

ENGL 3330: APPROACHES TO LITERATURE



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ENGL 3330

Approaches to Literature

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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1.1: Literary Snapshot- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

In the final chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Alice attends the trial of the Knave of Hearts, who has been accused of stealing the Queen of Hearts's tarts. You can read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* by accessing them at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html> and etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarGlas.html.



Figure 1.1.1: Illustration by Sir John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

Read the following exchange, which takes place in the midst of that trial:

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. "Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?" he asked.

"Begin at the beginning," the King said gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

These were the verses the White Rabbit read:—

"They told me you had been to her,

And mentioned me to him:

She gave me a good character,

But said I could not swim.

He sent them word I had not gone

(We know it to be true):

If she should push the matter on,

What would become of you?
I gave her one, they gave him two,
You gave us three or more;
They all returned from him to you,
Though they were mine before.
If I or she should chance to be
Involved in this affair,
He trusts to you to set them free,
Exactly as we were.
My notion was that you had been
(Before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
Him, and ourselves, and it.
Don't let him know she liked them best,
For this must ever be
A secret, kept from all the rest,
Between yourself and me."

"That's the most important piece of evidence we've heard yet," said the King, rubbing his hands; "so now let the jury—"

"If any one of them can explain it," said Alice, (she had grown so large in the last few minutes that she wasn't a bit afraid of interrupting him), "I'll give him sixpence. I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it."

The jury all wrote down on their slates, "She doesn't believe there's an atom of meaning in it," but none of them attempted to explain the paper.

"If there's no meaning in it," said the King, "that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know," he went on, spreading out the verses on his knee, and looking at them with one eye; "I seem to see some meaning in them, after all. '—said I could not swim—' you can't swim, can you?" he added, turning to the Knave. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 12, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>.

Perhaps you've been in a literature classroom where you felt just like Alice: where it seemed like your teacher or your classmates could find meaning in stories, poems, and plays that you just couldn't find. Perhaps you have even decided that you "don't like English" because of such experiences. We hope with this book to help you rethink your approach to literary works so that you will find meaning in a wide range of texts.

This textbook aims to give you practical tools for approaching literary works that will ease some common anxieties that student readers feel in literature classrooms. This text will also show you how to apply those tools when you are asked to write literary analyses. We call those tools "literary theories."

Your Process

1. Have you ever wondered how your teachers or your classmates develop their ideas about literary works? Have you felt confused when reading stories, poems, plays, or essays, and unsure of how to begin interpreting them? Write a bit about your previous experiences in English classes.
2. What does the word "theory" mean to you? Write your definition of the word.

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1.2: What Is Literary Theory?

When you hear the word “theory,” you might think first of the natural sciences, rather than of literature. In the sciences, theories are systems for understanding how an aspect of the world works: they can be used to explain past phenomena and predict future behavior. Thus we hear about the theory of evolution or the search for the unified theory of the universe.

Theory doesn’t mean exactly the same thing in literature. However, literary scholars do understand their subject through **literary theories**, which are intellectual models that seek to answer a number of fundamental interpretive questions about literature. In *How to Do Theory*, literary critic Wolfgang Iser suggests that the natural sciences (and the social sciences to a large part) operate under **hard-core** theories, whereas the humanities use **soft-core** theories. Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory* (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 2006). Simply put, hard-core theories lead to problem solving and are governed by general laws and rules; they predict and rely on objective fact. Soft-core theories, on the other hand, do not problem solve but predict—they map ideas and are not necessarily governed by laws but by metaphors and images.

Thus literary scholars use theories that are more descriptive of ideas—which map ideas more than quantify them. Such scholars are guided by questions that may include the following:

1. What exactly do we mean by “literature”? What counts as literature, and what does not?
2. Can (and should) we determine the value or worth of literary works? If so, how should we go about this task? If not, why not?
3. To what extent does a given text reflect its author and/or the historical moment of its composition?
4. What are the political and social ramifications of literary texts and of the ways we study them?

These are very broad versions of the questions that literary scholars ask in their work, but you can probably already see that different scholars are likely to have very different answers to many of them. Thus we often talk about different “schools” of literary theory. Each school prioritizes certain concerns for talking about literature while deemphasizing others. Thus one critic might focus on the representation of women within a given story or poem (feminist theory), while another critic might concentrate on representations of unconscious desire in that same text (psychoanalytical theory). Though they’re studying the same text, these two critics may come to very different conclusions about what is most interesting in that text and why.

This book will walk you through many of the primary schools that have shaped literary theory over the past century. Each chapter aims not to simply define a given theory but to show what it looks like in practice. In order to teach you how to employ literary theories, in each chapter we walk you through a sample student paper that demonstrates how other undergraduates have used a given theory to better understand a particular story, poem, play, or other literary work.

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1.3: Why Study Literary Theory?

In his essay “Disliking Books at an Early Age,” literary scholar Gerald Graff talks about how he struggled as a child to see the point of literature. “Literature and history,” he recalls, “had no apparent application to my experience.” Gerald Graff, “Disliking Books at an Early Age,” *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life* 2, no. 6 (September–October 1992): 45–51, *JSTOR*. Even in college, Graff says, he “continued to find ‘serious’ reading painfully difficult and alien.” Gerald Graff, “Disliking Books at an Early Age,” *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life* 2, no. 6 (September–October 1992): 45–51, *JSTOR*. This all changed for Graff when he encountered critical debates over the interpretation of Mark Twain’s novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1876). He read about critics who disagreed over the book’s meaning, value, and attitudes toward race. He realized that the conversations he’d been having with his classmates about the book in class discussion “were not too far from the thoughts of famous published critics,” which gave Graff a feeling of power and excitement about reading he’d never felt before. Gerald Graff, “Disliking Books at an Early Age,” *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life* 2, no. 6 (September–October 1992): 45–51, *JSTOR*.

We hope you will feel that same power and excitement about reading as you learn about critical debates in literary study and begin to contribute to them in your own papers. Literature isn’t made up of inscrutable texts that can be deciphered only by a chosen few who have learned to speak in a secret code. Literature is written by people—talented people perhaps, but people nonetheless. And the concerns of literary critics are concerns that many people share: What does this work say about the human condition? How does it convey its message? Does it portray its subjects fairly? What political or social ideas does it advance? Literature has many potential meanings, and literary theory gives scholars different avenues to uncover those meanings.

By asking theoretical questions of the novels, stories, poems, plays, and essays that you read in your literature class, you can begin to grasp works that may seem ineffable—impenetrable—if you try to uncover a single, “correct” interpretation for them. In short, literary theory can give you a toolbox for approaching any literary text: a set of interpretive moves that can help you figure out where to start when your instructor asks you to comment on a work in class or develop a paper topic.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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2.1: What is Fiction?

Overview



Image from Pixabay

Fiction refers to literature created from the imagination. Mysteries, science fiction, romance, fantasy, chick lit, and crime thrillers are all fiction genres. Whether or not all of these genres should be considered “literature” is a matter of opinion. Some of these fiction genres are taught in literature classrooms and some are not usually taught, considered more to be reading for entertainment. Works often taught in literature classrooms are referred to as “literary fiction” including classics by Dickens, Austen, Twain, and Poe, for example. We will be studying primarily literary fiction in our readings, unless your instructor decides otherwise.

Difference Between Fiction and Nonfiction

While nonfiction and creative nonfiction are true, fiction is **not true**. Fiction may chronicle real events that happened in a convincing way using **verisimilitude**, but for categorization purposes the literature is still fiction. For example, historical fiction adapts real events and historical figures into a compelling narrative. But even if 95% of the story is true, the 5% of imagination renders the narrative into fiction. Meanwhile, nonfiction and creative nonfiction must tell the truth. The flexibility in creative nonfiction comes in how the story is told. Fiction writers are not constrained by the truth in this way.

If an author presents untrue events as nonfiction, they are at risk of losing their reputation as writers or falling prey to lawsuits. For example, James Frey's "memoir" *A Million Little Pieces* is an example of what can happen when an author presents fictional events as nonfiction. His career was tanked. He was even kicked out of Oprah Winfrey's book club (Wyatt)! As creative nonfiction expert Lee Gutkind writes, "by virtue of the fact that some of the stuff in Frey's book never happened, it should be catalogued as fiction—not creative nonfiction" (Gutkind).

Fiction writers are not constrained by reality in the same way that creative nonfiction authors might be. They are only bound by the limits of their imaginations.

Why Should We Read Fiction?

Prose fiction, whether in the form of the novel or the short story, is one of the most popular and widely consumed literary **genres**. One only has to see the proliferation of bookstalls at railway stations and airports, for example, and the predominance of novels over other forms of writing made available in such locations, to realize the appeal of fiction.

Take a few moments to think about *Why* we read fiction. *What* do we hope to gain from reading stories about imagined events that happen to imaginary people?

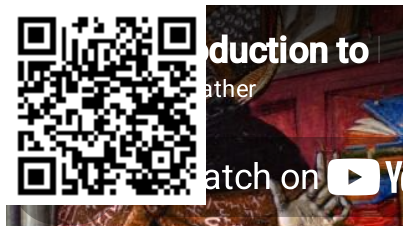
Robert DiYanni begins his impressively wide-ranging study *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay* (1997) with the following assertion about why we read:

We read stories for pleasure; they entertain us. And we read them for profit; they enlighten us. Stories draw us into their imaginative worlds and engage us with the power of their invention. They provide us with more than the immediate interest of narrative – of something happening – and more than the pleasures of imagination: they enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life. (p. 27)

Did your own answers to the question of why we read touch on any of the reasons DiYanni gives? I wouldn't be at all surprised if they did. It is, I think, true for all of us that there is an element of sheer escapism in our desire to read stories, to imaginatively engage with the incidents and events that befall the characters we read about. We often come to identify with these fictional characters, and think perhaps about how we would react and respond to the situations they find themselves in.

