

Introduction

Why Literature Matters

In the opening chapters of Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* (1854), the Utilitarian politician Thomas Gradgrind warns the teachers and pupils at his "model" school to avoid using their imaginations. "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life," exclaims Mr. Gradgrind to the schoolmaster, Mr. M'Choakumchild. To press his point, Mr. Gradgrind asks "girl number twenty," Sissy Jupe, whose father performs in the circus, to define a horse. When she cannot, Gradgrind turns to Bitzer, a pale, lifeless boy who "looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white." A "model" student of this "model" school, Bitzer gives exactly the kind of definition to satisfy Mr. Gradgrind:

"Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs."

Anyone who has any sense of what a horse is rebels against Bitzer's lifeless version of that animal and against the "Gradgrind" view of reality. Like The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, or like Dickens's own Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, Gradgrind wants to kill the irrational spirit; he wants to deal only with material things that can be bought and sold and with qualities that can be measured and counted. As these first scenes of *Hard Times* lead us to expect, in the course of the novel the fact-grinding Mr. Gradgrind learns that human beings cannot live on facts alone; that it is dangerous to stunt the faculties of imagination and feeling; that, in the words of one of the novel's more lovable characters, "People must be amused." Through the downfall of an exaggerated enemy of imagination, Dickens reminds us why we like and even *need* to read literature.

Over the ages, people like Gradgrind have dismissed literature as a luxury, a frivolous pastime, or even a sinful indulgence. Pretending to agree with the Gradgrinds of the world, Oscar Wilde asserted that "all art is quite useless"; but by this Wilde was suggesting that beauty and pleasure are the sole aims of the arts, including imaginative literature. Others (including Dickens himself) have argued for a kind of middle ground between the positions of a Gradgrind and a Wilde, insisting that literature should and does instruct as well as entertain.

Writing is not literature unless it gives to the reader a pleasure which arises not only from the things said, but from the way in which they are said.

—STOPFORD BROOKE

Wonderfully, instruction and delight often go hand in hand in our experience of literature: we learn from what delights us or what leads us to appreciate new kinds of delight. The pleasure of reading comes in many varieties, however, and sometimes the best pleasures require an effort that beginners tend to call pain. A lot of the writing that is called *literature* is at first difficult for any reader to grasp. But if we read literature only for pleasure, why would we bother with any piece of writing that requires such effort? One answer is that new kinds of pleasure open

up through that effort. As we challenge ourselves to read more difficult literature, we become able to extend ourselves further, much like athletes who train for heavier weights or longer jumps with repeated practice.

Another answer came from Wilde himself, for whom literature is of supreme importance precisely because it frees us from the utilitarian preoccupations and activities of daily life. We value literature (all art, really) for breaking the rules of the ordinary. In some kinds of written entertainment, we find immediate “escape,” but even imaginative writing that is more difficult to read and understand than a John Grisham or Patricia Cornwell novel offers escape of a sort: it takes us beyond familiar ways of thinking. A realistic story, poem, or play can satisfy a desire for broader experience, even unpleasant experience; we can learn what it might be like to grow up on a Canadian fox farm, for example, or to clean ashtrays in the Singapore airport. We yearn for such knowledge in a very personal way, as though we can know our own identities and experiences only by leaping over the boundaries that usually separate us from other selves and worlds. As even Wilde might have conceded, literature seems extremely *useful* in this respect.

Ultimately, it is impossible to separate knowledge from imagination or instruction from pleasure. For many ages, different peoples have affirmed that while imaginative writing may be like playing, such play is the closest we come to grappling with the complexity of life. Perhaps nothing is more important; perhaps literature is the very thing humanity can least afford to do without. Literature itself provides many examples of characters or even real people who gain a feeling of mastery, meaning, and purpose through learning to read and to write. Take a famous episode in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964). Malcolm X, in prison, with only an eighth-grade education, realizes he needs to learn standard written and spoken English if he is to succeed as a leader. He begins by copying every word in the dictionary and soon moves to absorbing the books on history and religion in the prison’s extensive library. What were the fruits of this labor? “I had never been so truly free in my life. . . . [A] new world opened to me, of being able to read and *understand*.” Literacy and a wide knowledge of literature of various kinds can be a sort of franchise, like the vote, and can launch a career.

Literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.

—LIONEL TRILLING

You may already feel the power and pleasure to be gained from a sustained encounter with challenging reading. Then why not simply enjoy it in solitude, on your own free time? Because reading is only one of the activities involved in gaining a full understanding of literature. Literature has a history, and learning that history makes all the difference in the pleasure you can derive from literature. By studying different kinds of literature, or **genres**, as well as different works from various times in history and from various national traditions—by becoming familiar with the conventions of writing a sonnet in seventeenth-century England or of writing a short story in 1920s America—you can come to appreciate and even love works that you might have disliked if you simply read them on your own. Discussing works with your teachers and other students, and writing about them, will give you practice in analyzing them in greater depth. A clear understanding of the aims and designs of a story, poem, or play never falls like a bolt from the blue. Instead, it emerges from a process that often involves comparing this work with other works of its genre, trying to put into words *how*

and *why* this work had such an effect on you, and responding to what others say or write about it.

Yet studying literature involves more than cultivating your own skills and insights. Reading can open worlds and change a person's life, but literature also has the potential for political effects. The international best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), for example, helped create such strong antislavery sentiments before the U.S. Civil War that Abraham Lincoln reportedly described its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, as "the little lady who started the big war." The personal and the political effects of literature intertwine. A sense of self and an identity as part of a group or a nationality are shaped and reinforced by respected traditions, and many groups and nations now try to recover and protect their own literary traditions rather than be misrepresented by the writings of others. Margaret Atwood has claimed that when Canadian literature was ignored, for instance, Canada itself seemed to have forgotten its identity. Since the 1970s, Canada and many other former colonies of European countries have recovered and developed thriving literatures of their own. Instead of one **canon**—or a single selective list of the most-recognized or most-esteemed works—there are now many canons of literature written in English.

When other people tell your story, it always comes out crooked.

—CHIPPEWA ELDER

"The Canon"

As you begin your college-level study of literature, a debate rages all around you about "the canon." Although this debate has many dimensions, it is often reduced to questions about which authors should be included in literature courses and anthologies: why Dryden and Pope but not Aphra Behn; why Ralph Ellison and not Zora Neale Hurston; why Joseph Conrad or Doris Lessing and not V. S. Naipaul or Bessie Head? *Whom* we publish and teach matters, because our choices convey certain messages about the many kinds of people who have made an art of writing. There are many more people who have expressed themselves in writing than you will be able to read in your lifetime, let alone your college career or this semester. Any anthology, any literature course, leaves out far more than it includes. The anthology you hold in your hands represents a diverse array of authors both ancient and modern, but it does not treat an assortment of types of authors as an end in itself. The works included here are *good*—each after its kind is a splendid creation—but of course such a judgment of quality requires some supporting evidence. As you read, you can gather the most telling evidence, identify your own standards for judging texts, define your own approaches to interpreting them, and finally decide for yourself whether these works belong in the book or in your personal "canon."

Debates about the canon and about whom we should include on the list of literary "greats" won't end soon, largely because such arguments are part of a discussion as old as literature itself. And even the notion of "literature" has had an interesting history.

What Is Literature?

Before you opened this book, you probably could guess that it would contain the sorts of stories, poems, and plays you have encountered in English classes or in

the literature section of a library or bookstore. The three genres of imaginative writing that we select for *The Norton Introduction to Literature* form the heart of literature as it has been defined in schools and universities for over a century. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines literature as “writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect.” The key elements in this definition may be *writing*—after all, the words *literature* and *letters* have roots in common—and *beauty* and *emotion*. But we sometimes use the word *literature* to refer to writing that has little to do with feelings or artful form, as in “scientific literature”—the articles on a particular subject—or “campaign literature.” And at least some of the nonfictional works studied in literature classrooms—Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” for example—were originally intended as “campaign literature” of one sort or another.

