THE RESEARCH PAPER

At some point in any course given in the department of English you almost certainly will be assigned the writing of a paper. Whether your teacher calls it a "critique," an "essay," an "essay examination," a "term paper," or a "research paper," he expects a performance that will fulfill at least three basic requirements. He expects you to demonstrate, first of all, that you have read a body of material; second, that your reading has led you to an understanding of it; and, third, that you have the facility in the use of English to communicate your understanding effectively to the reader of your paper. You will save yourself unnecessary grief if you recognize that all three requirements are of equal importance. To put it another way more bluntly, it is not enough to demonstrate that you have read: you must in turn have something to say about what you have read, and you must be able to say that "something" at least clearly, and hopefully even gracefully.

The research paper is the most complex writing assignment, for it requires you to find the materials you will read and write about. It means that you must first decide on a topic that can be researched in the libraries available to you. It also means that you must keep a record of the materials that you found. And it means further that you must present a selected portion of that record so that your reader may evaluate your judgments accurately. This is basic scholarship. If you do well you will have certain rewards. Of course you will earn a respectable grade, but that may turn out to be the smallest of the gains from your effort.
Most rewarding should be the knowledge that you have come through a difficult task stronger than you were when you went into it. You will have judged yourself self-reliant.

But recognize at the outset that much of what your friends have told you about the research paper is nonsense. A research paper is not an assignment that calls for inordinate numbers of footnotes spiced with Latin abbreviations: footnotes are to be used when they are necessary to document what must be documented. Nor is the research paper to be an accumulation of quotations: quotations, paraphrases, and plot summaries are -- at best -- useful forms of evidence for supporting generalizations that you make. And, perhaps most important, the research paper is not the record of an enormous number of books skimmed: it does require the use of sources, but the topic and your approach to it will determine how many sources are appropriate and which sources are necessary. The point is that it is wrong to turn useful tools of inquiry into the dumb-show of pseudo-scholarship.

What, then, is a research paper? It is the presentation of the results of an independent investigation of a specific topic. The topic itself must be of a special kind if the paper is to have any significance at all. No simple statement will be a suitable topic; no declaration, no form of communication other than a question will result in the basis for a successful research project. You will recognize the point quickly and finally in one brief example. Write your name on a slip of paper. Now think of how you might suggest this to a friend as a possible research topic. Simply telling him your name will be of little use. You would have to devise some question about it, or any of its elements: "What is the origin of
my last name?" "What is the symbolism of my first name, and how did that symbolic reference accrue to it?" It is to a question, then, that the research paper must direct itself.

The stages involved in preparing a research paper are:

1. Understanding the assignment
2. Defining the topic to be pursued
3. Recognizing the questions implied by the topic
4. Determining the kinds of materials needed to answer those questions
5. Gathering the materials
6. Abstracting notes on those portions of the materials relevant to your topic
7. Organizing the notes into a meaningful and relevant pattern geared to answer the questions implied by your topic
8. Writing the paper
9. Revising the paper so that it clearly and effectively communicates both the problem and its resolution
10. Proofreading and checking the format of the total paper (text, footnotes, and bibliography) to insure accuracy and completeness of presentation.

So a research paper is not a series of diary-like entries of the things you have thought, nor a travelogue of the books you have seen, nor a record of the library shelves you have visited. Your professor's purpose in assigning it is not to catch students cheating or tripping over format. It is a legitimate and a necessary assignment designed to give you practical experience in using the library, in gathering material, in taking systematic and helpful notes, and in efficiently organizing your judgments in the writing of a long paper. Ideally, you can demonstrate
simultaneously your knowledge and understanding of both your sub-
ject and the writing process. If all goes well, what you have done
will be a research paper: it will present the questions implied by
your chosen subject, the answers to those questions and the infor-
mation on which you have based your answer.
In the beginning of the 1800's, the Grimm Brothers traveled through the German countryside, collected fairy tales and issued them as Kinderund Hausmarchen, which translates, to Children's and Household Tales (Storytelling Encyclopedia 204). Many years later, in the early 1970's, Anne Sexton re-wrote a number of those same fairy tales, incorporating them into poetry form. To some degree, the Grimm Brothers were ahead of their time; they seemed to comprehend the fears of childhood and portrayed those fears vividly in their fairytales. However, they were not so far ahead that they placed men and women equally in society.

According to Hall in her book Anne Sexton:

A mature reader can plainly see in these tales the patriarchal bias of a male-oriented social view.

Ambitious women are witches, ugly and scheming. Good women are quiet, domestic, and submissive. (92)

Fairy tale characters have no middle ground; principal female figures are generally portrayed as diffident and soft-spoken or they are depicted as evil. "In the world of Wilhelm Grimm a talkative woman meant trouble" (Bottigheimer 125). This may explain why many of Grimm's good female characters are quiet and
have less dialogue than their male counterpoints. Sexton’s
Transformations uses extensive imagery and sarcasm to poke fun
at the Grimm Brother’s old-fashioned sexist ways. In Sexton’s
rendition of “Hansel and Gretel” she portrays Gretel as a
subservient girl in a male dominated world, but in contrast to
the Grimm Brother’s version, Sexton’s use of metaphor, sarcasm
and black humor elevates the female character and projects her
authority over men.

