

Fundamental Questions about Literature



As you begin this course, you may be asking some fundamental questions like:

- What is literature, anyway? And why should we study it?
- How do people study literature?
- Is there a distinction between literature that's worth studying and literature that isn't? If there is, how do we draw that distinction?

I think these are all fair questions; the first two are briefly answered here, and the last in the notes titled "Valuing Literature."

First, what is literature?

That may seem like a simple question, and I guess we can make the answer simple if we try. But simple answers are deceptive. And the only way to get a simple answer to this question is to ignore an awful lot.

First, the kind of literature we're speaking of is more specific than that broad term implies. "Literature" can refer to anything written—it can refer to the menu at Iron Hill Brewery if you want it to. So the kind of literature we're speaking of is more specifically, "imaginative literature" or "creative writing." The kind of literature you know is not "real."

That kind of literature can be defined as verbal art. It's verbal, and it's an art. A "verbal art." The implications of that definition are twofold: first, we acknowledge that we're dealing with an art, which implies that an artist has constructed this thing, this end product, which is now available to its audience, and is meant to strike that audience as profoundly beautiful, or meaningful, or (ideally) both. Just think about some of the art you love best (your favorite painting, or sculpture, or film, or book)—whether it's something visual or verbal, or both, literature is aiming for that same kind of impact. That impact is not just intellectual; you don't just think something is profound; you feel it, too. It moves you. Even slightly, but it moves you.

It's important to recognize the verbal aspect of the art of literature, because words are the literary artist's only tool. How does the writer shape language? Bend language? Twist language? Outright manipulate language so that it has that impact? There are lots of tricks to

learn about and observe, depending on the genre we're speaking of. The short story writer uses character, plot, and narrative point of view, description, and dialogue in interesting, provocative ways; poets use figures of speech, predetermined structures, and other devices to make words sound striking together; dramatists use dialogue and sets, and the talents of live actors and actresses to give their work its punch. And what makes a good poem might not make a good drama, or what makes a good drama might make a boring poem, etc. But what's common to fiction, poetry, and drama is that the writer has this unique, profound, beautiful vision to somehow embody in words. And if those words add up to something neither unique, nor profound, nor beautiful, nor in some way useful, then it's probably not good art.

People study literature because it enriches them; it's (literally) a repository of the wisdom of the ages; it's entertaining; it's profound; it's beautiful and moving. The best of it can deepen our experience of being alive, taking us beneath the superficial surface of people, into their inner caverns. As a discipline, the study of literature is an excellent way to sharpen your close reading skills, assemble excellent critical thinking apparatus, and refine your general sense of art appreciation.

Literature is a verbal art that explores what it means to be human from the inside. It's the inside story. It's a million and one snapshots of the human heart in all its mystery and perfection, and imperfection. It's philosophy, psychology, sociology, ideology and history rolled together without any attempt to clear up the unanswered questions. It's the questions, it's the questioner. It's you and what you make of it.

And that's about as neat and tidy a definition as I have to offer. In defense of it, I offer you the first line on page one of your textbook: "Literature does not lend itself to a single tidy definition because the making of it over the centuries has been as complex, unwieldy, and natural as life itself" (Michael Meyer, *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, 5th ed.). But, because he's writing a textbook, Meyer does offer this definition a few paragraphs later: "[Literature is] a fiction consisting of carefully arranged words designed to stir the imagination" (Meyer 2). Carefully arranged words...stirs the imagination...in other words, "a verbal art." I can live with that definition, and I encourage you to, as well.

But I would be remiss if I didn't direct you another professor's profound answer to this question (I have special access to his notes because he's my husband). Read the file called "Jim Esch on the Meaning of Literature" for a continued discussion of this fundamental question.

Literature is a verbal art, an art which explores what it means to be human from the inside. It's the inside story. It's a million and one snapshots of the human heart in all its mystery and perfection, and imperfection. It's philosophy, psychology, sociology, ideology and history rolled together without any attempt to clear up the unanswered questions. It's the questions, it's the questioner. It's you and what you make of it.

And that's about as neat and tidy a definition as I have to offer. In defense of it, I offer you the first line on page one of your textbook: "Literature does not lend itself to a single tidy

definition because the making of it over the centuries has been as complex, unwieldy, and natural as life itself" (Michael Meyer, *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, 5th ed.). But, because he's writing a textbook, Meyer does offer this definition a few paragraphs later: "[Literature is] a fiction consisting of carefully arranged words designed to stir the imagination" (Meyer 2). Carefully arranged words...stirs the imagination...in other words, "a verbal art." I can live with that definition, and I encourage you to, as well.

Another interesting, fundamental question to ask: how do people study literature?

If you read the chapter in CBIL, "Critical Strategies for Reading" (pp. 1533-1556), you will discover all the different ways scholars have approached the study of literature. You can read a brief summary of this chapter in the file "Critical Approaches to Literature."

It's clear there are a number of useful and interesting ways to pursue a serious study of literature, but they are not all equally represented by the instructional apparatus in your introductory-level text. You might notice, if you were to carefully observe, that your textbook takes a decidedly "formalist" approach; that is, it encourages students to see the literary text as the sum of its compositional elements; it is viewed as an "organic whole" whose "form" and "content" reflect one another and merge in meaningful ways.

The formalist approach is defined by Meyer:

- "Formalist critics focus on the formal elements of a work - its language, structure, and tone."
- "Formalists offer intense examinations of the relationship between form and meaning within a work, emphasizing the subtle complexity of how a work is arranged. This kind of close reading pays special attention to what are often described as intrinsic matters in a literary work, such as diction, irony, paradox, metaphor, and symbol, as well as larger elements, such as plot, characterization, and narrative technique. Formalists examine how these elements work together to give a coherent shape to a work while contributing to its meaning."
- "Other kinds of information that go beyond the text - biography, history, politics, economics, and so on - are typically regarded by formalists as extrinsic matters, which are considerably less important than what goes on within the autonomous text."

But as you can see here, the formalist approach is just one among many that are possible, and I encourage you to keep that in mind as you study the works I assign. You are free to step beyond the kind of formalist approach our textbook prefers and explore the wide world of biographical, historical, textual, psychological, mythological, sociological, deconstructionist, feminist, or reader-response criticism. There are more approaches (believe it or not) that haven't made the list. Reading closely, reading strongly, opening yourself to insight, being creative and imaginative as you read—expressing, sharing your insights clearly—that's what's most important for us in this course.

**Is there a distinction between literature that's worth studying and literature that isn't?
How do we draw such a distinction?**

The answer to this question is addressed in the next file, "Valuing Literature."