Literature is not things but a way to comprehend things.

—NORMAN N. HOLLAND

Could literature, then, include *anything* written? Or could it include works that do not depend on written words, such as staged performances or works recorded on media such as videotape or film? Every society has forms of oral storytelling or poetry, and some peoples do not write down the cherished myths and traditions that are their “literature.” If you go on to take more classes in literature or to major in English or another language, you might encounter texts that stretch the concept of literature still further: Web sites or electronic games, for example.

The concept of “literature” as we know it is fairly new. Two hundred years ago, before universities were open to women or people of color, a small male elite studied the ancient classics in Greek and Latin, never dreaming of taking college courses about poetry or fiction or drama written in the modern languages in everyday use. Before modern literature became part of the college curriculum, the word *literature* itself had to be invented. At first, it referred to the cultivation of reading or the practice of writing (“he was a man of much literature”). Only later did it refer to a specialized category of works. Over time, this category narrowed more and more, eventually designating only a special set of imaginative writings, particularly associated with a language and nation (as in “English,” “American,” or “French” literature). Roughly speaking, by 1900 a college student could take a course in English literature, and the syllabus would exclude most nonfictional forms of writing, from travel writing and journalism to biography, history, or philosophy. Although students at the time would have read widely in these genres of nonfiction, the curriculum in “English literature” had become a walled-in flower garden filled with works of beauty, pleasure, and imagination, and its walls held fast for most of the twentieth century.

National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.

—J. W. GOETHE

But now, as you begin this introduction to literature in the twenty-first century, the walls of that garden are coming down. Literature today generally encompasses oral and even visual forms (film and video being closely related to drama, of course), and it takes in, as it did long ago, writings of diverse design and purpose, including nonfiction. As a twenty-first-century student of literature, you may feel the pleasure of reading the

best imaginative writings of the past, hoping with the speaker of Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy” to “burst Joy’s grape against” your “palate fine”—to test your palate or taste for the beauty of language and form. Obviously, the garden reserved for

beautiful poetry, fiction, and drama is flourishing; this anthology is testament to its continued health. But the fields beyond the unwallled garden are wild and inviting as well.

Since there has never been absolute, lasting agreement about *what* counts as literature, we might consider instead *how* and *why* we look at particular forms of expression. A song lyric, a screenplay, a supermarket romance, a novel by Toni Morrison or Thomas Mann, and a poem by Walt Whitman or Katherine Philips—each may be interpreted in *literary ways* that yield insights and pleasures. Honing your skills at this kind of interpretation is the primary purpose of this book and most literature courses. By learning to recognize how a story, poem, or play works—not only how it is beautiful and pleasurable but also how it is *effective*—you should gain interpretative skills that you can take with you when you explore zones outside the garden of literature.

Thinking Critically about Literature

From the start of your first encounter with a literary work, you begin the process of **literary criticism** as you formulate questions about the mode (*is this fiction? is it a novel?*), the manner (*who is the narrator? is the style modern, funny?*), and the aims of the text (*is it satiric? is the reader supposed to sympathize with the main character?*). To read the text well, you need to pick up on signals about the way the text is formed, and almost as soon as you have noticed these signals, you begin to explain what they might mean. Your critical reading of a work could start with a simple catalog of its **elements**: you could name the **characters**; retell the **action**; identify the **meter** and **rhyme scheme**. By writing these observations down, you might find new details to observe in the process. Your reading and writing about a work could advance a step further with the help of literary terms, such as **stanza**, **narrator**, **metaphor**, because these terms conveniently and quickly identify specific effects and help to connect them to similar techniques or features of other works. A good reader quickly moves from noticing details of a work to interpreting the significance of the way elements are combined in this particular work. A practiced reader, further, compares this work to others, recognizing the characteristics of, say, realist novels or lyrics about love, and noting how this particular example distinguishes itself from others of its genre. Whenever you read, you make crucial assessments of this sort, perhaps even subconsciously.