We can immerse ourselves in a fictional world in this way without necessarily applying a great deal of critical or intellectual effort, of course. But if fictional narratives are, as DiYanni puts it, to "enlarge our understanding of ourselves and

deepen our appreciation of life," we need, perhaps, to read them in a more objective way, to subject them to a more critical scrutiny to see if they reinforce or challenge our existing ideas about the world around us. Close attention to the texts we read can only enhance our understanding, and this in turn can increase our pleasure in reading. In this section we will concentrate largely on the various elements that make up a fictional **narrative**; the events that make up a **story** and how they are arranged (the **plot**); the perspectives from which stories can be narrated; the act of **characterisation**; the importance of **setting**, both in terms of time and place; and the actual language and style which writers adopt to tell their narratives. Above all, in what follows, and in your own readings of fictional narratives, you need to always keep in mind the question of *why* you think writers use particular narrative strategies. There are an infinite number of ways in which stories can be told; the choices made by individual writers of individual texts are not randomly made. We need to think about why those choices might have been made. There is no single authoritative answer to such questions. How we read is dictated largely by the experiences and contexts we each of us bring to a particular text, and for that reason no two readings are likely to be the same, even though we may be applying the same critical processes to our reading.



Video 4.1.1 : Introduction to Fiction

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2.2: Short Stories versus the Novel

Short Story

Short stories are works of fiction that usually fall between 1,000 to 10,000 words. On the shorter end of the short story classification we have flash fiction (500-1,000 words). On the longer end, we might approach a novella (17,500-40,000 words). Aside from length, there are some other characteristics which qualify a work of fiction as a short story. It is written in prose, meaning sentences and paragraphs rather than the lines and stanzas of poetry. There is usually a clear storyline, or plot, that unfolds over time. In short stories, the plot usually stretches over a relatively short time span, and will involve fewer characters than a novel. Like in drama and novels, a short story will have a certain structure with a turning point or climax which brings the plot in an unexpected direction.

Short Story


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A short story is a fiction, shorter and more focused than a novel, the author economizes and gets to the point. Therefore, a short story usually deals with a single event or meeting.

Since it takes place over a shorter period of time than a novel, the author economizes and gets to the point. Therefore, a short story usually deals with a single event or meeting.

The Last Leaf

We get to know two girls and a painter. We follow them over a few days in an apartment building in New York as they go through a crisis. Typically of a short story, we don't get to know more about them than what we need to understand the actions of these few days. It is limited in scope and it has a clear introduction, climax and ending.



Watch on  YouTube



Video 4.2.1 : Short Story

The Novel

A novel is a work of fiction. This means that it is made up and not factual. Unlike the short story, it is NOT short: it usually focuses on many events and places as well as more characters than the short story. Also, the time span depicted in a novel is often longer than that of a short story.

In literary history, the novel is a fairly new form. Scholars count *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes (1605) as the first narrative that fits modern criteria of a novel. Usually a novel is defined by its length, or, more precisely, the extension of its plot, which can span over longer time than, for example, a short story. But that is not always the case; there are many famous (and long) novels where the narrative evolves over a very short span of time, for example a couple of hours or a day. In addition, a novel often has an extensive cast of characters, and the plot may take place in many different settings. There are a number of subgenres that will identify a novel more specifically, such as fantasy, romance, historical, or bildungsroman.

Novel
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NOVEL

OLIVER TWIST

In the novel *Oliver Twist*, we get to know lots of characters, and the action spans over many months and many places. We get to know the orphan Oliver Twist in his fight for survival in a poverty-stricken London in the 1830s. There are many turning points in the novel, which ends happily at the final climax of the story, when good people adopt Oliver.



Watch on  YouTube



OLIVER TWIST

get to know lots of characters, and the action spans over many months and many places. We get to know the orphan Oliver Twist in his fight for survival in a poverty-stricken London in the 1830s. There are many turning points in the novel, which ends happily at the final climax of the story, when good people adopt Oliver.



Video 4.2.2 : Introduction to the Novel

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2.3: How to Analyze Fiction - Elements of Literature

Elements of Literature

Before you dive straight into your analysis of symbolism, diction, imagery, or any other rhetorical device, you need to have a grasp of the basic elements of what you're reading. When we read critically or analytically, we might disregard character, plot, setting, and theme as surface elements of a text. Aside from noting what they are and how they drive a story, we sometimes don't pay much attention to these elements. However, characters and their interactions can reveal a great deal about the story's themes. Plot can act as a stand-in for real-world events just as setting can represent our world or an allegorical one. Theme is the heart of literature, exploring everything from love and war to childhood and aging.

With this in mind, you can begin your examination of literature with a “who, what, when, where, how?” approach. Ask yourself “Who are the characters?” “What is happening?” “When and where is it happening?” and “How does it happen?” The answers will give you character (who), plot (what and how), and setting (when and where). When you put these answers together, you can begin to figure out theme, and you will have a solid foundation on which to base your analysis.

We will be exploring several of the following literary elements in the following pages so that we can have a common vocabulary to talk about fiction:

- Tone
- Character
- Plot
- Setting
- Narration
- Rhetorical Devices
- Theme
- Imagery
- Symbolism

Here are a few questions to ask when looking at some of the main elements of fiction. We will be looking at each of these in more detail in the following pages.

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place.

- What aspects make up the setting?
 - Geography, weather, time of day, social conditions?
- What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?
- Study the time period which is also part of the setting
- When was the story written?
 - Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
 - How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere, or social circumstances of the novel?

Characterization

Characterization deals with how the characters are described.

- through dialogue?
- by the way they speak?
- physical appearance? thoughts and feelings?
- interaction – the way they act towards other characters?
- Are they static characters who do not change?
- Do they develop by the end of the story?
- What type of characters are they?

- What qualities stand out?
- Are they stereotypes?
- Are the characters believable?

Plot and structure

The *plot* is the main sequence of events that make up the story.

- What are the most important events?
- How is the plot structured? Is it linear and chronological or does it move back and forth?
- Are there turning points, a climax, and/or an anticlimax?
- Is the plot believable?

Narrator and Point of View

The *narrator* is the person telling the story.

Point of view: whose eyes the story is being told through.

- Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
- Is the narrator the main character?
- Does the author speak through one of the characters?
- Is the story written in the first person “I” point of view?
- Is the story written in a detached third person “he/she/they” point of view?
- Is the story written in an “all-knowing” third person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the novel and is related to the main character.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
 - Is it internal where the character suffers inwardly?
 - Is it external, caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds themselves in?

Theme

The *theme* is the main idea, lesson, or message in the novel. It is usually an abstract, universal idea about the human condition, society or life, to name a few.

- How does the theme shine through in the story?
- Are any elements repeated that may suggest a theme?
- What other themes are there?

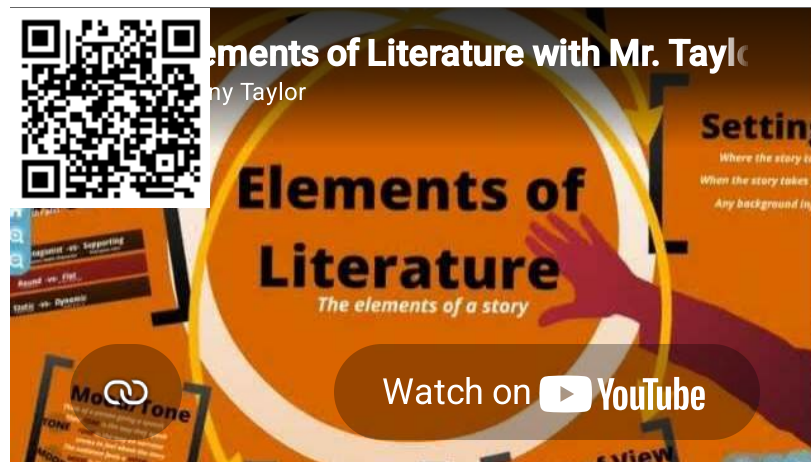
Style

The author’s style has to do with the author’s vocabulary, use of imagery, tone, or feeling of the story. It has to do with his attitude towards the subject. In some novels the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold, or dramatic.

- Is the text full of figurative language?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors, similes?
An example of a metaphor is when someone says, "My love, you *are* a rose." An example of a simile is "My darling, you are *like* a rose."
- What images are used?

Your literary analysis of a novel will often be in the form of an essay or book report where you will be asked to give your opinions of the novel at the end. To conclude, choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments. Try to view the novel as a whole and try to give a balanced analysis.

These are the Elements of Literature, the things that make up every story. This is the first of two videos.



Video 4.5.1 : Elements of literature with Mr. Taylor: Part I



Video 4.5.2 Elements of literature with Mr. Taylor: Part II

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2.4: A Review and Questions

How to Analyze a Short Story



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Old Fence. A short story has a structure and a message. Can you analyze this picture in much the same way as a short story?

