
WRITING ESSAYS
ABOUT LITERATURE

A Guide and Style Sheet
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Strategies for Interpreting Literature

Why Do People Read Literature?

People read literature for many reasons, but the two most likely reasons are for pleasure and for meaning. We read literature because it is fun and because it speaks to us about important things.

When we read purely for pleasure, we do not usually care what the work means. We just want to escape from the concerns of the day and let the work perform its magic on us. You may remember your first great reading experience, when you were so caught up in a work that you were oblivious to everything else. Reading just for pleasure is like that. We sit down with a book and say to ourselves, "I don't want to think. I just want to enjoy."

But on a more thoughtful level, reading for pleasure and reading for meaning are related. Part of the pleasure of reading comes from the meaning it gives us. On first reading a Raymond Chandler detective novel, for example, we may be gripped by the suspenseful plot. We eagerly turn pages just to find out what will happen next. But upon rereading the novel, and possibly reading other works by him, we discover a thematic and artistic richness we may not have noticed before: how he uses conventions of the detective story—wise guy dialogue, intrigue, suspense, urban settings, stereotypical characters, melancholy hero—to render a moral dimension to his fictional world. We notice his poetic language, his mastery of tone, his insights about American cities, about American obsessions, about high life and low life, wealth and

poverty, innocence and crime. As we continue to read Chandler, we move from one level of enjoyment—reading for “escape”—to another—reading for meaning. Or, put another way, we find ourselves reading not just for pleasure and meaning but for pleasure *because* of meaning.

In this book we will explore how to uncover the meanings of works of literature. These include the themes of a work (its comments about the human condition) as well as the workings and effectiveness of such devices as characterization, setting, plot, and language. Although one can study the aesthetic qualities of literature—the devices authors use to give us pleasure—for themselves, here we will consider them as integral to meaning. They are the means by which authors deliver ideas, they influence our response to these ideas, and their appeal often arises from the ideas they embody. On the one hand, we like the ideas in a work because of its artistic devices; on the other, we admire the devices because we like the ideas. Form and content, beauty and truth—they can hardly be separated.

How do we discover meaning in works of literature? We do so through interpretation.

What Is Interpretation?

Interpretation is a process. It is the process of examining the details of works of literature in order to make sense of them. John Ellis, the literary theorist, describes the goals and process of interpretation in this way: interpretation “is a hypothesis about the most general organization and coherence of all the elements that form a literary text.” This “organization and coherence” emerges from a “synthesis” between a work’s themes and its details. “The most satisfying interpretation,” he says, “will be that which is the most inclusive. The procedure of investigation will be that of any inquiry: a continual move between general notions of the coherence of the text, and consideration of the function within the whole of particular parts of it. General conceptions will change in the light of particular observations, and new particular observations will then become necessary in the light of the changed conceptions” (202). Ellis is saying here that as we read, we encounter details of a work and begin to draw conclusions about how they relate to one another, what they mean. As we continue to read, we encounter more details. These may confirm our hypotheses or cause us to replace them with new ones. Once we have finished reading the work, we can decide

which hypotheses account for the most details; those hypotheses, Ellis says, constitute the best interpretations.

Many critics today would disagree with Ellis that the best interpretation “covers” or accounts for the most details in a work or that it establishes a “coherence” that unifies the whole work. For one thing, it is hard to say which interpretation covers the most details. For another, the most comprehensive interpretation may not be the most satisfying to a particular reader. We might, for example, want to focus on just one aspect of a work, such as the motivation of a character or the influence of setting. Many works, furthermore, stubbornly resist complete “coherence.” But Ellis is correct about how the process of interpretation works. Interpretation is a quest for ideas manifested by a work’s details. To be believable and convincing, therefore, interpretations must emerge from the details of the work. If we encounter details that contradict our interpretations, we must adjust the interpretations to accommodate those details.

Interpretation is something we do with more than just literature. It is an unavoidable process in any thinking person’s life: Why is Miriam angry with me? Why did Jonathan go to pieces when he took the test? Would this job be better for me than that one? How will my blowup with Lucy affect our relationship? Is the defendant guilty? Should we legalize late-term abortions? What were the causes of World War II? Do human beings have free will? Answering questions like these, from the trivial to the profound, requires interpretation.

A crime scene, for example, demands a similar interpretive process as a work of literature. You, the detective, have just arrived at the scene of the crime. As you examine the details of the scene, you formulate hypotheses about what happened and who is responsible. With the discovery of new evidence, you adjust your hypotheses until, having sifted through all the evidence, you decide who committed the crime. A key difference between crime scenes and works of literature, however, is that literature has authors. Criminals may be “authors” of a sort; they create the crime scene, but they do not want us to know what they have done. Authors, in contrast, want to reach us. The following diagram represents this process of communication:



Authors have ideas, express them in works of literature, and “send” the works to us, their readers. We read (“receive”) the works. As receivers, our challenge is to understand authors’ ideas. But this challenge is complicated

by the nature of literature. Instead of just telling us what their ideas are, authors use “literary” devices—metaphor, symbol, plot, connotation, rhyme, meter, and so forth—to convey ideas. Such devices communicate meaning indirectly. They force us to figure out authors’ ideas. It is as if an author says to us, “I want to state my ideas about something, but instead of saying them straight out, I will tell a story and let you figure out what I’m trying to say.” Or the author says, “The woman I’m in love with is wonderful, but instead of telling you directly how this is so, I’m going to say, ‘My love is like a red, red rose.’” Most authors impose the task of “figuring out” on us, the readers. Such a task requires interpretation. The craft of interpreting literature is called *literary criticism*. Anyone who interprets literature is a literary critic.