Throughout the first part of Grimm’s “Hansel and Gretel”,
Gretel is portrayed as weak, without having ideas and holding no
hope. She “wept bitter tears” on pages 87 and 92, and felt
distressed and hopeless enough to cry again on pages 88 and 89:

Ah, how the poor little sister did lament when she had
to fetch the water, and how her tears did flow down
her cheeks! “Dear God, do help us,” she cried. (Sexton
92)

The Grimm Brothers mention Gretel’s crying five times in their
version of the tale. This repetitive behavior (her crying)
illustrates that Gretel is a feeble female who looks to her
brother, Hansel, for emotional support. In comparison, Sexton
makes only one mention of Gretel’s crying:

Gretel

who had said nothing so far

nodded her head and wept. (Sexton 90-92)
By placing Gretel’s name alone on a line, Sexton elevates
Gretel’s importance in the story and provides foreshadowing by
hinting at Gretel’s upcoming accomplishment. Gretel’s
prominence continues with Sexton’s next lines “She who neither
dropped pebbles or bread / bided her time” (Sexton 93-94).
Sexton infers that although Gretel had been quiet to this point
in the story, her mind was vigorously working on solutions to
the sibling’s predicament, and she was waiting for the right
opportunity to put her plan into action. This is a distinct
contrast from Grimm’s Gretel, who seemed to merely be a
follower, incapable of doing her own thinking.

Hansel, on the other hand, is depicted as the leader and
Gretel’s protector in Grimm’s tale. Hansel alone interacts with
the siblings stepmother, sheltering Gretel from the
stepmother’s evil ways. He comforts Gretel by assuring her they
will “wait a little, until the moon has risen”, and then “find
the way” out of the big, dark woods (Grimm 88). Hansel is also
more delectable than Gretel and the witch chooses to fatten him
up for her feast. Gretel is only worthy of a servant’s status
and is forced to “do what the wicked witch commanded” (92). The
best food was cooked for Hansel and poor Gretel was only allowed
crab shells after her full day of labor. Comparatively, Sexton
begins her poem with a lengthy description of how edible the son
(presumably Hansel) is. The mother could easily be interchanged
with the wicked witch because of their similar cannibalistic
ways. Sexton's mother can hardly resist her son and wants to bite, chew, and eat him up, "little nubkin / sweet as fudge" (Sexton 101). She continues later, in the body of the poem, by stating that Hansel was "smarter", "bigger" and "juicier" (103). Sexton proceeds with a stately simile to describe how the witch is planning to fatten Hansel:

Each day she fed him goose liver
so that he would fatten
so that he would be as larded
as a plump coachman
that knight of the whip. (73-77)

What lurks beneath the surface of Sexton's poem, is a dark humor that contrasts Hansel's confinement in a barn as a prisoner, with that of his filling up on goose liver, considered a delicacy consumed by the rich. Sexton goes on to describe poor Gretel as a "saucy lass", good enough only to be an "hors d'oeuvre" (Sexton 104). This is an entertaining and witty way to contrast Gretel's servant status with Hansel's status of royalty. Sexton's underlying meaning, of course, is that Gretel is not second rate at all.

In Grimm's rendition, Hansel, is continually coming up with ideas to save Gretel and himself. He drops the pebbles, which enables them to return home the first time. He leaves the trail of breadcrumbs, a failed attempt at their second homecoming. Clearly, Hansel was the dominant of the siblings. Gretel had to
behave like a "silly goose" and act dumb when she realized she had the opportunity to trap and burn the witch in the oven (Grimm 93). She then ran immediately to Hansel and cried "Hansel, we are saved!" (93). Instead of giving Gretel any praise for rescuing him, Hansel instantly takes the dominate role back by instructing Gretel that they "must be off" and on their way back home (93). Sexton depicts Gretel as a quiet girl waiting for the right time to pounce. Sexton's concise line "Gretel spoke at last" alerts the reader that something important is about to happen (Sexton 104). Immediately following, Sexton states:

Gretel
seeing her moment in history
shut fast the oven
locked fast the door
fast as Houdini
and turned the oven on to bake. (107-112)

In speaking of Gretel's "moment in history" Sexton sarcastically implies that Gretel will have few moments compared with Hansel's many as she alludes to Grimm's sexism by pointing out this imbalance. Sexton ironically indicates, by repeating the word "fast", that Gretel's one moment passes so quickly she hardly receives any credit for her extraordinary feat.

Gretel fits the classic Grimm character; she bows to Hansel throughout the story and is timid and quiet. Even during her one
moment of glory she has very little dialogue. Sexton puts her "personal stamp" on "Hansel and Gretel" and transforms Gretel, using her unique observations, into a more powerful figure than she has been given credit for in the Grimm Brothers version (Hall 98). When Hansel and Gretel finally return safely to their father, one can only guess what might change in their happy little home. Go Gretel, go!
Works Cited