What Is a Short Story (a review)?

A short story is a work of short, narrative prose that is usually centered around one single event. It is limited in scope and has an introduction, body, and conclusion. Although a short story has much in common with a novel (see *How to Analyze a Novel*), it is written with much greater precision. You will often be asked to write a literary analysis. An analysis of a short story requires basic knowledge of literary elements. The following guide and questions may help you:

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place. In a short story there are fewer settings compared to a novel. The time is more limited. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How is the setting created? Consider geography, weather, time of day, social conditions, et cetera.
- What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?

Study the time period, which is also part of the setting, and ask yourself the following:

- When was the story written?
- Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
- How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere, or social circumstances of the short story?

Characterization

Characterization deals with how the characters in the story are described. In short stories there are usually fewer characters compared to a novel. They usually focus on one central character or protagonist. Ask yourself the following:

- Who is the main character?
- Are the main character and other characters described through dialogue – by the way they speak (dialect or slang for instance)?
- Has the author described the characters by physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, and interaction (the way they act towards others)?
- Are they static/flat characters who do not change?
- Are they dynamic/round characters who DO change?
- What type of characters are they? What qualities stand out? Are they stereotypes?
- Are the characters believable?

Plot and structure

The plot is the main sequence of events that make up the story. In short stories the plot is usually centered around one experience or significant moment. Consider the following questions:

- What is the most important event?
- How is the plot structured? Is it linear and chronological or does it move around?
- Is the plot believable?

Narrator and Point of View

The narrator is the person telling the story. Consider this question: Are the narrator and the main character the same?

By point of view we mean from whose eyes the story is being told. Short stories tend to be told through one character's point of view. The following are important questions to consider:

- Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
- Does the author speak through the main character?
- Is the story written in the first person "I" point of view?
- Is the story written in a detached third person "he/she/they" point of view?
- Is there an "all-knowing" third person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the short story and is related to the main character. In a short story there is usually one main struggle.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
- Is it an internal conflict within the character?
- Is it an external conflict caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds themselves in?

Climax

The climax is the point of greatest tension or intensity in the short story. It can also be the point where events take a major turn as the story races towards its conclusion. Ask yourself:

- Is there a turning point in the story?
- When does the climax take place?

Theme

The theme is the main idea, lesson, or message in the short story. It may be an abstract idea about the human condition, society, or life. Ask yourself:

- How is the theme expressed?
- Are any elements repeated and therefore suggest a theme?
- Is there more than one theme?

Style

The author's style has to do with their vocabulary, use of imagery, tone, or the feeling of the story. It has to do with the author's attitude toward the subject. In some short stories the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold, or dramatic.

- Is the author's language full of figurative language?
- What images are used?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors (comparisons that do not use "as" or "like") or similes (comparisons that use "as" or "like")?

Your literary analysis of a short story will often be in the form of an essay where you may be asked to give your opinions of the short story at the end. Choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which character/characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments.

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2.5: Gilman, Charlotte Perkins "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892)

The Yellow Wallpaper

by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

1

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—*perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see, he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.

So I will let it alone and talk about the house.

The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.

There is a *delicious* garden! I never saw such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.

There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.

There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid; but I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it.

I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a *draught*, and shut the window.

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself,—before him, at least,—and that makes me very tired.

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! But John would not hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery, at the top of the house.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate, and provoke study, and when you follow the lame, uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions.

The color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word.

2

We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day.

I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery, and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please, save lack of strength.

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.

I am glad my case is not serious!

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him.

Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!

I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!

Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able—to dress and entertain, and order things.

It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby!

And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous.

I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wallpaper!

At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies.

He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on.

“You know the place is doing you good,” he said, “and really, dear, I don’t care to renovate the house just for a three months’ rental.”

“Then do let us go downstairs,” I said, “there are such pretty rooms there.”

Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain.

But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things.

It is as airy and comfortable a room as any one need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.

I’m really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper.

Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try.

It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fire-works in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now.

I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside-down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn’t match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store.

I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

The furniture in this room is no worse than inharmonious, however, for we had to bring it all from downstairs. I suppose when this was used as a playroom they had to take the nursery things out, and no wonder! I never saw such ravages as the children have made here.

The wallpaper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.

Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed, which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.

But I don't mind it a bit—only the paper.

There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing.

She is a perfect, and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows.

There is one that commands the road, a lovely, shaded, winding road, and one that just looks off over the country. A lovely country, too, full of great elms and velvet meadows.

This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn't faded, and where the sun is just so, I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

There's sister on the stairs!

3

Well, the Fourth of July is over! The people are gone and I am tired out. John thought it might do me good to see a little company, so we just had mother and Nellie and the children down for a week.

Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now.

But it tired me all the same.

John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!

Besides, it is such an undertaking to go so far.

I don't feel as if it was worth while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous.

I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time.

Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone.

And I am alone a good deal just now. John is kept in town very often by serious cases, and Jennie is good and lets me alone when I want her to.

So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper.

It dwells in my mind so!

I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of “debased Romanesque” with *delirium tremens*—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the cross-lights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all,—the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap, I guess.

4

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.

John says I musn't lose my strength, and has me take cod-liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat.

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.

It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness, I suppose.

And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head.

He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well.

He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper.

If we had not used it that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all. I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.

Of course I never mention it to them any more,—I am too wise,—but I keep watch of it all the same.

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here!

5

It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.

But I tried it last night.

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all around, just as the sun does.

I hate to see it sometimes, it creeps so slowly, and always comes in by one window or another.

John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy.

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.

I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper *did* move, and when I came back John was awake.

“What is it, little girl?” he said. “Don’t go walking about like that—you’ll get cold.”

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

“Why darling!” said he, “our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can’t see how to leave before.

“The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better. I feel really much easier about you.”

“I don’t weigh a bit more,” said I, “nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening, when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away.”

“Bless her little heart!” said he with a big hug; “she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let’s improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!”

“And you won’t go away?” I asked gloomily.

“Why, how can I, dear? It is only three weeks more and then we will take a nice little trip of a few days while Jennie is getting the house ready. Really, dear, you are better!”

“Better in body perhaps”—I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.

“My darling,” said he, “I beg of you, for my sake and for our child’s sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?”

So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long. He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn’t,—I lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well under way in following, it turns a back somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions,—why, that is something like it.

That is, sometimes!

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window—I always watch for that first long, straight ray—it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it.

That is why I watch it always.

By moonlight—the moon shines in all night when there is a moon—I wouldn't know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind,—that dim sub-pattern,—but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.

Indeed, he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.

It is a very bad habit, I am convinced, for, you see, I don't sleep.

And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake,—oh, no!

The fact is, I am getting a little afraid of John.

He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis, that perhaps it is the paper!

I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times *looking at the paper!* And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once.

She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with the paper she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry—asked me why I should frighten her so!

Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!

Did not that sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!

6

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was.

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wallpaper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was *because* of the wallpaper—he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.

I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more, and I think that will be enough.

7

I'm feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime.

In the daytime it is tiresome and perplexing.

There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.

It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.

But there is something else about that paper—the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.

It creeps all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair.

Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell!

Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.

It is not bad—at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful. I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me.

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the *color* of the paper! A yellow smell.

There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed, a long, straight, even *smooch*, as if it had been rubbed over and over.

I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!

8

I really have discovered something at last.

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside-down, and makes their eyes white!

If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.

9

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!

And I'll tell you why—privately—I've seen her!

I can see her out of every one of my windows!

It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her on that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!

I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.

And John is so queer now, that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room! Besides, I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself.

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once.

But, turn as fast as I can, I can only see out of one at one time.

And though I always see her she *may* be able to creep faster than I can turn!

I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind.

10

If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little.

I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

There are only two more days to get this paper off, and I believe John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes.

And I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give.

She said I slept a good deal in the daytime.

John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet!

He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind.

As if I couldn't see through him!

Still, I don't wonder he acts so, sleeping under this paper for three months.

It only interests me, but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it.

11

Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John is to stay in town over night, and won't be out until this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight, and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.

And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me I declared I would finish it to-day!

We go away to-morrow, and they are moving all my furniture down again to leave things as they were before.

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired.

How she betrayed herself that time!

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me—not *alive!*

She tried to get me out of the room—it was too patent! But I said it was so quiet and empty and clean now that I believed I would lie down again and sleep all I could; and not to wake me even for dinner—I would call when I woke.

So now she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it.

We shall sleep downstairs to-night, and take the boat home to-morrow.

I quite enjoy the room, now it is bare again.

How those children did tear about here!

This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

But I must get to work.

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path.

I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes.

I want to astonish him.

I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!

But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!

This bed will *not* move!

I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.

Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

I don't like to *look* out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get *me* out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

Why, there's John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can't open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now he's crying for an axe.

It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!"

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said—very quietly indeed, "Open the door, my darling!"

"I can't," said I. "The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!"

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it, of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!

