work’s theme of death. Woolf’s choice of tone for an essay on this topic is, perhaps, what distinguishes it from the many other literary works on the subject. The attitude is not one of tragedy, horror, or indignation, as we might expect. Rather, through imagery and diction, Woolf generates a tone of *wistfulness*. By carefully crafting the reader’s experience of the moth’s death, through the author’s own first person point of view, she reminds us of our own human struggle against death, which is both heroic and inevitable.

While this piece is not a poem, what aspects of it are *poetic*? Consider the imagery employed to suggest the season of death, for all of nature. The writer describes her experience sitting at her desk next to the window, observing the signs of autumn: the plow “scoring the field” where the crop (or “share”) has already been harvested. Although the scene begins in morning—characterized by energetic exertions of nature, including the rooks, rising and settling into the trees again and again with a great deal of noise, “as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree tops were a tremendously exciting experience”—the day shifts, as the essay progresses, to afternoon, the birds having left the trees of this field for some other place. Like the moth, the day and the year are waning. The energy that each began with is now diminishing, as is the case for all living things.

The writer is impressed with the moth’s valiant struggle against its impending death because she is also aware of its inevitable doom: “[T] here was something marvellous as well as pathetic about him.” As is common in poetry, Woolf’s diction not only suggests her attitude toward the subject, but also exhibits a lyrical quality that enhances the work’s effect: She introduces words whose meanings are associated with youth and energy, as well as *sounding* strong with the “vigorous” consonants of “g,” “c,” “z,” and “t”—words such as “vigour,” “clamour,” and “zest.” Yet, the author counters this positive tone with other words that suggest, both in meaning and in their softer sounds, the vulnerability of living things: “thin,” “frail,” “diminutive,” and “futile.” In a third category of diction, with words of compliment—”extraordinary” and “uncomplainingly”—Woolf acknowledges the moth’s admirable fight. In addition to indicating the moth’s heroism, the very length of these words seems to model the moth’s attempts to drag out its last moments of life.

What impression does the essay, as a whole, convey? The writer acknowledges that watching even such a small creature as the moth struggle against death, she sympathizes with the moth and not with the “power of such magnitude” that carries on outside the window—that of time and inevitable change, for this power is ultimately her own “enemy” as well. In her last line, “O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am,” what lesson has she internalized regarding *herself*, a human being who at first observed the autumn day with no immediate sense of her own mortality?

# Models of Creative Nonfiction

Now that we have analyzed a creative nonfiction essay together, try your own hand at this process. With each of the following essays, I have included Questions for Consideration to help guide you to some of the key elements that generate particular effects and meanings. Once you have observed *how* these works make meaning, you might choose one on which to formulate a perspective and then compose a written argument making a case for that perspective.

Let’s begin with “Goodbye to All That,” by Joan Didion, 1967, at [http://juliaallison.com/goodbye-to-all-that-by-joan-didion/.](http://juliaallison.com/goodbye-to-all-that-by-joan-didion/)

### Questions for Consideration:

1. How does Didion employ sensory detail to draw us into her experience of New York City?
2. Of her images of New York, which are the most striking to you? What gives these images their impact?
3. What general impression of New York is created by the essay?
4. How does Didion use **catalogs** (or lists) to help generate a panoramic impression of the city in her early years there?
5. How does the writer experience her memories of New York City now? How does she use the notion of “film dissolve” to convey this perspective?
6. Why did her experience of the city change when she was twenty- eight?
7. What do you think is the general message of this essay?

While Didion’s “Goodbye to All That” is a *personal essay*, offering a glimpse into Didion’s own life as a vehicle for more general insight into human experience, Richard P. Feynman’s work “The Value of Science” focuses on the subject of science in a context more *social* than personal. In fact, it was originally offered as a *lecture* in 1955 for the National Academy of Sciences. As you read the work in its written form at [http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/40/2/Science.htm,](http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/40/2/Science.htm) consider how it might have been shaped by its original intent for lecture delivery to an audience composed primarily of scientists.

