

Below is a description/definition of the personal essay. The same ideas are on p.1 of your P.E.N. ASSIGNMENTS packet. They are numbered on that page

THE PERSONAL ESSAY

The next group of selections are examples of the personal essay, the most easygoing and conversational of literary forms. The personal essayist begins with an interesting idea, some personally engaging notion; but the idea is seldom pursued along a straight line. Like any good conversationalist, the essayist lets one idea trigger another, wandering off onto any path that seems appealing, but always returning to the starting point. Think of an essay as good talk polished and raised to a higher level of style than is possible in impromptu speech. But remember that, for all its apparent formlessness, the good essay *does* make a point—often a very serious one—and it probably has more of a planned structure than at first meets the reader's eye.

When did the essay begin? The word "essay" was first used by the sixteenth-century French writer, Montaigne; it means an "attempt" or "experiment"—in other words an attempt to take up a subject and examine it from a personal point of view. Of course, writers had attempted to deal with ideas for centuries; but these "essays" of Montaigne had something quite new in them—the personal element. In these pieces, both long and short, Montaigne showed a frankness, an interest in the quirks of his own personality, an attempt to come to *know himself* and to share his self-examination with the reader.

The following quotation is excerpted from Montaigne's essay on "The Inconstancy of Our Actions."

There is some apparency to judge a man by the most common conditions of his life, but seeing the natural instability of our customs and opinions, I have often thought that even good Authors do ill and take a wrong

course, willfully to opinionate themselves about framing a constant and solid contexture of us. They choose a universal air, and following that image, range and interpret all a man's actions; which, if they cannot wrest sufficiently, they remit them into dissimulation. Augustus hath escaped their hands, for there is so apparent, so sudden and continual a variety of actions found in him, through the course of his life, that even the boldest Judges and strictest censurers have been fain to give him over and leave him undecided. There is nothing I so hardly believe to be in man as constancy, and nothing so easy to be found in him as inconstancy. He that should distinctly and part by part judge of him, should often jump to speak truth. View all antiquity over, and you shall find it a hard matter to choose out a dozen of men that have directed their life unto one certain, settled, and assured course, which is the surest drift of wisdom.

Essays are limited in subject only by the writers' reactions to their own inner and outer worlds. An American essayist, Christopher Morley, said, "No matter how personal or trifling the topic may be, there is always a tendency to generalize, to walk around the subject of experience and view it from several vantages. So an essay can never be more than an attempt for it is an excursion into the endless."

The personal essay is usually short and it does not attempt to arrive at a definitive or complete analysis of an idea. The style is informal, with a strong personal flavor closely resembling the elements of good conversation. In reading the selections that follow, imagine yourself sitting down with these witty and educated people (three are English, one Spanish) and just listening to them talk—about themselves.