Exercise 5.3.1

Questions

1. What is the meaning of the title? Why did Gilman use first person narration? Why is the female protagonist unnamed throughout the text?
2. How would you describe the narrator's voice in this text? How does that voice evolve over the course of the novella? How does the fragmented style of the narrative influence you as a reader?
3. How does Gilman engage with traditional ideas of femininity in this story? What do the house and wallpaper symbolize? What does the woman/women in the wallpaper represent?
4. What is the meaning of the last scene? Has this woman liberated herself from patriarchy as an individual through her madness or has she experienced the ultimate victimization?
5. Gilman was very much an activist writer and authored texts in many different voices (the social scientist, the journalist, the utopian writer, the Gothic writer). What is she advocating in this story? What are the risks of this narrative strategy for a politically-oriented feminist writer?
6. What contemporary issues does "The Yellow Wallpaper" evoke? Why do you think it has become one of the five most popular readings in college courses?

Optional Reading

Readings about the author and literary analysis of the story can be found [here](#).

Contributors and Attributions

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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3.1: Intertextuality

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Chapter 4. The World of Texts: Intertextuality

The previous chapters have represented written texts (although they may appear to come from nowhere and to travel to everywhere) as always being contexted in the lives of the people who read and write and located in social spaces within which the texts circulate. The typification of genre draws participants together in recognizable activities and contexts crystallized by the genre. Even someone scratching an X on the ground where a hole is to be dug potentially evokes a history of maps (and even tales of pirate treasure)—or at least draws on a history of worksite inscription practices to identify specific places to be acted on.

Each new text can relate to prior texts in other ways. Sometimes the text may directly and self-consciously identify other texts it builds on or sets itself against; sometimes the reference is more implicit, but intentional; and sometimes the relation is entirely submerged, relying on familiar textual traditions and cultural resources.

Intertextuality is this relationship among texts, and it forms a separate domain or location within which texts can act. That is, intertextuality is both a resource activated in texts and forms a playing field upon which texts can assert their place, meaning, and consequence. The more deeply we understand the intertextual resources we inevitably draw on whenever we write, the more we will be able to manage, deploy, and position our writing with greatest clarity and intent upon this history of texts and how the readers may perceive those prior texts. And the more we understand how the texts we read also rely on prior texts, we can understand with greater clarity what they are trying to accomplish on which playing field, and whether we are satisfied with the kinds of intertextuality they construct.

Intertextuality Is Like and Unlike Other Spatial and Temporal Notions of Context

Texts are to some extent like interactions mediated in speech. A series of letters may serve in a friendship or a business relationship much as a series of turns in a conversation, so that each new utterance relies on and speaks to the previous ones and sequentially is part of the temporal unfolding of arrangements, relationships, and activities. But texts endure beyond our fading memories of previous conversations, and so we can look at them to refresh our memories, and we can refer to them as enduring artifacts in our new statements. We may even quote them. If memories of our readers differ, we can produce the prior letters, if we have saved them. Thus as texts add up into an archive they become a binding resource on the current moment, locating current events within a documentable space of prior texts.

Texts outside the immediate interchange may also come to be treated as relevant, becoming accountable facts within the interactional situation. We may introduce a prior contract that encumbers current negotiations. No matter what current participants in the negotiation wish, they must now recognize and respect the terms of the prior contract. Or, in another situation, we may refer to a shameful family secret revealed in a letter that Aunt Rosie sent us. Of course we could mention Aunt Rosie's spoken comments or could even suggest our respondent go speak to Aunt Rosie—but the enduringness and circulation of documents means that Aunt Rosie's divulging of that secret cannot be denied or radically misconstrued or misremembered. These circulating documents, both contract and personal secrets, may even be seen and read by numerous people not part of the original or the current communicative interaction unless we burn them or otherwise keep them hidden.

Networks of documents grow and circulate, and become mutually accessible, particularly after the inventions of print, cheap paper, and widespread literacy. Libraries, mass printings, and the transformative ease of digital communication and the World Wide Web means that there are extensive sets of documents that can be brought to bear on any new circumstance, written or spoken. Texts become accountable to wide bodies of prior texts which are deployable as resources.

The status of the intertext, nonetheless, remains tied to social and institutional arrangements that value texts and how texts become intertwined with social arrangements. Consider, for example, the history of the relation of oral and written contracts. Before writing, all agreements were oral. When writing entered the picture, writing was only used to remind people of spoken agreement. The written document only eventually gained the status of an enforceable contract as business law became a matter of record, and business records established accountability for business practices. Now spoken contracts have a much more dubious status and are harder to enforce, and all major agreements are reduced to writing, with the written form taking legal priority over any oral understandings (Tiersma, 2010).

With the coming of the Internet we now recognize a virtual world consisting of digital communications, representations, and interactions, yet this virtual world has been growing since the inception of literacy, as people started to orient toward collections of texts as significant parts of their worlds, to which they might appropriately respond with more texts. Texts bind together groups of people who have access to, interests in, or responsibilities toward particular kinds of documents. People in academic specialties are expected to be familiar with the literature of their fields so as to be able to contribute to that literature and apply it to cases where their expertise is called on. Lawyers need to keep up to date on the latest rulings as well as prior precedents and laws so as to have maximum resources in their own pleadings and to be able to counter the deployment of these texts by their opponents. Stamp collectors and aficionados of the fictions of Thomas Pynchon each have their bodies of texts that help form the substance and interactions of their socio-literate worlds. For millennia, pervasive intertextuality shaped the world of religious scholars devoted to sacred texts and commentaries; similarly, now pervasive intertextuality has come to remake the world of increasingly large numbers of people in economically advanced societies. Institutions of law, bureaucracy, government, corporations, finance, health care, science and social science, social welfare, academic research, entertainment, journalism, and publishing—to name just a few—transform our here and now lives in relation to deep archives of records, files, and knowledge. Through the work of intertextually-guided professionals, these archives become relevant for who we are, what we do, and how we are to be treated in the current moment. Over a century ago we recognized the formation of large white-collar workforce and more recently we have come to call ourselves the information society. The requirements for education and high levels of literacy have increased for those who wish to participate fully and establish high levels of agency in this new way of life. Everyone needs to be able to move through realms of texts as adeptly as they navigate the physical world, perhaps even more adeptly.

Bodies of texts not only provide a terrain against which new utterances may emerge, they have their own rhythms of temporality. Documents from the deep past may be rehabilitated and made immediately relevant, as when an ancient law or a philosophic argument is brought from the recesses of forgotten archives to be claimed to rule in a current case. Different domains have different relevancies for documents of different ages, and how prior texts may be recalled and made relevant to the moment at hand. Arguments may evolve slowly or rapidly based on whether significant, slowly maturing statements appear perhaps only several times in a century, or financial trades are transmitted and responded to in micro-seconds.

Extensiveness and Shape of Invoked Intertext

When we now write, our activity is likely to be already deeply embedded in one of the well-established activity systems relying on a robust intertextual infrastructure. This intertextual infrastructure contributes to defining the current moment as well as to the immediately relevant bodies of texts that need to be explicitly and implicitly considered in framing our response. A lawyer preparing contractual documents for a client must take into account the law and precedents for the nation and local jurisdiction that specifically regulate the kind of transaction being engaged. Even though none of the laws may be explicitly mentioned in the contract, the terms of the agreement must be in conformity with the provisions of the law, and lawyers would be well-advised to be mindful of the opportunities the laws provide for creating favorable terms for the client. Litigation precedents and rulings might also help guide the drafting of the document so as to be effective if it were to come to court. The contract also should be well positioned against the relevant business and financial documents that define the client's financial situation, obligations, plans, and wishes.

On the other hand, the lawyer need not attend to, nor in any way make the contract responsive, to many documents, both near and far from the matter at hand. In a real estate transaction, neither a newspaper description of the neighborhood the property is located in nor the history of the property itself is likely to be relevant to the effective contract—unless another lawyer does a great deal of work to establish the legal relevance to the case, perhaps to indicate the property has a different owner or contains toxic substances that are liable to legal regulation, thereby bringing it into the relevant intertext. Even less likely to bear on the case is the owner's childhood schoolwork or medical records. The lawyer needs to be careful in intertextually locating the contract in a complex textual world, but a fairly defined one. Although the law now rules life, it rules life primarily from the page, and anything that would come to notice to the law must wind up in the network of legally admissible documents that the law would consider relevant.

Although in a less compulsory way, philosophic arguments exist in a network of texts and anyone attempting to advance a new argument with any hope of credibility, even in an oral forum, must take into account a canon of prior authors that have puzzled over the question at hand. If the argument occurs among trained philosophers the expectation will be quite explicit, as the writer will be expected to take into account Aristotle's and Locke's positions, if the field has deemed that in fact Aristotle and Locke are the most relevant authors for the issue. Training in the field explicitly requires induction into the canon of texts deemed relevant and in the

appropriate ways of framing issues, positioning one's views and arguing for new claims in the on-going discussions over the accumulated wisdom registered in the intertext. The training is equally in what texts and modes of argument are not germane. Even in non-expert, daily life discussion of philosophy, the more one is familiar with the kinds of objections and considerations posed in the history of philosophy, the better able one is to frame views and anticipate objections—as well as to solve problems that drive one to philosophize.

In an even less rigorously intertextually organized domain, every newspaper story is framed against the unfolding stories of the previous days, the longer flow of reported events likely to remain in the memories of the newspaper-reading public, and the stories of competing papers. Public documents and reports, academic research, or private papers may become relevant and referred to, or viewed as inappropriate or uninteresting to the news and therefore to be ignored—depending on readers' expectations and reporters' attempts to construct relevance. While neither law nor professional judgment may hold the newspapers accountable to awareness of the relevant intertext and the boundaries of the relevant, public memory, credibility, and interest will.

