

Introduction to the Class: What is Literature?

ENG 3060: Intro to Literary Study

Dr. Jennings



What is Literature?

- How do we critically define something as literary?
- What sort of object or activity is it?
- What does it do? What purpose does it serve?
- How is reading literature different from other activities?
- What distinguishing characteristics do literary works share?



Defining Literature

- As a specialized area of study, literature is a “modern” concept
 - Prior to 1800s we did not study or analyze literature for its meaning
 - How we define literature has also changed over time since the 19th C.
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- **Key question**, then, is not “What is Literature?” but “What makes us (or any given society/culture) treat something as literature?”
 - **Context**: promotes or elicits special kinds of attention
 - **Communication/Convention**: *how* is the information conveyed?



The Nature of Literature: Competing Definitions

- Literature as the ‘foregrounding’ of language
- Literature as the integration of language
- Literature as fiction
- Literature as aesthetic object
- Literature as intertextual or self-reflexive construct



The Functions of Literature: Variable Purposes and Effects

- The ‘human condition’
- National interests or identity
- Individual subjectivity and imagination
- Ideological instruction or disruption
- Social change or complacency



Reading Literature

Why do we read and write about literature?

- Literature reflects and shapes our world
- To organize thoughts and clarify what we think and know
- Learning process: making new discoveries and connections
- Working through contradictions: from chaos to linear



Close Reading

How to Ask Critical Questions of Literature

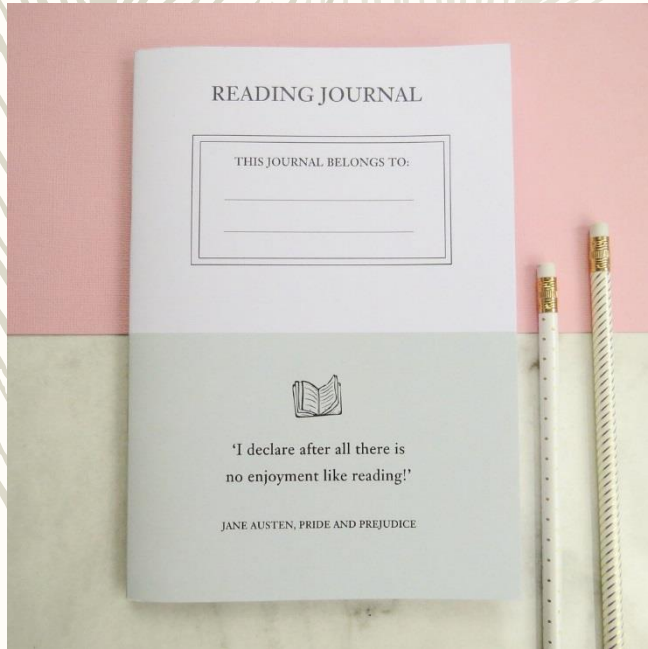
- Slow, attentive, focused ---
Rereading is key
 - **Critical** Reading – active, thoughtful consideration
 - No such thing as “**hidden meaning**”
- Go beyond simple inquiries of fact
 - Embrace multiplicity, complexity, and contradiction
 - Provoke further investigation



Four Primary Questions about Literature

- **TEXT:** genre, structure/plot, character, language/style, juxtaposition, symbolism, setting, point of view/persona
- **AUTHOR:** age, gender, religious/political beliefs, family structure, childhood, nationality—however, maintain a distinct separation of biography/meaning
- **READER:** past and present audience; response of intended reader & contemporary reader (including self)
- **CONTEXTS:** social, cultural, historical, political, geographical

Active Reading Strategies



- Annotating & Notetaking
- Reference Materials (i.e. dictionaries and encyclopedias)
- **Reading Journals**
 - Ask critical questions & try out possible answers
 - Expand ideas into full paragraphs
 - Reflect and connect between text and your ideas



Writing About Literature

- **Summary:** brief recap of important points, usually to demonstrate understanding of what you've read—should remain limited within literary analysis essays
- **Explication:** takes what is implicit or subtle in a work of literature and makes it implicit and clear—unpacking and unfolding **meaning** for the reader in order to support your interpretation
- **Analysis:** to take something apart and examine how the individual parts relate to another and function within the whole: plot development, characterization, tone, irony, symbols, themes, etc.



Types of Literary Essays

- **Close Reading:** builds on explication and analysis, paying special attention to elements of *language*: sentence structure, style, tone, word-choice, imagery, similes, metaphors, grammar, punctuation, etc.
- **Comparison/Contrast:** examines similarities/differences in authorship, history, themes, style, etc. within a single work or between works; selection of elements or texts should be logical
- **Cultural/Critical Contexts:** brings in research to support reading or interpretation of a text through various socio-cultural contexts, secondary literary criticism about the text and/or specific theoretical approaches



Elements of Poetry

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What is poetry?

How does poetry differ from prose?

- Beyond content that can be paraphrased—heightened attention to language
- Poetry is intensely concerned with the effect of language as much as meaning
- “A poem should not mean/But be” — Archibald MacLeish



Point of View: Speaker & Listener

- **Who is speaking?** – Where, when; poet or persona?
- **Who is the implied listener?** – Who is being addressed?
- **Diction:** the poem conveys its message through word choice
- **Tone & Voice:** mood, vernacular, irony



Poetic Devices

- **Situation/Setting:** place, time, occasion

- **Imagery & Figures of Speech:** concrete & sensory
 - Placement, juxtaposition, effect
 - Metaphor, similes, symbols, allusion
- **Sound:** rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration
- **Meter/Rhythm:** accentual/syllabic
- **Structure/Form:** sonnet, villanelle, sestina, ballad, free verse
- **Stanzas:** creates cohesive units within poem
- **Lineation:** end-punctuation, enjambment, caesura (pause)



Denotation & Connotation

- **Denotation:** direct meaning -- as defined in the dictionary, but keep in mind many words have different meanings in the English language
- **Connotation:** suggested or associative meaning, present & past contexts
- **Example:** 'Epitaph' – Timothy Steele, 1979

Here lies Sir Tact, a diplomatic fellow

Whose silence was not golden, but just yellow.

- To what famous saying does the poet allude?
- What are the connotations of *golden*? Of *yellow*?



Denotation & Connotation

- Poems often convey meaning indirectly, so we need to pay careful attention to what a poem suggests (its connotative meaning).
- After reading each poem, jot down some observations both about what the poem says directly (denotative meaning) and what you might want to know but aren't told.
- What important details are you led to infer for yourself? A useful strategy is to cover the "five W's": who, what, when, where, why.



Analyzing What a Poem Says and Suggests

- **Who** speaks the words of the poem? Is it a voice close to the poet's own? A fictional character? A real person, living or dead? Who is the poem's central figure? To whom – if anyone – is the poem addressed?
- **What** objects, events, relationships, emotions are depicted?
- **Where** and **When** does the action of the poem take place? What season? Time of day? Is that location or timing significant in any way?
- **Why** does the action of the poem take place? Is there some significant motivation?

Does the poem leave any of the above information out?

If so, what does that lack of information reveal about the poem's intentions?