

# ESSAYS IN LOVE: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

“I have no idea what love is; no one does. But I do know that life is meaningless without it.”  
—Noam Chomsky

For this assignment I would like you to do some in-depth analysis of six key passages from Alain de Botton’s *ESSAYS IN LOVE*. The passages are from the first two essays: “Romantic Fatalism” and “Idealization.”

For each passage I would like you to explain in your own words exactly what the narrator is saying. I would also like you to comment on the importance of the passage—what is the “big idea” or the important insight that narrator shares?



Use the space provided or use separate paper if you wish.

## ROMANTIC FATALISM

10. We attributed to events a narrative logic they could not inherently have possessed. We mythologized our aircraft encounter into the goddess Aphrodite’s design, Act One, Scene One of that primordial narrative, the love story. From the time of each of our births, it seemed as though the giant mind in the sky had been subtly shifting our orbits so that we would one day meet on the Paris-London shuttle. Because love had come true for us, we could overlook the countless stories that fail to occur, romances that never get written because someone misses the plane or loses the phone number. Like historians, we were unmistakably on the side of what had actually happened.

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16. From within love, we conceal the chance nature of our lives behind a purposive veil. We insist that the meeting with our redeemer, objectively haphazard and hence unlikely, has been prewritten in a scroll slowly unwinding in the sky. We invent a destiny to spare ourselves the anxiety that would arise from acknowledging that the little sense there is in our lives is merely created by ourselves, that there is no scroll (and hence no preordained fate awaiting) and that who we may or may not be meeting on aeroplanes has no sense beyond that we choose to attribute to it—in short, the anxiety that no one has written our story or assured our loves.

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18. My mistake was to confuse a destiny to love with a destiny to love a given person. It was the error of thinking that Chloe, rather than love, was inevitable. But my fatalistic interpretation of the start of our story was at least proof of one thing: that I was in love with Chloe. The moment when I would feel that our meeting or not meeting was in the end only an accident, only a probability of one in 989.727, would also be the moment when I would have ceased to feel the absolute necessity of a life with her—and thereby have ceased to love her.

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## **IDEALIZATION**

1. 'Seeing through people is so easy, and it gets you nowhere,' remarked Elias Canetti, suggesting how effortlessly and yet how uselessly we can find fault with others. Do we not fall in love partly out of a momentary will to suspend seeing through people, even at the cost of blinding ourselves a little in the process? If cynicism and love lie at opposite ends of a spectrum, do we not sometimes fall in love in order to escape the debilitating cynicism to which we are prone? Is there not in every coup de foudre a certain wilful exaggeration of the qualities of the beloved, an exaggeration which distracts us from our habitual pessimism and focuses our energies on someone in whom we can believe in a way we have never believed in ourselves?

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9. What is so frightening is the extent to which we may idealize others when we have such trouble tolerating ourselves—*because* we have such trouble . . . I must have realized that Chloe was only human, with all the implications carried by the word, but could I not be forgiven for my desire to suspend such a thought? Every fall into love involves the triumph of hope over self-knowledge. We fall in love hoping we won't find in another what we know is in ourselves, all the cowardice, weakness, laziness, dishonesty, compromise, and stupidity. We throw a cordon of love around the chosen one and decide that everything within it will somehow be free of our faults. We locate inside another a perfection that eludes us within ourselves, and through our union with the beloved, hope to maintain (against the evidence of all self-knowledge) a precarious faith in our species.

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10. Why did this awareness not prevent my fall into love? Because the illogicality and childishness of my desire did not outweigh my need to believe. I knew the void that romantic intoxication could fill, I knew the exhilaration that comes from identifying someone, anyone, as admirable. Long before I had even laid eyes on Chloe, I must have needed to find in the face of another an integrity I had never caught sight of within myself.

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