Every genre and activity system carries with it relevant intertexts to be drawn upon and to which they are held accountable. This may always be expanded by textual work that argues or insinuates the relevance of unanticipated documents, and parts of the anticipated intertext may be similarly excluded by authorial intent and strategy. Whole new intertextual systems may be made relevant, as when the affliction of a celebrity movie actor with a dread disease links health news with entertainment news for as long as the star holds the public attention and uses his or her celebrity to give attention to curing the disease. Also the magic of foregrounding and backgrounding as well as strategic remembering and forgetting, may change the apparent shape or immediate relevance of the intertext, varying according to the degree of inspection and compulsion of intertextual accountability.

It should be mentioned as well that each domain has its common practices of referring to and citing the intertext. Academic fields often foreground parts of the intertext through explicit citation following the differing conventions of various fields for footnotes or works cited, as specified in style guidebooks. Less explicit, though, is which parts of the intertext are left entirely in the background as “general knowledge” of the field, no longer attributed to any author. Also less explicit are the practices of representing material from the intertext, whether from extensive quotation and comment, paraphrase, summary, or just the passing use of a term originated by another author. Non-academic professional domains, such as law, accounting, and journalism, have their own regulations and practices of identifying the relevant intertexts through citation or explicit linking of documents. Some domains, at the other extreme, leave the intertext entirely implicit, as folk tales borrow freely from each other, remind us of other folk tales, and capture a world-view resonantly expressed across many texts.

The Intertext as a Virtual Theater of Action

Texts originally were fully integrated into daily non-textual activities, as cows and sheep were tallied in the meadow and barn and tax collectors carried their lists as they traveled the land. To some extent this is still true as the express delivery messenger carries an electronic device to one's doorstep, to be signed and inscribed at the moment of delivery of a package. But texts increasingly have retreated to the counting house, government office, academic library, the internet and other sites where texts can be readily collected, inspected, contemplated, and processed in the presence of other texts, apart from the realities represented, analyzed, or directed by the texts. Within such indoor worlds of reading and writing, calculation, contemplation, and design, the most immediate realities to be contemplated are those inscribed in other texts. Within the intertextual world, the world outside the page only becomes accessible and relevant when inscribed through the typical and accepted procedures of the activity system related to the intertextual field. Thus for the operations of physical and biological reality to enter into the discourse of science they must be observed, collected, and inscribed by acceptable procedures of experiment, observation, or other legitimized methods. Then they are usually further processed from the initial textual form as raw data into charts, tables, data bases and other textualized and textually processed aggregates. When we are talking about the environment and climate change, we are most immediately talking about data bases, climate models, equations, scientific papers, policy reports and other inscriptions produced, stored, consumed, and contemplated indoors. The warmth of a sunny day is only relevant insofar as it is recorded and brought indoors in a format that can be handled in the textual world. Chapter 9 of this volume provides more detailed treatment of how we can inscribe realities into our texts and link our texts to others to establish an intertextual domain of inscribed meanings.

In the inverse process, those documents that are most likely to be integrated with our material, experienced world—such as architectural drawings used to construct buildings or standards for automobile fuel consumption and exhaust—are likely to have spent much time indoors being produced and processed among other texts. Even the principles by which we conduct our personal relations are pervaded by the textual work of psychologists, sociologists, and health researchers that have led us to monitor and

guide our behavior in new ways. The world of texts, and now what we call the virtual world of information, has thus changed the basic social and material landscape on which we live our lives.

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3.2: The Odyssey Introduction

For many people, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* seem to go together. After all, they are both by Homer and *The Odyssey* seems to be a continuation of *The Iliad*. Of course, the reality is not quite so simple. First, since we are not sure that a person named Homer either wrote the poems or even actually existed, it is dangerous for us to assume that the same person was responsible for both poems, and given the history of oral composition that I described briefly in the last chapter, it is dangerous for us to assume that any single person wrote either of them. Furthermore, *The Odyssey* is a continuation of *The Iliad* in only the loosest sense. People tend to remember Odysseus' spectacular adventures, but those adventures form only a small part of the poem. Those adventures are exciting, but the heart of *The Odyssey* is elsewhere. Actually there were a number of other poems built around the Troy story, but except for brief fragments, those poems have disappeared.

The Iliad opens by announcing as its subject the wrath of Achilles and the destruction that resulted from that wrath. Achilles' wrath, with all its implications, begins and prolongs the action of that poem, a poem full of wrathful characters who feel compelled to show how heroic they can be in the most traditional sense of heroism. *The Odyssey* is quite different, as even the opening lines show, for the narrator announces as his subject not wrath or any other quality but a man, "the man of many ways" (again using Richmond Lattimore's translation). What we see immediately is not the rigidity of Achilles and his peers but the adaptability of Odysseus, the man of many ways." Even more important, we are introduced to Odysseus' intelligence. He may have had fantastic adventures, but what the narrator emphasizes is how much Odysseus learned from them. As we shall see, physical prowess is important in this poem, but it is far less important than mental ability. In addition, while *The Iliad* focuses on wrath, destruction, and death, *The Odyssey* focuses on a man, on his wife, on their son, and on life. *The Iliad* is an epic because it focuses on a pivotal moment in the history of Troy, the moment leading up to its destruction. *The Odyssey* is a romance because it focuses on individuals and on fantastic adventures.

The Odyssey then focuses on domesticity. Odysseus' entire purpose in the poem is simply to get home to his wife and son, as he explains to the Phaiakians in Book XIII. He is just a man who wants to get home. He does not talk about how he is the best warrior, how he is superior to others. He does not boast, but his goal turns out to be harder to achieve than we might expect. Achieving it requires Odysseus to learn about himself, about the many roles he (like any other human being) must play in life, and about his wife and child.

In fact, this poem requires that wife, Penelope, and that child, Telemachos, to learn about themselves as well. In this sense, *The Odyssey* tells three separate stories, not one highly unified story as we see in *The Iliad*. If we look only at Odysseus, we miss far too much of the poem. Perhaps that is why we never even see Odysseus until Book V, and in our first view of him we see him sitting on Kalypso's island and weeping over his separation from his loved ones. Yes, our first view of the great hero shows him crying because he cannot get home. The first four books of the poem, and large parts of later books, are devoted to Penelope and Telemachos and their fates.

We must always remember that if Odysseus' plight—he has been away from home for twenty years, ten at the Trojan War and ten in his wanderings—has been hard on him, it has also been a trial for his family in Ithaka. His wife Penelope, one of the most remarkable women in all of literature, has awaited his homecoming for two decades, during the latter of which she has had to fend off the attentions of the one hundred eight suitors who have moved into her house and consumed the treasures that Odysseus left behind. Through a combination of wiles and intelligence (and often those two are the same thing), she has managed to preserve her independence, though as *The Odyssey* progresses, it is clear that unless Odysseus returns soon, she is about to lose that independence.

That Penelope's independence should even be a question, however, is an indication of how remarkable this poem is, for women in ancient Greece had very little independence, and *The Odyssey* is full of independent women: Athene, Kalypso, Circe, the Sirens, Nausikaa, Helen, and Penelope come immediately to mind, though all but the last three are divine or supernatural. Nonetheless, the emphasis on women is obvious, and these women make important points not only about themselves but about men as well. Circe, for instance, is famous for her ability to change men into pigs, but (dare I say it?), rather than actually transforming them, she only seems to be allowing them to show their real natures. We have ample proof in other episodes that Odysseus' companions behave like pigs, which means that Circe is just letting them be themselves.

Kalypso, on the other hand, is really taken with Odysseus and offers him immortality if he will stay on her island with her. She presents a major test for Odysseus, who indicates often in this poem that he is deeply concerned with the problems of human mortality; but Odysseus passes this test without a hint of hesitation. He wants only to be home with Penelope. He would rather be home with his by now middle aged wife than to live forever on a tropical island with a beautiful goddess, which is surely a sign of how much he loves that wife.

Athene, too, is a central figure in this poem. This goddess of wisdom is Odysseus' protector and ally, and time after time we see that Odysseus would rather rely on the intelligence that she represents than on the muscle that he also has in abundance. In fact, it would not be going too far to say that the poem is largely about the uses of intelligence, which invariably triumphs over the more common male attribute of prowess in fighting. Time after time we see the superiority of wisdom over might. Might is a last resort, a lamentable last resort. Even Menelaos in Book IV expresses his regret to Telemachos over the Trojan War and its consequences. Menelaos and Helen, whose passions stood at the center of the war, have become images of domesticity, preparing in Book IV for the wedding of their daughter to the son of Achilleus, though we may sense some troubles beneath the surface. That modest domesticity, coupled with wisdom, is at the center of *The Odyssey* and brings us back to Penelope, who, despite her husband's mysterious disappearance, remains faithful to him and outwits the suitors. Furthermore, even when Odysseus reveals himself near the poem's end, Penelope has one more test for him. He cannot simply announce his return; he must prove himself to the woman who is so clearly his equal in intelligence. As we will see, Odysseus learns much about himself, largely through his encounters with women on his journey, but Penelope has also learned a great deal about herself during his absence.