How Do We Interpret?

Interpretation of works of literature is the process of thinking about their details in order to see how the details interconnect and what ideas they convey. Interpretation requires us to be active rather than passive readers. When we read purely for pleasure, we are generally “passive,” letting the work wash over us, not trying to figure it out. But when we interpret, we need to pay close attention to the potential meaning of details. Keeping in mind the model of author→work→reader, we can think of the author as using literary devices to manipulate our emotions and our beliefs. As interpreters, we should be alert to authors’ wiles. Do we agree with the ideas authors try to foist on us? The following are suggestions about how to be active, interpreting readers.

1. **Get the facts straight.** The first, most fundamental step in interpreting anything is to see clearly what is in the work, its “facts.” For some works, this is easy to do; the details in them are accessible and understandable. But for other works, getting the facts straight may not be so easy. The poetry of seventeenth-century poets like John Donne and George Herbert is notoriously dense and requires close study to understand. Modernist and Post-Modernist authors such as T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison employ innovative techniques that obscure the details of their works. The language of Chaucer and Shakespeare is not quite our language. To understand it we have to rely on glosses (definitions) that editors often place at the bottom of the page. In short, we sometimes have to work hard just to recognize the facts of

literary works. When we read, then, we should look up words we do not know. We should track down allusions (to myths, the Bible, historical and biographical events). We should read works slowly and more than once.

2. **Connect the work with yourself.** For each of us, the most important meanings of works of literature will arise from our own experience and beliefs. This does not mean that the reasons people value great authors like Sophocles, Sappho, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and George Eliot are unimportant. Such reasons are part of our cultural heritage. Not to be interested in them is to deny ourselves the wisdom of that heritage. Even worse, to care only about our own “meanings” is to cut ourselves off from the rest of humankind. But, that said, unless we can connect a work of literature to our own experiences and interests, it will not live for us.

The “connection” strategy is to actively project ourselves into works of literature, especially ones that seem disconnected from us. We ask, “How would I live under these circumstances?” Take, for example, the writings of the New England Puritans, which may seem remote and forbidding. If you use your imagination to place yourself in the Puritan world, you can capture its connection to your life. How would you think and feel had you lived then—about your family, the wilderness around you, the difficulty of scraping out a living, the harsh winters, the imperatives of your religious beliefs? What would your psychological state—emotional conflicts and tensions—have been? Authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne (in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850); Arthur Miller (in his play *The Crucible*, 1954); and Maryse Condé (in her novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, 1986) have done just this—projected themselves into Puritan culture and produced highly imaginative rethinkings of it. As readers, we can do the same. By asking questions like the following, we can recover the appeal of works of literature that may at first seem distant from our own lives:

- How are things in the work (characters, incidents, places) similar to things in our lives?
- How does this work challenge our beliefs?
- What new things does the work bring up for us?
- How does this work give us pleasure?
- What is upsetting or unpleasant about it?

3. **Develop hypotheses as you read.** As John Ellis says in the passage on page 8, when we read works of literature, even for the first time, we generate ideas about them. The “hypothesis” strategy makes this action intentional and constant. As you read, raise questions about what the details mean: Why does a particular character act the way she does? What ideas does a character espouse? Why does the author keep using a particular image? rhyme scheme? metrical pattern? As you read, do not feel that you have to give final answers to these questions. Plan to come back to them later. Such questions and tentative answers get us thinking, help us pick up important details that pop up later, and make reviewing the work easier.
4. **Write as you read.** Writing generates ideas and helps us think creatively. By putting concepts in our own words, we make them our own and embed them in our memory. If you own copies of works of literature, write in them: underline passages, circle words, draw arrows from one passage to another. In the margins, write questions, summaries, definitions, topics the author addresses, and tentative interpretations. If something is repeated in a work, note where it first appears (“see page xxx”) and make comparisons later. Such notations help us generate ideas about what we are reading. When we review, our markings highlight important places in the work and lead us to synthesize details.
5. **Learn from the interpretations of others.** Although we read alone, interpretation is most fruitful as a shared activity, something we do with others. Knowing what others think helps us decide what we think. One critic wrote that even blurbs on book jackets helped him get his bearings in a work. By learning from the insights and knowledge of others, we place ourselves in a dialogue with them. We listen, agree, disagree, share, and thereby clarify what we believe. Interpretations by professional critics are readily available in books and articles. But equally stimulating are the ideas of people we know—friends, classmates, teachers, colleagues. These people are often nearby, ready to share what they think.
6. **Analyze works of literature.** To *analyze* is to examine the “parts” of something and discover the relationships among them. Analysis is a powerful, necessary strategy for generating and communicating interpretations of anything, not just literature. If, for example, you sell computers, you will do it better if you can analyze them—know how they work and what they can do, thus what they “mean” (how, for example, they can help your customers). The same is true for inter-

preting literature. Being able to analyze literature helps us see how each “part” contributes to the meaning of a work.

