

1.2: Why Read and Write About Literature?

Why Read Literature?

In the age of TikTok, Twitter, Youtube, and streaming television services, literature might seem like a relic of the past. Indeed, fewer people are reading literature than ever. According to an article published in the Washington Post, "in 2015, 43 percent of adults read at least one work of literature in the previous year. That's the lowest percentage in any year since NEA surveys began tracking reading and arts participation in 1982 when the literature reading rate was 57 percent" (Ingraham). If the decline of literature-reading in adults isn't the death knell of literature, the decline in teenagers might be. According to NPR, in a recently conducted poll, "nearly half of 17-year-olds say they read for pleasure no more than one or two times a year — if that" (Ludden). How many books have you read this year? How many poems? In this fast-paced dopamine-fueled media landscape, it's difficult for stinky old books to compete.

But this is hardly a new problem if it is even a problem at all.

Consider the words of master-of-clapbacks Sir Philip Sydney, #throwback to the late 1500s and early 1600s. After the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg, many people saw the proliferation of novels and plays as morally poisonous. Talking heads of the time argued that poetry and literature were a waste of time, or "fake news" as some might call it today. They questioned the purpose of fictional works. Poet and diplomat Sir Philip Sydney responded with a scathing literary smack-down to the haters. He argued the poet has a special talent to create new, beautiful worlds that no other professional can claim, and that those who question the purpose of poetry have "earth-creeping" minds and are "momes" (AKA fools, blockheads). He further stated that he hopes these momes never get "favor" (love) because they don't know how to write sonnets to woo their love interests and that they don't get an epitaph on their graves, because that is the poet's job. Ouch, harsh.

In today's world, it seems that Sidney would probably consider most people momes. After all, very few of us read or appreciate poetry regularly. Most of our reading and writing is done on the internet: in the forms of Facebook posts, memes, tweets, snapchats, Tik Tok videos, and viral news. In response to this trend, some claim that literature is dead (Breuklander). Indeed, if we define literature as only printed novels and poetry, perhaps it is, for all intents and purposes, dead. But... what if we were to define literature as Sidney did—a creation made from the "zodiac of [the poet's] own wit," improving upon nature itself through invention? Might some of today's internet media fall into that definition?

What if literature isn't dead after all...but thriving more than ever? What if we radically reconsider the parameters of literature? What if literature has just evolved from sonnets and novels to tweets and memes? In this textbook, we will explore how technology has blurred the lines between Literature and literature. We will question and explore the "usefulness" of literature in a world that encourages split-second attention spans. We will see how literature has solved problems in the past, and explore how it can be used to solve problems in the future. Medicine, a threat to the status quo, entertainment, activism, or boring stinky old piles of pages: what is literature to you?

No matter the reader, no matter the writer, no matter the genre, literature is a cultural relic, a manifestation of the human experience. Thus, it can teach us things about our society and about ourselves we might not be able to learn from other types of media. It enables us to experience and discuss ideas from the safety of our armchairs, to project ourselves onto characters and environments, to explore worlds and lived experiences we otherwise would never have the opportunity to experience.

Additionally, data suggests reading literature benefits us in profound ways.

Benefits of Literature

Studies show reading literature may help

- promote empathy and social skills (Castano and Kidd)
- alleviate symptoms of depression (Billington et al.)
- business leaders succeed (Coleman)
- prevent dementia by stimulating the mind (Thorpe)

These are just a few of the studied benefits of literature. As we continue to gain increasing complexity in terms of measuring

brain activity and developing other tools to measure brain function, scientists may find more benefits.

Why Write About Literature?

You might be asking yourself why you should bother writing about something you've read. After all, isn't creative writing more fun, journalistic writing more interesting, and technical writing more useful? Maybe, but consider this: writing about literature will let you exercise your critical thinking skills like no other style of writing will. Even if you don't want to pursue a career involving literature, you can use critical thinking and analysis in any field from philosophy to business to physics. More than being able to think critically, you need to be able to express those thoughts in a coherent fashion. Writing about literature will allow you to practice this invaluable communication skill.