The other character whose education about self is so important in this poem is Odysseus and Penelope's son Telemachos. As the poem opens, Telemachos is about twenty years old. He has grown up in the shadow of a famous father whom he has never known, has watched as his mother has been besieged by the suitors, and has been helpless to prevent them from devouring his inheritance. In *The Odyssey* we watch him turn from a boy into a man, as he begins to assert himself and then allies himself with his returned father. The importance of Telemachos' story to the poem as a whole can be seen in the way that the poem's first four books are devoted to him, as well as in the attention that is given to Odysseus himself not only as Telemachos' father but as his parents' son. Family relationships are central to this poem.

Early in the poem, Telemachos announces one of the poem's major themes:

My mother says indeed I am his [Odysseus']. I for my part
do not know. Nobody really knows his own father.

(I.215-16)

James Joyce, in *Ulysses*, his rewriting of *the Odyssey* story, refers to this theme as the "mystery of paternity," but that mystery refers to more than the simple physical relationship between a child and the child's alleged father. In Telemachos' case, it refers to his need to define himself without the aid of his absent father, to discover what it means to be not Telemachos, the son of Odysseus, but just Telemachos. This process, which we might think of as the process of becoming an adult, is not easy for the individual involved nor for those around the person. In order to define himself, Telemachos must go on his own journey, visiting Nestor and Menelaos, defying the suitors, and even establishing his power in relation to his mother. In all of these endeavors he is aided by his father's guardian, Athene, goddess of wisdom, which means that he, too, is wise. Athene convinces him that his father will return, but she convinces him also that he cannot simply wait for that return. He must assert himself and take action on his own. As a result of this maturation, when Odysseus does return, Telemachos can relate to him not just as a son but as an independent person, which is an essential step in growing up.

This development in no way diminishes Telemachos' attachment to his father. If anything, it strengthens that attachment, because Telemachos is driven not only by what is expected of him as a son but by his own choice. One of the most touching moments in the poem—and there are many such moments, as Odysseus reveals himself to friends and family members—comes when Odysseus reveals himself to Telemachos. Thanks to Athene, Odysseus' appearance has been altered, so that when he meets Telemachos at the home of the swineherd Eumaios, the son does not recognize the father (whom he would not recognize anyhow), but Odysseus has a chance to see the fine person that his son has become. Finally, when the two of them are alone, Athene restores Odysseus' appearance and he announces his identity, which Telemachos promptly doubts, until Odysseus says, "No other Odysseus than I will ever come back to you" (XVI.203-04) and the two of them embrace, father and son having proven themselves to each other and having accepted each other on their own terms as individuals. The moment is magical and almost as affecting as the moment when

Odysseus reveals himself to Penelope and she tricks him into proving his identity, after which they “gladly went together to bed, and their old ritual” (XXIII.296).

Of course, growing up is never easy, and Telemachos has much to learn. Early in the poem, as he begins to assert himself, he criticizes his mother and tells her, basically, to go back to her room and leave the business of the household to him (I.356-60). He is not exactly delicate with his mother, and modern readers might well find the way he talks to his mother offensive, so we must be aware of the sexism inherent in the culture we are observing. In order to assert himself in front of the suitors, Telemachos, who is reaching male adulthood, must establish himself as independent of and more powerful than his mother. In terms of his society, he is correct to say that the household power is his, which Penelope acknowledges by doing what he says, but which she also laments as she weeps for her missing husband. In another sense, she is proud that Telemachos has asserted himself, though she is sad at the implications of his self-assertion for herself and for what it says about expectations for Odysseus’ return, because it means that another generation has matured and is about to take over.

Elsewhere in the poem, however, Telemachos learns to be more diplomatic in his self-assertion, and despite Telemachos’ harsh words to her, Penelope, as we have seen, is credited with insight and intelligence. The dynamics of this family are working themselves out in difficult circumstances, and it is vital, as we consider Odysseus, to keep in mind the stories of his wife and of his son.

Perhaps we should approach Odysseus first as a son himself, a role that he plays on two particular occasions in the poem. At the very end of the poem, after Odysseus has routed the suitors and been reunited with Penelope, he goes to tell Laertes, his aged father, of his return, but, being Odysseus, he cannot simply approach the old man and say, “Hi, Dad. I’m back.” Although he is greatly affected at seeing how sad and old his father has become over the past twenty years, Odysseus concocts one of his many stories, describing himself as someone who had seen Odysseus only five years before and still hopes for his return. As a result of this speech, his father pours dust over his own head, a sign of mourning. At this point even Odysseus cannot continue the masquerade and he reveals himself, but we are left wondering why Odysseus would behave in such a way. Why, seeing his father after twenty years, does he play a role, making up a new identity for himself? The answer is not that he is a cruel man who enjoys tormenting people. In fact, as we see throughout the poem, Odysseus enjoys inventing identities for himself. He tells stories to Eumaios, to Telemachos, to Penelope, to the Cyclopes—to almost everyone he meets. Some of these stories are told for strategic purposes, because at times Odysseus must not identify himself, but some of them seem to indicate Odysseus’ need constantly to recreate himself, to create an identity for himself, as though he is not entirely secure in who he is.

One of my favorite instances occurs just after Odysseus discovers from a stranger (who is Athene in disguise) that he has awakened in Ithaka, and he identifies himself by telling one of his long fictional stories, full of realistic details and identifiable names, to which Athene basically responds, “Oh come off it. I know who you are” (XIII.291- 95). Clearly Athene is fond of Odysseus, who is, after all, her protégé, and she recognizes much of herself in him. In other words, she knows that his deviousness and his deceptive tales, which are signs of his intelligence because he employs them so intelligently, are part of his nature. At the same time, she is telling him that though he may be great at inventing identities, he is no match for her. Simultaneously, then, he is being both praised and put in his place. He can adopt any identity that he likes, says Athene, but she will always know who he is.

We might legitimately wonder, however, whether he always really knows who he is, just as we may wonder whether we always really know who we are or whether, like Odysseus, we constantly go through a process of reinventing ourselves.

That question is raised not only by the many stories Odysseus tells and the many disguises he wears (some of them the work of Athene) but by the well-known adventures that he describes to the Phaiakians. Perhaps his most famous adventure, his encounter with the Cyclopes, illustrates this point best. The Cyclopes are a savage group who have developed no societal structure. Furthermore, their possession of a single eye in the middle of their foreheads indicates a lack of depth perception, a deficiency that is both physical and intellectual. In order to deal with such barbaric creatures, Odysseus must deny not only who he is but what he is, so that when Polyphemos asks his name, he answers, “Nobody” (in Greek, *Outis*). This may seem to us like a fairly primitive trick, and we may laugh at Polyphemos for falling for it, but it has a deeper meaning for *The Odyssey*. By denying his identity, by saying that he is “Nobody,” he succeeds in saving most of his men, as well as himself. And when he does assert his true self by yelling out his name as they depart the Cyclopes’ island, he dooms his men and condemns himself to more years away from home. The point that is made in this episode, and throughout much of the poem, is that identity, selfhood, can be dangerous. It must be understood and controlled. Consequently, Odysseus must even visit the Underworld, where he learns of his future—that his death will come from the sea—and where he meets his mother, who has died from grief during his absence, because he was such a good

son and because she loved him so much. His love for his mother, his identity as a good son, has killed her. In short, everything we do, the good and the bad, has unforeseen consequences. The poet always comments on the ironies of human existence.

It should be obvious now that every part of the poem—every character, every episode—contributes to the overall effect of the poem. Nothing is extraneous and nothing is out of place, though we as readers must often exercise our own intelligence to see and understand the connections. In this sense, this three thousand-year-old poem is interactive, as literature tends to be. It shows us the stories of Penelope, Telemachos, and Odysseus, but we as modern readers must put those stories together, see where they lead us.

Usually a writer will help us in this task. A writer may focus on particular words or images to stress a point, or a writer may repeat particular kinds of scenes with significant variations, as we saw in *The Iliad*. In *The Odyssey*, the poet helps us by having numerous characters refer to yet another story, one that seems at first to have nothing to do with Odysseus, the story of Agamemnon's homecoming. This story would have been known to the earliest audience of *The Odyssey*, but we may need to be reminded of it.

After the Achaians' victory at Troy, most of the leading warriors had trouble with their homecomings. Many, in fact, died before they could return home, and in the course of *The Odyssey* we hear about the fates of Nestor, Aias, Menelaos, and others. Most prominent, however, is the story of Agamemnon, who reached home relatively easily, only to be killed almost immediately by his wife Klytaimnestra and her lover Aigisthos, the latter of whom was killed several years later by Agamemnon's son Orestes. (Some three centuries after *The Odyssey* was completed, the Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote a trilogy of play, *The Oresteia*, based on this story. The focus of Aeschylus' works, as well as numerous elements of the plot, is quite different from what we see in *The Odyssey*, though like all the Greek tragedies, they are well worth reading.) The story of Agamemnon is referred to prominently by Athene in Book I, by Nestor in Book III, by Menelaos in Book IV, by the occupants of the Underworld (including Agamemnon himself) in Book XI, and by Odysseus in Book XIII). Why? Clearly this story stands in sharp contrast to most of *The Odyssey*. Agamemnon, as we saw in *The Iliad* is a man of force and brutality, but his physical power counts for little when he returns home. His return itself is without obstacles, and he learns nothing from his experiences, unlike Odysseus, whose return is difficult but provides him a vital education. Klytaimnestra has hardly been faithful during Agamemnon's absence and she plays an active role in his death, whereas Penelope remains faithful throughout Odysseus' doubly long absence. (Of course, unlike Odysseus, Agamemnon came home with a captured woman, Cassandra, whom Klytaimnestra also killed. Agamemnon really is not terribly bright.) And Telemachos joins his father in combatting their enemies, while Orestes was forced to seek vengeance on his own. The characters in Odysseus' household all learn to subordinate their selfish desires to the greater good of the family, whereas in Agamemnon's household each character operates independently, rather like the Cyclopes, looking out only for him or herself. In fact, the two stories once again return us to the question of identity by focusing our attention on how these characters behave and why they do so. It is revealing that the ghost of Agamemnon tells Odysseus what he learned from his bloody homecoming, that women are untrustworthy. Still the same old introspective Agamemnon that we saw in *The Iliad*. He contrasts sharply with Odysseus, who learns so much from his adventures, including that he absolutely must trust women.