In the next chapter, we will consider the “parts” of literature itself and how they contribute to the meaning of works of literature.

Works Cited

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What Is Literature?

Is a Batman comic book “literature”? What about a physics textbook? a restaurant menu? a university catalog? a television sitcom? a political speech? the letters we write home? Back about the middle of the twentieth century, critics thought they knew what literature was and thus the answer to such questions. The so-called New Critics, who flourished in the United States from the 1920s until the 1960s, believed that literature had certain properties that people trained in the writing and studying of literature could identify. Some of these properties were to them mysterious, even spiritual, and thus to be intuited rather than rationally identified. Other properties, however, were objective and identifiable—such things as imagery, metaphor, meter, rhyme, irony, and plot. The New Critics confidently identified and evaluated works of literature, elevating the “great” works of literature to high status. Literature for them consisted, with but few exceptions, of poetry, drama, and fiction and would definitely *not* have included the kinds of writing listed at the beginning of this paragraph.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, critics questioned the concept of literature expounded by the New Critics. The New Critics, they noted, seemed narrow in policing the literary “canon,” that unofficial collection of works that critics deem worthy of admiration and study. The New Critics were mostly male and Eurocentric, and the works they admired were usually by males who wrote within the European literary tradition. Largely excluded from the canon were works by females, persons of color, and persons who lived outside Europe. Excluded, also, were the genres (kinds) of “literature” that such outsiders preferred. Because women, for example, often lacked access to the means of publishing literature, many

wrote in genres that would not normally be published: letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, autobiographies. Why, critics asked, were these genres not “literature”? Because people of color were often politically active, they wrote in genres that furthered political ends: speeches, autobiographies, essays. Why were these not thought of as “literature”? And because some people belonged to “traditional” cultures, their works were often meant to be spoken, not written. Were these works not “literature”?

As a result of such questions and because of the emergence of new theories about language, critics wrestled anew with the question, “What is literature?” At stake were a number of related issues: Which works would get published? Which works were available—in textbooks and paperbacks—to be taught? What groups of people would be valued (because their works were read and appreciated)? If we compare textbook anthologies of English and American literature published circa 1960 with those published today, we can see that the canon now embraces a much broader variety of authors, works, and genres.

Such a comparison reveals how much the concept of “literature” has changed in the past forty years. Some theorists have challenged even the concept of literature. John Ellis argues that literature is not definable by properties, such as rhyme, meter, plot, setting, and characterization. “Nonliterary” works often have such properties—advertisements, popular songs, jokes, graffiti. Rather, the definition of literature is like that of weeds. Just as weeds are “plants we do not wish to cultivate” (38), so literature is identifiable by how people use it. People use works of literature not for their utilitarian purposes—to get something done—but as objects of enjoyment in themselves. Or, as Ellis puts it, a work becomes literature when it is no longer “specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin” (44). If, for example, a physics textbook stops being read for its information about physics and is read instead for some other reason—say, the elegance of its prose style—then it transcends the “immediate context of its origin” and becomes literature.

Terry Eagleton, another contemporary critic, is even more radical than Ellis: “Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist” (11). Literature—and the literary “canon”—are constructs, established by society: “Anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature—Shakespeare, for example—can cease to be literature” (10).

Ellis and Eagleton represent a skeptical reaction to the categorical pronouncements of the New Critics, whose definitions excluded many

works we value today. Nonetheless, as interpreters of literature, it is helpful for us to know about properties traditionally identified with literature. Not every work may contain all of these, but most will have one or more of them. We can think of these characteristics as “places” to look for meaning in literature.

Literature Is Language

The word *literature* has traditionally meant written—as opposed to spoken—works. But today, given the broadened meaning of the word, it includes oral as well as written works. The works of Homer emerged from an oral tradition, and it is even possible that the author “Homer,” whether a single individual or a group of people, was illiterate and spoke his works to a scribe, who wrote them down. What Homer and other oral story tellers have in common with writers is language: The medium of literature, whether oral or written, is language. This raises questions about the “literariness” of media that rely heavily on other means of communication: film, or dance, or certain forms of theater (mime, slapstick, farce), or comic books. Most critics believe that language is a key aspect of literature and that there has to be enough language in a work for it to be considered literature.

Some theorists claim that authors of literature use language in special ways. One of those ways, according to René Wellek, is an emphasis on connotative rather than denotative meanings of words. Scientists, for example, use language for its *denotative* value, its ability to provide signs (words) that mean one thing only. For scientists, the thing the sign represents—the referent—is more important than the sign itself. Any sign will do, as long as it represents the referent clearly and exactly (11). Because emotions render meanings imprecise, scientists try to use signs that eliminate the emotional, the irrational, the subjective. Writers of literature, in contrast, use language *connotatively*—to bring into play all the emotional associations words may have. *Connotation* is the meaning that words have in addition to their explicit referents. An example of connotation is the word *mother*, whose denotation is simply “female parent” but whose connotations include such qualities as protection, warmth, unqualified love, tenderness, devotion, mercy, intercession, home, childhood, the happy past. Even scientific language becomes connotative once it enters everyday speech. When we see Albert Einstein’s equation $E = mc^2$, we no longer think just of “Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared” but of mushroom clouds

and ruined cities. Or the term *DNA*, which denotes the genetic code of life, connotes the alteration of species or the freeing of innocent people from death row. Some kinds of literature (poetry, for example) rely more heavily on connotation than others. Realistic novels, in contrast to much poetry, may contain precise denotative descriptions of physical objects. But most authors of literature are sensitive to the emotional nuances of words.