"Okay," you say, "that's all good and well. But hasn't anything I have to say about a story already been said? So what's the point, then?" When you write your paper, you might end up saying something that has been discussed, argued over, or proposed by literary critics and students alike. However, when you write something, you present a point of view through your unique voice. Even if something has been said about a book many times, you can add something new to that discussion. Perhaps you can state an idea in simpler terms, or you want to disagree with a popular viewpoint. Even if you're writing to an instructor's prompt, your voice will make the paper unique.

How Do I Start?

To many of us, writing a response to something we've had to read sounds more than a little daunting. There are so many things to examine and analyze in a book, play, or poem. But before you decide that writing about writing just isn't for you, think about this--you already have many of the skills you need to write a good response to literature.

How many times have you heard about someone who watched a horror movie and yelled, "Don't go into the basement!" at the potential victim. Or maybe you've listened to a song and thought about how the lyrics described your life almost perfectly. Perhaps you like to jump up and cheer for your favorite team even if you're watching the game from home. Each time you do one of these things, you are responding to something you've seen or heard. And when you read a book, you likely do the same thing. Have you ever read anything and sympathized with or hated a character? If so, you've already taken your first step in responding to literature.

However, the next steps are a little harder. You need to be able to put your response into writing so other people can understand why you believe one thing or another about a book, play, or poem. In addition, writing an essay based on how a story makes you think or feel is only one of many ways to respond to what you read. In order to write a strong paper, you will need to examine a text both **subjectively** and **objectively**. If you only write about your personal reaction to a book, there won't be much to support your argument except your word alone. Thus, you will need to use some facts from the text to support your argument. Rather than trying to evaluate every nuance of a text all at once, you should start with the basics: character and plot. From there, you can examine the theme of the work and then move on to the finer points such as the writing itself. For instance, when determining how you want to analyze a piece of literature, you might want to ask yourself the following series of questions:

- Who are the characters?
- What are they doing?
- Why and how are they doing it?
- Do their actions relate to any broader topics or issues?
- How does the author convey this through their writing?

Questions to consider when writing about literature

Of course, answering these questions will only start your analysis. However, if you can answer them, you will have a strong grasp of the basic elements of the story. From there, you can go on to more specific questions, such as, "How does symbolism help illustrate the theme?" or "What does the author say about the relationships between characters through the dialogue he gives them?" However, before you can start answering detailed questions like these, you should look at the basic elements of what you're reading. Some of the most common elements in a piece of literature include:

- Setting
- Characters
- Plot (story or play) or structure (poem)

- Tone/Mood
- Themes
- Symbolism and Figurative Language

As you work through each genre in this book, try to examine each of these elements in each piece of literature you read.

Optional, Supplemental Reading: Excerpt from Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*

"There is no art delivered unto mankind that has not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth. So doth the astronomer look upon the stars, and, by that he sees, set down what order nature has taken therein. So do the geometrician and arithmetician in their divers sorts of quantities. So doth the musician in times tell you which by nature agree, which not. The natural philosopher thereon has his name, and the moral philosopher stands upon the natural virtues, vices, and passions of man; and "follow nature," says he, "therein, and thou shalt not err." The lawyer says what men have determined, the historian what men have done. The grammarian speaks only of the rules of speech, and the rhetorician and logician, considering what in nature will soonest prove and persuade, thereon give artificial rules, which still are compassed within the circle of a question, according to the proposed matter. The physician weighs the nature of man's body, and the nature of things helpful or hurtful unto it. And the metaphysic, though it be in the second and abstract notions, and therefore be counted supernatural, yet doth he, indeed, build upon the depth of nature.

Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature brings forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goes hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden...

[...]

But if—fie of such a but!—you be born so near the dull-making cataract of Nilus, that you cannot hear the planet-like music of poetry; if you have so earth-creeping a mind that it cannot lift itself up to look to the sky of poetry, or rather, by a certain rustical disdain, will become such a mome [blockhead—ed.], as to be a Momus of poetry; then, though I will not wish unto you the ass' ears of Midas, nor to be driven by a poet's verses, as Bubonax was, to hang himself; nor to be rimed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland; yet thus much curse. I must send you in the behalf of all poets:—that while you live in love, and never get favor for lacking skill of a sonnet; and when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph." -- Sir Philip Sydney

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