There is one other aspect of *The Odyssey* that should be covered in this brief introduction, the role of the bards. There are a number of bards who appear in the poem, the most important of whom are Demodokos, the bard of the Phaiakians, and Phemios, the bard in Odysseus' house. There are a number of reasons that a reader should pay close attention to these bards. One is that they give us an idea of how a Homeric poet might have operated. After meals, the bards are brought in to recite in poetic form the exploits of some hero, providing what we would call after-dinner entertainment. It is especially interesting that Demodokos is blind, since Homer (if such a person existed) was reputed to be blind. In fact, bards in oral cultures tend not to be blind, but literate cultures assume that only blind people would be able to memorize so much poetry. Of course, as I explained in the chapter on *The Iliad*, we are not really talking about memorization but oral composition. Another thing that is important about the bards concerns Odysseus directly. While he is with the hospitable Phaiakians, in disguise, Demodokos tells a story about Odysseus. That is, Odysseus has become a hero, the subject of heroic poetry, in his own lifetime. Odysseus, who has been cut off from society for so many years, is shocked to realize that he has become the stuff of legend. So moved is he that he weeps (again). What Homer has done here is to create a fascinating mirror effect, a meta-narrative: within a poem about Odysseus, we see the creation of a poem about Odysseus. Odysseus becomes the audience to his own story, just as we become the audience to this story, which, as it relates to human identity, to the vicissitudes of human existence, is also our story.

Finally, we see the honor that is paid to the bards. Poets love to write about the importance of poetry, naturally, and the poet might well be exaggerating the role of the bards, but it is clear that Demodokos is a respected member of the court who receives all sorts of special considerations. And Phemios, who is accused of collusion with the suitors back in Ithaka, is given the benefit of the

doubt and spared. Perhaps the poet is simply glorifying poets, but more likely what we see is how important poets were to the society that produced these poems.

I have tried to make this discussion of *The Odyssey* shorter and less detailed than the discussion of *The Iliad*, partly because reading *The Iliad* is itself a preparation for reading *The Odyssey* and partly because *The Odyssey* presents fewer problems for modern readers, who tend to be more familiar with romance than with epic. There are fewer battle scenes, Odysseus' adventures are already well-known, and the poem is set on a smaller scale. It still has cosmic overtones, but not to the same extent as *The Iliad*. However foreign *The Odyssey* might be to us, its domestic concerns, as well as Odysseus' adventures, still resonate. He just wants to get home, to be with his wife and son and the loyal members of his household. He, like Achilles, is aware of the dark side of human life, and he knows after his visit to the Underworld that he is fated to go wandering yet again, but we all know that human happiness is fleeting. What *The Odyssey* confirms for us is that human happiness is a possibility that can be found in the mundane.

Incidentally, for readers who really like *The Odyssey*, there are two modern works based on it that may be of interest. One is Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, and the other, loosely related to *The Odyssey*, is Derek Walcott's beautiful and effective *Omeros*.

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3.3: Homer, The Odyssey Book X

AEOLUS, THE LAESTRYGONES, CIRCE.

“Thence we went on to the Aeolian island where lives Aeolus son of Hippotas, dear to the immortal gods. It is an island that floats (as it were) upon the sea,⁸³ iron bound with a wall that girds it. Now, Aeolus has six daughters and six lusty sons, so he made the sons marry the daughters, and they all live with their dear father and mother, feasting and enjoying every conceivable kind of luxury. All day long the atmosphere of the house is loaded with the savour of roasting meats till it groans again, yard and all; but by night they sleep on their well made bedsteads, each with his own wife between the blankets. These were the people among whom we had now come.

“Aeolus entertained me for a whole month asking me questions all the time about Troy, the Argive fleet, and the return of the Achaeans. I told him exactly how everything had happened, and when I said I must go, and asked him to further me on my way, he made no sort of difficulty, but set about doing so at once. Moreover, he flayed me a prime ox-hide to hold the ways of the roaring winds, which he shut up in the hide as in a sack—for Jove had made him captain over the winds, and he could stir or still each one of them according to his own pleasure. He put the sack in the ship and bound the mouth so tightly with a silver thread that not even a breath of a side-wind could blow from any quarter. The West wind which was fair for us did he alone let blow as it chose; but it all came to nothing, for we were lost through our own folly.

“Nine days and nine nights did we sail, and on the tenth day our native land showed on the horizon. We got so close in that we could see the stubble fires burning, and I, being then dead beat, fell into a light sleep, for I had never let the rudder out of my own hands, that we might get home the faster. On this the men fell to talking among themselves, and said I was bringing back gold and silver in the sack that Aeolus had given me. ‘Bless my heart,’ would one turn to his neighbour, saying, ‘how this man gets honoured and makes friends to whatever city or country he may go. See what fine prizes he is taking home from Troy, while we, who have travelled just as far as he has, come back with hands as empty as we set out with—and now Aeolus has given him ever so much more. Quick—let us see what it all is, and how much gold and silver there is in the sack he gave him.’

“Thus they talked and evil counsels prevailed. They loosed the sack, whereupon the wind flew howling forth and raised a storm that carried us weeping out to sea and away from our own country. Then I awoke, and knew not whether to throw myself into the sea or to live on and make the best of it; but I bore it, covered myself up, and lay down in the ship, while the men lamented bitterly as the fierce winds bore our fleet back to the Aeolian island.

“When we reached it we went ashore to take in water, and dined hard by the ships. Immediately after dinner I took a herald and one of my men and went straight to the house of Aeolus, where I found him feasting with his wife and family; so we sat down as suppliants on the threshold. They were astounded when they saw us and said, ‘Ulysses, what brings you here? What god has been ill-treating you? We took great pains to further you on your way home to Ithaca, or wherever it was that you wanted to go to.’

“Thus did they speak, but I answered sorrowfully, ‘My men have undone me; they, and cruel sleep, have ruined me. My friends, mend me this mischief, for you can if you will.’

“I spoke as movingly as I could, but they said nothing, till their father answered, ‘Vilest of mankind, get you gone at once out of the island; him whom heaven hates will I in no wise help. Be off, for you come here as one abhorred of heaven.’ And with these words he sent me sorrowing from his door.

“Thence we sailed sadly on till the men were worn out with long and fruitless rowing, for there was no longer any wind to help them. Six days, night and day did we toil, and on the seventh day we reached the rocky stronghold of Lamus—Telepylus, the city of the Laestrygonians, where the shepherd who is driving in his sheep and goats [to be milked] salutes him who is driving out his flock [to feed] and this last answers the salute. In that country a man who could do without sleep might earn double wages, one as a herdsman of cattle, and another as a shepherd, for they work much the same by night as they do by day.⁸⁴

“When we reached the harbour we found it land-locked under steep cliffs, with a narrow entrance between two headlands. My captains took all their ships inside, and made them fast close to one another, for there was never so much as a breath of wind inside, but it was always dead calm. I kept my own ship outside, and moored it to a rock at the very end of the point; then I climbed a high rock to reconnoitre, but could see no sign neither of man nor cattle, only some smoke rising from the ground. So I sent two of my company with an attendant to find out what sort of people the inhabitants were.

“The men when they got on shore followed a level road by which the people draw their firewood from the mountains into the town, till presently they met a young woman who had come outside to fetch water, and who was daughter to a Laestrygonian named Antiphates. She was going to the fountain Artacia from which the people bring in their water, and when my men had come close up to her, they asked her who the king of that country might be, and over what kind of people he ruled; so she directed them to her father’s house, but when they got there they found his wife to be a giantess as huge as a mountain, and they were horrified at the sight of her.

“She at once called her husband Antiphates from the place of assembly, and forthwith he set about killing my men. He snatched up one of them, and began to make his dinner off him then and there, whereon the other two ran back to the ships as fast as ever they could. But Antiphates raised a hue-and-cry after them, and thousands of sturdy Laestrygonians sprang up from every quarter—ogres, not men. They threw vast rocks at us from the cliffs as though they had been mere stones, and I heard the horrid sound of the ships crunching up against one another, and the death cries of my men, as the Laestrygonians speared them like fishes and took them home to eat them. While they were thus killing my men within the harbour I drew my sword, cut the cable of my own ship, and told my men to row with all their might if they too would not fare like the rest; so they laid out for their lives, and we were thankful enough when we got into open water out of reach of the rocks they hurled at us. As for the others there was not one of them left.