The Russian Formalists, a group of theorists who flourished in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, claimed another use of language as a defining quality of literature. The key to literature, they said, is “literary” language, language that calls attention to itself as different from ordinary, everyday language. The term for this quality, invented by Viktor Shklovsky, is “defamiliarisation” (literally, “making strange”). “The technique of art,” he said, “is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (quoted in Selden 31). Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarization can apply not just to language but other aspects of literary form—plot, for example, or techniques of drama. The principle of defamiliarization is to “foreground”—give prominence to—something in the work of literature that departs from everyday use or familiar artistic conventions. When authors foreground language, they in effect say, “Hey! Look at my language! See how different it is from ordinary language!” They focus on language for itself. They are fascinated by its sounds, its rhythms, even its appearance on the page. Sometimes they become so interested in these qualities that they subordinate meaning to them. Some nursery rhymes, for example, exhibit a delight in language that virtually deemphasizes meaning, like this one, “Swan”:

Swan, swan, over the sea:
Swim, swan, swim!
Swan, swan, back again;
Well swum, swan!

Here, the anonymous author revels in the repetition of sounds that key off the word *swan*. People who use language in everyday, nonliterary speech and writing also show sensitivity to its sounds and subjective qualities, but writers of literature exploit these qualities more fully, more consciously, and more systematically.

Language is one of the “places” we can look for meaning in literature. We can be alert to how writers convey ideas in their subtle and

complex use language. Questions such as these help us focus on such usage: How does an author use language to signal ideas? What seems significant about such things as the author’s choice of words (*diction*), ways of constructing sentences (*syntax*), word sounds, repetitions of key words and phrases, archaisms of diction or syntax (as in language that echoes the King James Bible or Shakespeare)?

Literature Is Fictional

We commonly use the term *fiction* to describe prose works that tell a story (for example, fairy tales, short stories, and novels). In fact, however, most works of literature are “fictional” in the sense that something in them signals that readers may set them apart from the context of real life.

A work can be fictional in two ways. First, authors make up—imagine—some or all of the material. This property explains why literature is often referred to as “imaginative literature”; it features invented material that does not exist in the real world. In fantasy fiction, for example, human beings fly, perform magic, remain young, travel through time, metamorphose, and live happily ever after. But even historical fiction, which relies on actual events, is fictional. It includes characters, dialogue, events, and settings that never existed. The three main characters of Hilary Mantel’s 1992 novel *A Place of Greater Safety*—Camille Desmoulins, Maximilien Robespierre, and Georges-Jacques Danton—were real people. But the author, while following the outline of their participation in the French Revolution, makes up much of what they do and say.

Second, the fictionality of literature lies also in the artistic control the writer exercises over the work. This artistic control has the effect of stylizing the materials of the work and thus setting it apart from the real. This effect occurs even when the material does accurately mirror the facts of real life or when it states ideas that can be verified in actual experience. Such works would include autobiographies like those by Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass and “true crime” narratives like Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966) and Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979). Compare, for example, how a newspaper reporter and a poet would describe the same event. Assume that both would describe the event accurately. The reporter would make his or her account correspond as exactly as possible to the event. Just like the poet, the reporter “controls” his or her account by arranging events in order, by choosing apt words, by leaving out details. There is an art to

what the reporter does. But the reporter wants us to experience the details of the event, not the report of it. The poet, in contrast, makes his or her *poem* the object of experience. Through the play of language, selection of details, inclusion of metaphor, irony, and imagery, the poet makes the work an artifact, an object of enjoyment and contemplation in itself. Consider Walt Whitman's "Cavalry Crossing a Ford" (1867), a poetic account of an event he no doubt witnessed during the American Civil War:

A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,
They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun—hark
to the musical clank,
Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop
to drink,
Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person a pic-
ture, the negligent rest on the saddles,
Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering the
ford—while,
Scarlet and blue and snowy white,
The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind.

Although there are no end rhymes or regular metrical patterns in this poem, readers sense, even if they are not sure why, that this is a work of literature. The way it looks—lines separated, not run together, as they would be in prose. Also, such devices as unusual word choice ("array," "betwixt," "behold," "guidon"), alliteration ("flags flutter"), repeated vowel sounds ("silvery river," "horses loitering"), repeated phrases ("Behold the silvery river," "Behold the brown-faced men"), and colorful imagery ("Scarlet and blue and snowy white") call attention to *how* Whitman describes the event, to the poem itself. In this way, the work becomes "fictional." It transcends the event described. Long after people have forgotten the event, they will take pleasure in the poem.