### Questions for Consideration:

1. In the beginning of the lecture, Feynman says that in talking not about scientific subjects but rather about *values*, he is “as dumb as the next guy.” How does this notion fit into his later argument that one important value of science is that it teaches us to live with uncertainty?
2. How does Feynman differentiate between scientific knowledge and moral choice? How does he make his case for the value of the *key* to heaven *and* hell?
3. The second value of science, according to Feynman, is that it stimulates a unique imaginative process, one that causes those who get turned onto the scientific perspective to “turn over each new stone.” How does his poem exemplify this unique kind of imagining? What is the meaning of line 17, “A mite makes the sea roar”?
4. How does Feynman use the metaphor of playing music to explain why perhaps more people are not “inspired by our present picture of the universe”?
5. What is your personal response to his reminder that our brain, which we equate with our *mind* (on which we base our notion of our individuality) is not made of the same atoms it was made of two weeks ago? Does this point affect you the way Feynman desired it to? Why or why not?
6. What, according to Feynman, is the importance of our learning to live in a state of uncertainty? How does science help foster this world view?

George Orwell, author of the novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty- Four*, among many other works, brings us back to the personal essay in his 1946 “Why I Write.” This essay not only offers a useful example of effective creative nonfiction, but it also gives us a glimpse into the subject of writing itself, raising questions about our own reasons for writing. You can read it at [http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300011h.html#part47.](http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300011h.html#part47)

### Questions for Consideration:

1. What does Orwell mean when he says that in his early resistance to becoming a writer, he was “outraging my true nature”? Can you identify with this sentiment in light of your own “natural” tendencies?
2. What kind of “literary activities” did Orwell engage in even when he was not purposefully developing his aspirations of becoming a writer? How then does his attitude contrast his perspective on that period as he looks back now, writing this essay?
3. What is the “joy of mere words” he describes? Can you give examples of words that affect you this way?
4. Consider the “four great motives for writing” listed by Orwell. According to him, how might these motives work against one another?
5. How does Orwell use his poem to explain why he eventually became political even though it was not in his “nature” to do so?
6. What is the role of aestheticism for Orwell even in writing a book with a political theme?
7. What does he mean when he says that “every book is a failure”?
8. If you were to write a similar essay tracing your development into a major, what details of your life would you focus on? If this major, and the profession it leads to, does not always fit well with your character and habits, where do the discrepancies lie?
9. If you were to write an essay about your development as a writer, how would your story be similar to Orwell’s? How would it be different?

The essays presented in this chapter reveal the potential power of creative nonfiction. Exhibiting strong differences from one another, these pieces illuminate the ways that various literary strategies can be used to generate particular effects. You may end up writing your own essay that provides a literary analysis of one of these works, giving you a chance to practice composing argument based on textual evidence. Whether you write *about* these essays or not, these works *model* strategies available to you as a writer.

Since the length of this chapter is limited by the constraints of space, I have included a brief list, below, of additional essays that might be of interest to you. These should be accessible, free of charge, on the internet. Like the other essays whose links are included in this chapter, these works provide both fascinating subjects for analysis and useful models for your own writing.

Anzaldua, Gloria. “How to Tame a Wild Tongue.” *Borderlands / La Frontera*, 2nd ed., Aunt [Lute Books, 1987. https://www.sfu.ca/iirp/](http://www.sfu.ca/iirp/) documents/Anzaldua%201999.pdf. Accessed 21 Dec. 2014.

Postman, Neil. “Of Luddites, Learning, and Life.” *Technos Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4, W[inter 1993. http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/](http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/) felwell/www/Theorists/Postman/Articles/TECHNOS\_NET.htm. Accessed 3 June 2014.

Sedaris, David. “Old Lady Down the Hall.” *Esquire*, http://www.esquire. com/news-politics/a498/old-lady-hall-sedaris-1000/. Accessed 5 Feb. 2014.

Wimsatt, William Upski. “How I Got My D.I.Y Degree.” *Unte Reader*, May/June 1998. Self Education Foundation. https:// selfeducationfoundation.wordpress.com/sef-history/diy-degree/. Accessed 7 Feb. 2014.