If you have made a good mental picture of the work and noted your detailed observations, you have laid the foundation of good critical reading and writing. Yet a description of details is not enough for an essay of literary criticism. As a student in a course on literature, you will be discussing works of literature with your class and writing interpretations of these works, to be read by classmates, your instructor, perhaps a parent or friend. Remember that *your* reader will want to learn something from your essay that is not in plain view on a first reading of the literary work. Criticism, in other words, becomes worthwhile when it expresses something unexpected or debatable about a work. This does not mean that good criticism consists of an extreme interpretation based on your own personal feelings. To be persuasive, your critical writing needs to support your impressions with the sort of evidence—such as the details that you have noted in preparation—that will convince others to share your impressions. You will need to argue a case for your interpretation; often the heart of your argument is that the specific evi-

dence you have put forward is a key to a better understanding of the work. Both discussion and writing will help you become a better reader and literary critic in this way. Very often, you will make the text itself seem all the richer and more complex in the process of showing others how it works: its design and the meanings of its effects. Before you venture into this new territory of making your thoughts about works of literature known to your peers and your teacher, however, it might help to review what it means to approach literature from a critical and analytical perspective.

Methods of literary interpretation, like definitions of literature, have varied over time. We may be amused or amazed at the assumptions that guided literary studies in an earlier age, but we should beware of assuming that our own approach is natural, correct, or inevitable. It is good to remember, for instance, that in the early 1800s, many people decried the seductive dangers of novel-reading, especially for young girls. The warnings back then resemble those we hear now about television, video games, and the Internet. Perhaps your children will live in a time when the digital media of the early twenty-first century receives the kind of careful interpretation and appreciation that we grant to novels today.

*Literature is language
charged with meaning. . . .
Literature is news that stays
news.*

—EZRA POUND

Every reader has a theory about literature and how to interpret it, whether articulated or not. Over a century ago, an American professor of English, C. T. Winchester, argued in *Some Principles of Literary Criticism* (1902) that “Literary Criticism” should “determine the essential or intrinsic virtues of literature” and measure each work according to those standards. To Winchester, the student’s or critic’s task is aesthetic “appreciation” of works that have gained “permanence” because of their “appeal to the emotions”; historical or biographical concerns should be kept subordinate to aesthetic judgment. Winchester’s plan looked natural or normal in his day, but today it seems unduly limiting. In the late twentieth century, literary scholars questioned nearly every one of Winchester’s (and his generation’s) underlying assumptions. These more recent scholars called into question the power of language to refer to reality or to express shared values or feelings, the notion that the author consciously intends all or even most of the meanings that can be found in a work, and the near-sacred status that literature had enjoyed for centuries. In the “Critical Approaches” appendix, we provide sketches of some contemporary theories and methods that encourage various ways of seeing literature and culture generally. Knowing a little about these “schools” of literary criticism or theory may help you to recognize and refine your own critical assumptions and methods, and may save you steps in clarifying your views.

Do you need to know anything specialized about literary criticism as you begin to learn how to interpret and write about literature? Your manner of literary criticism rightly will differ from that of a professional literary critic or theorist, as much as the lab work of a student in biology or chemistry differs from the research conducted by the authors of articles in *Science* or *Nature*. Yet just as the student in a lab should be engaged in hands-on discovery, and sometimes has an opportunity to contribute to a published finding, you will be able to develop original and interesting responses to what you read. To offer another metaphor that is even more appropriate to the arts (which have often been called nourishment for the spirit): most of us have thought a great deal about food, yet few of us are farmers, chefs, or restaurant critics. Dining offers greater pleasure, though, when we know

the kinds of ingredients that went into each dish, how it has been prepared, and whether the plate before us presents a good example of gumbo or bouillabaisse.