Even works that are not supposedly fictional, that purport to be about real people and events, become "fictional" by means of literary devices. Two well-known autobiographical examples are Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). Thoreau really did live in a cabin at Walden Pond, and we can be fairly sure the events he records in *Walden* did happen. But Thoreau does so many "literary" things with those events that he causes us to conceive of them in aesthetic and thematic terms. His prose style is highly stylized and "poetic." He emphasizes his own feelings. He collapses the two

years he actually spent at Walden into one year, and organizes that year around the four seasons of the year, thus giving the book a kind of "plot." He retells events to illustrate philosophical themes. The text is heavily metaphoric and symbolic. As with Thoreau, Richard Wright records events that actually happened. But here, too, the author employs "literary" devices to make these events vivid. He conveys his intense feelings by means of a first person point of view similar to that a fiction writer would use. His language is charged with emotional intensity. Perhaps most striking, he constructs "novelistic" scenes. These scenes, which have extensive dialogue and minute descriptions of physical actions and details, are almost certainly "fictional" in that it is improbable the author could have remembered the exact words these people said and the physical details he records. We can believe they happened, but Wright fills in details to give them aesthetic impact.

The fictional quality of literature is a second "place" to look for meaning in literature. The fantasy element in literature is fun in itself, but fiction grants authors the option to fill in gaps that always exist in historical events, to make connections that historians cannot. Also, the stylized quality of literature often underscores ideas. Whitman's "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," for example, conveys the impression of lightheartedness, vigor, and gaiety, largely through his selection of details of color, sound, and light. What, then, seems fictional about the work, whether imagined or stylized? What ideas do those qualities suggest?

Literature Is True

Even though works of literature are "fictional," they have the capacity for being "true." This paradox creates one of the most pleasurable tensions in literature: its imaginative and stylized properties (fictionality) against its commentary on the human condition (truth). There are at least three ways that literature can be true. First, literature can be true to the facts of reality, as in descriptions of real people, places, and events—Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the operations of a coal mine, the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, the details of human anatomy, the biology of a forest.

More important, literature can be true by communicating ideas about life. Again, the model we presented in Chapter 1 is relevant here:



Authors have certain ideas they want to communicate to readers. They embed them in works of literature and “send” the works to readers. We can most readily spot this purpose when authors directly state their ideas, as in this poem, “My Friend, the Things That Do Attain,” by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, written in 1547:

My friend, the things that do attain
 The happy life be these, I find:
 The riches left, not got with pain;
 The fruitful ground; the quiet mind;

 The equal friend; no grudge, no strife;
 No charge of rule, nor governance;
 Without disease, the healthy life;
 The household of continuance;

 The mean diet, no dainty fare;
 Wisdom joined with simpleness;
 The night discharged of all care,
 Where wine the wit may not oppress:

 The faithful wife, without debate;
 Such sleeps as may beguile the night;
 Content thyself with thine estate,
 Neither wish death, nor fear his might.

Here the poet tells us straight out his ideas about how to live the “happy life.” Even when authors employ obvious elements of fantasy, they can state their ideas directly. Aesop’s animal characters are like no animals in real life: They reason, talk, and act like human beings. But the author uses these fantastic characters to state “morals,” shrewd commentaries on the human experience.

More typically, however, authors refrain from stating their ideas directly. Instead, they present them indirectly by means of literary conventions such as plot, metaphor, symbol, irony, musical language, and suspense. All the details of a work make up an imaginary “world” that is based on the author’s ideas about the real world. The world of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), for example, is filled with crumbling buildings, frightened people, children who spitefully turn their parents over to the police, procedures whereby truth is systematically altered, masses of people trapped by their ignorance and selfishness, and officials who justify any deed to achieve power. It is a world without

love, compassion, justice, joy, tradition, altruism, idealism, or hope. The facts of this world are patently imaginary—Orwell placed them in the future—but we infer from them that Orwell had an extremely pessimistic view of human nature and human institutions. We sense that he is warning us: the terrible society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has already existed in places like Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia and could spread to other places as well.

Since most works of literature tell stories, two prominent conventions for communicating ideas are *typical characters* and *probable actions*. You may have heard the phrase “stranger than fiction,” as if the characters and events in works of fiction are abnormal and bizarre. But, ironically, it is real life that gives us freakish events and inexplicable people. In contrast, authors impose order on the chaos of real life. To do this, they present characters who typify real people, and they recount actions that would probably happen in real life. J. R. R. Tolkien, for example, offers an array of fantasy creatures and kingdoms in *The Hobbit* and its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet his characters, whatever they may look like, represent recognizable types of people. The protagonists, Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, for example, typify those gentle, kindly people who would prefer to live in domestic obscurity but who instead play heroic roles in cataclysmic dramas. And the way they behave is probable because it fits the types of people they are. They do not suddenly become supermen with supernatural powers. Like average people, they are vulnerable to superior strength and to their own fears. They succeed because they exhibit the strengths of average people: perseverance, shrewdness, unselfishness, courage, and honesty.

So prominent in literature are typical characters and probable actions that most works of literature are to some extent allegorical. *Allegory* is a kind of literature in which concrete things—characters, events, and objects—represent ideas. Here is a very short allegory:

Fear knocked at the door.
 Faith answered.
 There was no one there.

In this story, the character “Fear” stands for the idea of fear and the character “Faith” is equivalent to the idea of faith. The setting of the story is a house, which symbolizes our psychological selves. Fear’s knocking at the door shows an emotion that everyone experiences. Faith’s opening the door shows a possible response to fear. The “moral” of the story, implied in the conclusion, is that we should all have faith

because faith makes fear disappear. In longer allegories, such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1590–1596), and the anonymous medieval play *Everyman* (c.1485), the characters, places, and events are much more complexly developed but nonetheless, as in this allegory, have names that directly indicate the ideas they represent. But even in nonallegorical works, the characters, locations, and events are so typical and probable, that they could almost be given names to represent ideas: Hamlet could be named "Melancholy," Othello could be called "Jealous," Ophelia "Innocent," Romeo "Love Sick," Iago "Sinister," and so forth. We can infer authors' worldviews from the "allegorical" qualities of their works—typical characters, suggestive places, and probable actions.

The near-allegorical quality of literature underscores its expressiveness. Literature is always an expression of the individuals who compose it. Their personalities, emotions, styles, tastes, and beliefs are bound up in their works. As interpreters, our task is to determine objectively what the ideas of a given work may be. We do not, however, have to agree with them. Orwell's worldview is very different from Tolkien's. Orwell shows an average man rebelling against social corruption and failing miserably to do anything about it. He is weak, ineffectual, and controlled by forces outside himself. In Orwell's world, good loses because people are too stupid or greedy or weak to overcome evil. Like Orwell, Tolkien also shows the weakness of average people, but in his worldview, the average person is innately good and potentially strong; such individuals can band together with others and overthrow evil. Orwell is pessimistic about human nature and the future of humanity; Tolkien is optimistic.

Still another kind of "truth" conveyed by literature is the *experience* of reality. Whatever the experience might be—white water rafting, losing a loved one, falling in love, going hungry, overcoming a handicap—authors put us in the midst of it, make us feel it. Such feelings can teach us about experiences we have never gone through. Scientists do not often write novels about their research, but one who did was Björn Kurtén, the Swedish paleontologist. His novel *Dance of the Tiger: A Novel of the Ice Age* features the interaction of *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthal peoples during the Ice Age. Kurtén has published many scholarly books on Ice Age peoples. "Why," he asks in his preface, "write a novel about prehistoric man?" He answers,

In the last three decades, it has been my privilege to be immersed in the life of the Ice Age. More and more, I have felt there is much to be told that simply cannot be formulated in scientific reports. How did it

feel to live then? How did the world look to you? What were your beliefs? Above all, what was it like to meet humans not of your own species? That is an experience denied to us, for we are all *Homo sapiens* (xxiii).

In his novel, Kurtén brilliantly succeeds in bringing Ice Age people alive for us. Through the thoughts, conflicts, and daily activities of his characters, we *feel* what it was like to live 35,000 years ago.

Another example is Jessamyn West's novel *The Massacre at Fall Creek* (1975). In the afterword she says she was intrigued by an event that occurred in Indiana in 1824. A white judge and jury convicted four white men of killing Indians, and the men were hanged. Although this event marked the first time in United States history that white men convicted other white men for killing Indians, West could find little information about it. She wondered: What was it like to be convicted for something previously condoned? How did the Indians and whites feel about the event? West's novel is her answer to these questions. Drawing upon her understanding of what most people would go through under those circumstances, she shows us what they *probably* experienced. Furthermore, she causes us to *feel* what they experienced. We live through the gruesome killings. We share the fear of Indian reprisal. We see the callousness of hardened Indian killers. We experience the dawning consciousness of some whites that Indians are human and have rights. We suffer the alienation caused by taking unpopular moral stands. We inhale the circus-like atmosphere of the hangings. With the judge, we puzzle over ambiguous ethical dilemmas. We stand on the scaffold with the condemned.

The truth of literature is the most important "place" to look for meaning in literature. The following questions encapsulate the points we have made here about truth in literature.

1. What ideas does the author seem to state directly?
2. How are the characters typical of human behavior? What ideas do they espouse or seem to represent? Which characters—and thus the ideas associated with them—predominate at the end of the work?
3. What ideas are associated with places and other physical properties?
4. Authors sometimes signal ideas through such devices as titles, names, and epigraphs. (An *epigraph* is a pertinent quotation put at the beginning of a work or chapter.) Examples of suggestive titles are *The Grapes of Wrath* (taken from a line in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"), *All the King's Men* (from the nursery rhyme "Humpty-Dumpty"),

Pride and Prejudice, *Great Expectations*, and *Measure for Measure*. What ideas seem embedded in titles, chapter heads, epigraphs, names, and other direct indications of authors' ideas?

5. What do other works by the author suggest about the meaning of this work?
6. As with Björn Kurtén and Jessamyn West on pages 24–25, authors sometimes comment on their own work. What light does such comment shed on the ideas in the work?
7. What feelings does the work elicit in each of us? What do we experience in the work that we have never gone through? What have we experienced that the work brings powerfully to life?

Literature Is Aesthetic

Literature is “aesthetic”; that is, it gives pleasure. The aesthetic quality of literature—its “beauty”—is hard to define and describe. In a sense, it just *is*. Like various other art forms—music, patterns of color in paintings, photographs of sunsets, dance—literature is an end in itself. The pleasure of literature rests in the way authors use literary conventions, such as metaphor, plot, symbolism, irony, suspense, themes, and poetic language. Taken together, they constitute the *form* of the work, the order authors impose on their material. Such order is not typical of real life. In real life, events can be random, disconnected, and inconsequential. Problems can remain unresolved. The murderer may not be caught, the cruel parent may continue to be cruel, the economic crisis may continue, the poor but honest youth may not be rewarded. So many things happen to us that we can hardly recognize, much less remember them all. Nor do we always know which events are important, which trivial. But literature can give order to events in the form of a *plot*. Unimportant events are excluded, cause-and-effect relationships established, conflicts resolved. Events are arranged in logical order so that they form a sequence with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Plot is but one of a multitude of ways artists give order to material. They may also arrange language into patterns, reduce characters to recognizable types, connect details to ideas, elegantly describe settings. In works of literature, all of the elements combine to form an *overall* order, an *overall* coherence.