Often students and even teachers of literature object to systems or theories of literary criticism. Too much information about the writer, the work, or the contexts surrounding them, or too many technical terms, can interfere with an original response. Many students wonder not only about the uses of a systematic critical theory, but also about the aims of thorough interpretation or close reading. Why subject the poor text to such probing and questioning? Did the author ever really intend such deep paradoxes or heavy symbolism? Why not content ourselves with our private, unspoiled impressions, and let the text go about its business?

The problem with this understandable wish for an innocent reading and a pure text is that neither of these exist. Three entities must unite in order to produce any act of reading and interpretation: the source of the text (the **author** and other factors that produce it); the **text** itself; and the receiver of the text (the **reader** and other aspects of reception). Your reading and interpretation will be enhanced if you take each of these components into consideration. The most important thing to realize is that each of these three factors, involving real people and their roles or positions, is surrounded by a **historical context**—by external events, cultural and personal values and beliefs, as well as economic constraints and opportunities—that has partly shaped it.

To illustrate the importance of historical context, let's begin by looking at the person with whom you are most familiar: *you*. You undoubtedly sense your uniqueness, and may even see that your uniqueness is determined in part by your beliefs and values as well as by your personal history. But you may not perceive those beliefs, values, and history as having been shaped in turn by many external forces beyond your own or your friends' and family's control. Now and then you may have wondered about the effects of such forces or have been frustrated by the limits they place on you. (Have you ever wished you were born in a different century, or as a different type of person?) At times, you have probably realized that your perceptions of the world depend on who you are—and that someone figuratively standing in a different place would see things from a different point of view.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to maintain this sort of perspective on ourselves and what influences our responses. As a reader, for example, you may feel that you are just reading a poem neutrally, the way you might read a newspaper report about weather on the other side of the world. In any kind of reading, however, you apply your experience with reading similar texts, drawing on your fluency in the language, your ability to read this and other kinds of texts, as well as the information and assumptions that you have been accumulating since birth. You carry the baggage of someone alive today with your particular cultural and family history, and you have particular skills and preconceptions that frame your reading.

Just as you are a unique reader, the story, play, or poem that you read imports its own historical context, and so it actually changes more or less over time. The sequence of words may remain almost identical, from the author's original manuscript to the original published form to the pages of this anthology (although textual scholars would emphasize how much variation there may be between editions). But words in them-

Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way.

—SALMAN RUSHDIE

selves don't create meaning. Think of the puzzlement created by Egyptian hieroglyphs until the Rosetta Stone, found in 1799, provided clues to enable the work of translation. The signs carved in the second century B.C.E. had lost their power to convey meaning until scholars in the 1920s recreated the key, but even then, modern readers could only guess at the nature of the ancient beliefs and practices to which the signs originally referred. Each time we read a text, we become to some extent archeologists or linguists, unearthing and re-creating a sequence of letters, spaces, punctuation marks that has been lying dormant. Most of the literature reprinted here reflects the literary practices and fashions of our own era, yet historical change can be significant over even a few decades, or across different social groups and cultures. When you read, you should be aware of when the work was written and published, since knowing this can help prevent misinterpretations of everything from words that have changed meanings to whether the style was innovative or old-fashioned when the work first came out. Placing a text in its historical and social context can be a rewarding critical method, as suggested by our chapter on the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (chapter 23).