The aesthetic quality of literature is another “place” to look for meaning in literature. Experiencing the beauty of literature may itself

be a kind of meaning. But the aesthetic qualities of literature are bound up with the other kind of meaning, the ideas conveyed by a work. Authors use pleasurable conventions to enhance and communicate ideas. When we study the aesthetics of literature, we ask questions like these: What conventions (of language, plot, characterization, etc.) does the author use to give us pleasure? Why does the author’s manipulation of these conventions affect us so strongly? And, especially, how does the author use pleasurable conventions to communicate ideas and make them appealing?

Literature Is Intertextual

Literature is intertextual: It relates to other works of literature, it incorporates established literary conventions, and it belongs to at least one genre of literature. *Genre* is a French word that means “type” or “kind.” Literary genres are identifiable by their literary conventions. *Conventions* are features of literature, whether of language, subject matter, themes, or form, that readers can easily recognize. As an example of intertextuality, consider these two poems. The second, by Sir Walter Raleigh, is a response to the first, by Christopher Marlowe.

THE PASSIONATE SHEPHERD TO HIS LOVE

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

THE NYMPH’S REPLY TO THE SHEPHERD

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd’s tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy love.

Time drives the flocks from field to fold
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold,
And Philomel becometh dumb;
The rest complains of cares to come.

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields;
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy’s spring, but sorrow’s fall.

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten—
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherds' swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.

Christopher Marlowe (1600)

Thy belt of straw and ivy buds,
Thy coral clasps and amber studs,
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

But could youth last and love still breed,
Had joys no date nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee and be thy love.

Sir Walter Raleigh (c. 1600)

These poems are intertextual in the three ways mentioned above. First, Raleigh's poem is an almost line-for-line response to Marlowe's. We can understand Marlowe's poem without knowing Raleigh's, but we would miss a lot in Raleigh's poem if we did not know Marlowe's. Second, Marlowe's poem belongs to a genre called pastoral poetry. Third, in composing his poem, Marlowe incorporated the conventions of the pastoral genre: a peaceful, simple rural setting; carefree shepherds (the word *pastor* means "shepherd"); a season of eternal spring; an absence of the difficulties of life—hard work, disease, harsh weather, betrayal; lovers who talk genially about love; and a playful, witty, charming poetic style.

The intertextuality of literature is a rich source of meaning for the interpretation of individual works. We can pose several questions that help us mine this meaning.

1. **What can we learn about a work by considering works related to it?** Authors often have specific works of literature in mind when they compose their own. Sometimes they signal this by means of *allusions*: explicit references to other works. Such allusions are always invitations to compare the author's work with the other works. Dante, for example, by featuring the Latin poet Virgil as a prominent character in *The Divine Comedy*, signals to us that Virgil's writings and especially *The Aeneid* were significant for his work.

Sometimes authors make no overt references to other works, but we infer from the work itself or learn from outside sources, that the author drew from other works. We know, for example, that Dostoevsky was influenced by the works of Charles Dickens, but he does not necessarily say so in his novels. Whether or not authors tell us what other works serve as their reference points, we can ask what ideas and artistic devices from these other works are applicable to the work under study. Raleigh, in "The Nymph's Reply to the Shep-

- herd," openly invites us to compare his poem to Marlowe's. When we do, we see the stark difference between his ideas and Marlowe's.
2. **Can we understand the genre in which the work is written?** Genres are indispensable for both writers and readers of literature. Alastair Fowler, in his comprehensive treatment of genre, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, says that genres are similar to language. The conventions of each genre constitute a "grammar" that allows us to "read" the genre and works written in it (20). Just as we must learn the structure of a language in order to read it, so must we learn the conventions of genres in order to read literature. People learn popular genres as they grow up—by being read to, watching television, going to movies. But some genres require special training to understand. One reason is that genres are products of particular cultures and times. We can read narrative fiction, for example, because we know its conventions. But a culture could conceivably have no tradition of fiction. If so, its members would find fiction baffling, just as people brought up in the Western tradition usually find Japanese No plays and Kabuki theater puzzling. Another reason is that genres change over time or cease to exist. We may encounter genres even in our own language that puzzle us because we do not know them. To read some works of literature, we have to *recover* their genres. Pastoral poetry, a genre that was enormously popular in Christopher Marlowe's day, is virtually dead as a genre today. To recover it, we can read other poems in the pastoral tradition. And we can refer to historical works, such as M. H. Abrams's excellent *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, for information about pastoral poetry and other unfamiliar genres.
 3. **What values does the genre convey?** Genres are cultural phenomena. In contrast to works by an individual author, they emerge from many authors and reflect the interests, ways of life, and values of particular cultures. Detective fiction, for example, became a recognizable genre in the nineteenth century. Critics contend that its conventions mirror the values, troubles, and circumstances of Western culture in the nineteenth century. The detective hero—Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes—represents Western culture's enormous respect for science. These detectives are dispassionate, analytical, and brilliant. Holmes, in fact, publishes treatises on forensic science. The setting of detective fiction is typically the great industrial cities, which were by-products of nineteenth-century capitalism. These cities, with their mazelike streets and heterogeneous populations, were perfect environments

for intrigue and crime. Dupin works in Paris, Holmes in London. The crime is almost always murder or threat of murder. The pursuit and punishment of the murderer upholds the nineteenth century's respect for the individual. The murderer destroys the individual's most valuable possession, life itself. But the murderer destroys more than just lives. At stake also are the institutions held dear in the nineteenth century—the family, boards of trade, governmental agencies, universities. The detective, by capturing the murderer, purges these institutions of those who would corrupt and destroy them.