If both the reader and the text belong in historical contexts that shape our interpretation, so too does the writer. Contextual issues relating to the author usually concern the career—other works by the same person, relative success and reputation—and what is known about the life. When you read a work in this anthology, the writer's name (or "Anonymous") should be what you notice right after the title. Combined with the publication date, this can provide keys to your reading. The Biographical Sketches following each genre give brief biographies for most of the writers, and you can easily find more information in reference works online or in print, such as *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Your instructors may encourage you to read several works by the same author and to learn about the writer's life. Our chapters on Flannery O'Connor, John Keats, and Adrienne Rich emphasize the benefits of situating stories or poems in the context of other works by the same writer, and of such biographical evidence as letters. Knowing something about the person who wrote the work inevitably shapes interpretation, just as the writer's life was shaped by historical, social, and cultural conditions. Imagine Phillis Wheatley, who had been enslaved as a child in Africa and brought to Boston in 1761, finding time after her housework to write **heroic couplets** with the quill of a bird dipped in homemade ink, by the light of a candle made of animal fat, on paper so expensive that people seldom threw out a "rough draft." Her poetry was of her time, but it was viewed as a curiosity: the first published writing by an African American woman. Most readings of literature draw upon such information about the author's historical context and biography. Yet we cannot return to Boston in the 1770s and interview Wheatley to ask her what she meant in any line of her poetry.

*Literature always anticipates
life. It does not copy it, but
molds it to its purpose.*

—OSCAR WILDE

Even when a poet or playwright or fiction writer is still alive, it can be misleading to take his or her word about what the work means. Though critics usually do consider what is known about the writer, they prefer to focus on the text itself rather than the creator's statements about what it means. This is precisely because literary works usually intertwine more implications than anyone could consciously intend, and hence remain open to the varied interpretation of others. Further, critics avoid identifying the actual author with the **speaker** of a poem, the **characters** in a play, or

the **narrator** of a fictional story. Even very personal or autobiographical writing is an utterance that has been removed from its source, the real person who might write contradictory things in different moods, or would speak differently when just chatting with a friend. Critics have developed the concept of the **implied author**, the designing personality or value system that guides us in this particular text, in order not to confuse the interpretation with too much concern for the biography and intentions of the real author. The implied author will often seem to ask a reader to stand at a distance from the viewpoint of a narrator or speaker: the blandly decent lawyer in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” or the monomaniacal duke in “My Last Duchess,” for instance. It is helpful to set aside biography during reading, and to consider whether we are asked to resist the values or behaviors being shown to us. Should we sympathize with Bartleby’s nihilism and reproach the lawyer? What sort of future son-in-law would proudly insinuate that he murdered his previous wife? The speaker in a **dramatic monologue** or the narrator who is also a participant in a story should be regarded as akin to a character in a play, that is, as distinct from the poet or author. Because characters in most plays are created to be performed by actors on stage, audiences seldom confuse characters with the playwright, though there may be lines or speeches that seem close to what the playwright would have been likely to say in person.

Bearing in mind the various contexts that shape the source, text, and audience will help you develop more per- *And all else is literature.*
suasive interpretations of literature. You will notice, too, —PAUL VERLAINE
that interpretation is always open to discussion. There will

always be a variety of respected approaches—generally concentrating on different aspects of the exchange between source, text, and audience—to the study of texts that reward interpretation. You may become acquainted with the variety of schools of literary criticism and theory that, across the generations, have yielded powerful interpretations of literature. Such diversity of methods might suggest that the discussion is pointless: there is no arguing taste, any interpretation will do as well as another. On the contrary, it is quite easy to judge whether any of the various interpretations is reasonably supported by the evidence in the text—the sorts of aspects of the work that this introduction has advised you to look for. That’s when the discussion gets interesting. Because there is no single, straight, paved road to the destination of understanding a text, you can explore some of the blazed trails or less-traveled paths. In sharing your interpretations, tested against your peers’ responses and guided by the instructor’s or other critics’ expertise, you will hone your own critical skills, both in discussion and in writing about literature. After the intricate and interactive process of interpretation, you will find that the work has changed when you read it again. What we do with literature alters what it does to us.