Other genres reflect their own cultural contexts. The epic, for example, trumpets heroic deeds and national solidarity. The medieval romance inculcates a code of chivalry. Why, then, did the author choose to compose in this genre? What ideas associated with the genre carry over to this work?

4. **Why is or was the genre appealing?** It is a cold, rainy night. You are home for vacation. Everyone else in the house has gone to bed. You have been saving Stephen King's latest gothic thriller for just such a time. Perfect. You settle in for two hours of uninterrupted escape. The book, of course, need not be horror. It could be science fiction, romance, western, detective, adventure, spy. Maybe you do not care who the author is. You just picked the book off the shelf because it belongs to a genre you like.

When we do this—read something because it is a kind of literature—we have succumbed to the pleasures of genre. The reasons we like certain genres are part of the “meaning” of what we read—the pleasures the genres give as well as the ideas they convey. We can pinpoint that meaning by investigating the appeal of genres. Why do we and other people like them?

The same question applies to genres from the past. We can discern what meanings authors may have intended by asking why people liked the genres in which the authors wrote. Authors and readers of pastoral poetry during Christopher Marlowe's time, for example, lived in the city. They liked pastoral poetry because the fantasy of an idealized rural life, with pretty scenes, images, and language, allowed them to escape the grimy, dangerous, and changing cities where they lived.

5. **How does the author challenge or change the genre?** Before authors can compose a work of literature, they have to know its genre well. But when they compose, they almost always rebel against generic formulas. Alistair Fowler describes the process in this way: The “writer who cares most about originality has the keenest interest in

genre. Only by knowing the beaten track, after all, can he be sure of leaving it” (32). Because authors and readers hunger for innovation, every literary work, Fowler says, “changes the genre it relates to.” Consequently, “all genres are continuously undergoing metamorphosis. This, indeed, is the principal way in which literature itself changes” (23). An example of a recent “new” genre is “magic realism,” a form of fiction that has been popularized by Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Laura Esquivel. Combining the characteristics of two genres—realistic fiction and fairy tale—these authors couch trenchant political and social criticism within the delights of erotic romance and supernatural happenings.

We can assume, then, that when authors alter the formulas of genres, they do so purposefully. What shifts in values and aesthetic effects do these changes contribute to the works we want to interpret? Raleigh, by having his female character respond to Marlowe's shepherd in terms of the harsh realities of life, cleverly changes the pastoral genre into a new genre, one we might call the antipastoral. He criticizes not only the ideas that undergird pastoral poetry but the pastoral genre itself.

6. **How do individual conventions of a genre add meaning to a work?** Alistair Fowler says that the nucleus of all literary genres is three huge, amorphous categories: fiction, drama, and poetry (5). Within these genres are numerous subgenres. Subgenres, Fowler says, “have the common features of a kind—external forms and all—and, over and above these, add special substantive features” (112). Pastoral poetry, for example, has the overall characteristics of “poetry” but, as we have noted above, has other characteristics that make it a distinctive subgenre of poetry. Our assumption in the next three chapters is that authors choose the genres in which they write. They use the conventions of these genres consciously to communicate ideas. We will, therefore, examine how these conventions work and how they communicate ideas. Like the properties of literature discussed in this chapter—language, fictionality, truth, aesthetics, and intertextuality—each literary convention is a “place” to look for meaning in works of literature.

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Interpreting Fiction

This chapter begins an analysis of the three major genres of literature: fiction, drama, and poetry. The word *genre* comes from French and means “type” or “kind.” To identify literary genres is to classify literature into its kinds. Literary critics sometimes disagree about how to classify literature into genres. Some say the genres of literature are tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, satire, the elegy, and so forth. But for our purpose, we will classify literature into three broad “kinds”: fiction, drama, and poetry. This chapter begins with the most popular genre, fiction.

Although literary genres are interesting subjects in themselves, our purpose in this and the next two chapters is to identify things to think about that can help us interpret works of literature. To that end, we will look at many of the best known elements that characterize fiction, drama, and poetry. Our goal when we interpret elements of literature should not be to consider and comment on *every* element of a work. Although all the elements of a work contribute to its meanings, probably only several will stand out to you as the most important ones. Focusing on one or more of these is a fruitful strategy for discovering meaning in texts. The questions and “Thinking on Paper” exercises that follow the discussions of each element should help you do this.

The Nature of Fiction

As a descriptive term, *fiction* is misleading, for although fiction does often include made-up or imaginary elements, it has the potential for being “true”: true to the nature of reality, true to human experience.