“Thence we sailed sadly on, glad to have escaped death, though we had lost our comrades, and came to the Aeaean island, where Circe lives—a great and cunning goddess who is own sister to the magician Aeetes—for they are both children of the sun by Perse, who is daughter to Oceanus. We brought our ship into a safe harbour without a word, for some god guided us thither, and having landed we lay there for two days and two nights, worn out in body and mind. When the morning of the third day came I took my spear and my sword, and went away from the ship to reconnoitre, and see if I could discover signs of human handiwork, or hear the sound of voices. Climbing to the top of a high look-out I espied the smoke of Circe’s house rising upwards amid a dense forest of trees, and when I saw this I doubted whether, having seen the smoke, I would not go on at once and find out more, but in the end I deemed it best to go back to the ship, give the men their dinners, and send some of them instead of going myself.

“When I had nearly got back to the ship some god took pity upon my solitude, and sent a fine antlered stag right into the middle of my path. He was coming down his pasture in the forest to drink of the river, for the heat of the sun drove him, and as he passed I struck him in the middle of the back; the bronze point of the spear went clean through him, and he lay groaning in the dust until the life went out of him. Then I set my foot upon him, drew my spear from the wound, and laid it down; I also gathered rough grass and rushes and twisted them into a fathom or so of good stout rope, with which I bound the four feet of the noble creature together; having so done I hung him round my neck and walked back to the ship leaning upon my spear, for the stag was much too big for me to be able to carry him on my shoulder, steadying him with one hand. As I threw him down in front of the ship, I called the men and spoke cheeringly man by man to each of them. ‘Look here my friends,’ said I, ‘we are not going to die so much before our time after all, and at any rate we will not starve so long as we have got something to eat and drink on board.’ On this they uncovered their heads upon the sea shore and admired the stag, for he was indeed a splendid fellow. Then, when they had feasted their eyes upon him sufficiently, they washed their hands and began to cook him for dinner.

“Thus through the livelong day to the going down of the sun we stayed there eating and drinking our fill, but when the sun went down and it came on dark, we camped upon the sea shore. When the child of morning, rosy-fingered Dawn, appeared, I called a council and said, ‘My friends, we are in very great difficulties; listen therefore to me. We have no idea where the sun either sets or rises,⁸⁵ so that we do not even know East from West. I see no way out of it; nevertheless, we must try and find one. We are certainly on an island, for I went as high as I could this morning, and saw the sea reaching all round it to the horizon; it lies low, but towards the middle I saw smoke rising from out of a thick forest of trees.’

“Their hearts sank as they heard me, for they remembered how they had been treated by the Laestrygonian Antiphates, and by the savage ogre Polyphemus. They wept bitterly in their dismay, but there was nothing to be got by crying, so I divided them into two companies and set a captain over each; I gave one company to Eurylochus, while I took command of the other myself. Then we cast lots in a helmet, and the lot fell upon Eurylochus; so he set out with his twenty-two men, and they wept, as also did we who were left behind.

“When they reached Circe’s house they found it built of cut stones, on a site that could be seen from far, in the middle of the forest. There were wild mountain wolves and lions prowling all round it—poor bewitched creatures whom she had tamed by her enchantments and drugged into subjection. They did not attack my men, but wagged their great tails, fawned upon them, and

rubbed their noses lovingly against them.⁸⁶ As hounds crowd round their master when they see him coming from dinner—for they know he will bring them something—even so did these wolves and lions with their great claws fawn upon my men, but the men were terribly frightened at seeing such strange creatures. Presently they reached the gates of the goddess's house, and as they stood there they could hear Circe within, singing most beautifully as she worked at her loom, making a web so fine, so soft, and of such dazzling colours as no one but a goddess could weave. On this Polites, whom I valued and trusted more than any other of my men, said, 'There is some one inside working at a loom and singing most beautifully; the whole place resounds with it, let us call her and see whether she is woman or goddess.'

"They called her and she came down, unfastened the door, and bade them enter. They, thinking no evil, followed her, all except Eurylochus, who suspected mischief and staid outside. When she had got them into her house, she set them upon benches and seats and mixed them a mess with cheese, honey, meal, and Pramnian wine, but she drugged it with wicked poisons to make them forget their homes, and when they had drunk she turned them into pigs by a stroke of her wand, and shut them up in her pig-styes. They were like pigs—head, hair, and all, and they grunted just as pigs do; but their senses were the same as before, and they remembered everything.

"Thus then were they shut up squealing, and Circe threw them some acorns and beech masts such as pigs eat, but Eurylochus hurried back to tell me about the sad fate of our comrades. He was so overcome with dismay that though he tried to speak he could find no words to do so; his eyes filled with tears and he could only sob and sigh, till at last we forced his story out of him, and he told us what had happened to the others.

"'We went,' said he, 'as you told us, through the forest, and in the middle of it there was a fine house built with cut stones in a place that could be seen from far. There we found a woman, or else she was a goddess, working at her loom and singing sweetly; so the men shouted to her and called her, whereon she at once came down, opened the door, and invited us in. The others did not suspect any mischief so they followed her into the house, but I staid where I was, for I thought there might be some treachery. From that moment I saw them no more, for not one of them ever came out, though I sat a long time watching for them.'

"Then I took my sword of bronze and slung it over my shoulders; I also took my bow, and told Eurylochus to come back with me and shew me the way. But he laid hold of me with both his hands and spoke piteously, saying, 'Sir, do not force me to go with you, but let me stay here, for I know you will not bring one of them back with you, nor even return alive yourself; let us rather see if we cannot escape at any rate with the few that are left us, for we may still save our lives.'

"'Stay where you are, then,' answered I, 'eating and drinking at the ship, but I must go, for I am most urgently bound to do so.'

"With this I left the ship and went up inland. When I got through the charmed grove, and was near the great house of the enchantress Circe, I met Mercury with his golden wand, disguised as a young man in the hey-day of his youth and beauty with the down just coming upon his face. He came up to me and took my hand within his own, saying, 'My poor unhappy man, whither are you going over this mountain top, alone and without knowing the way? Your men are shut up in Circe's pigstyes, like so many wild boars in their lairs. You surely do not fancy that you can set them free? I can tell you that you will never get back and will have to stay there with the rest of them. But never mind, I will protect you and get you out of your difficulty. Take this herb, which is one of great virtue, and keep it about you when you go to Circe's house, it will be a talisman to you against every kind of mischief.

"'And I will tell you of all the wicked witchcraft that Circe will try to practice upon you. She will mix a mess for you to drink, and she will drug the meal with which she makes it, but she will not be able to charm you, for the virtue of the herb that I shall give you will prevent her spells from working. I will tell you all about it. When Circe strikes you with her wand, draw your sword and spring upon her as though you were going to kill her. She will then be frightened, and will desire you to go to bed with her; on this you must not point blank refuse her, for you want her to set your companions free, and to take good care also of yourself, but you must make her swear solemnly by all the blessed gods that she will plot no further mischief against you, or else when she has got you naked she will unman you and make you fit for nothing.'

"As he spoke he pulled the herb out of the ground and shewed me what it was like. The root was black, while the flower was as white as milk; the gods call it Moly, and mortal men cannot uproot it, but the gods can do whatever they like.

"Then Mercury went back to high Olympus passing over the wooded island; but I fared onward to the house of Circe, and my heart was clouded with care as I walked along. When I got to the gates I stood there and called the goddess, and as soon as she heard me she came down, opened the door, and asked me to come in; so I followed her—much troubled in my mind. She set me on a richly

decorated seat inlaid with silver, there was a footstool also under my feet, and she mixed a mess in a golden goblet for me to drink; but she drugged it, for she meant me mischief. When she had given it me, and I had drunk it without its charming me, she struck me with her wand. ‘There now,’ she cried, ‘be off to the pigstye, and make your lair with the rest of them.’

“But I rushed at her with my sword drawn as though I would kill her, whereon she fell with a loud scream, clasped my knees, and spoke piteously, saying, ‘Who and whence are you? from what place and people have you come? How can it be that my drugs have no power to charm you? Never yet was any man able to stand so much as a taste of the herb I gave you; you must be spell-proof; surely you can be none other than the bold hero Ulysses, who Mercury always said would come here some day with his ship while on his way home from Troy; so be it then; sheathe your sword and let us go to bed, that we may make friends and learn to trust each other.’

“And I answered, ‘Circe, how can you expect me to be friendly with you when you have just been turning all my men into pigs? And now that you have got me here myself, you mean me mischief when you ask me to go to bed with you, and will unman me and make me fit for nothing. I shall certainly not consent to go to bed with you unless you will first take your solemn oath to plot no further harm against me.’

“So she swore at once as I had told her, and when she had completed her oath then I went to bed with her.

“Meanwhile her four servants, who are her housemaids, set about their work. They are the children of the groves and fountains, and of the holy waters that run down into the sea. One of them spread a fair purple cloth over a seat, and laid a carpet underneath it. Another brought tables of silver up to the seats, and set them with baskets of gold. A third mixed some sweet wine with water in a silver bowl and put golden cups upon the tables, while the fourth brought in water and set it to boil in a large cauldron over a good fire which she had lighted. When the water in the cauldron was boiling,⁸⁷ she poured cold into it till it was just as I liked it, and then she set me in a bath and began washing me from the cauldron about the head and shoulders, to take the tire and stiffness out of my limbs. As soon as she had done washing me and anointing me with oil, she arrayed me in a good cloak and shirt and led me to a richly decorated seat inlaid with silver; there was a footstool also under my feet. A maid servant then brought me water in a beautiful golden ewer and poured it into a silver basin for me to wash my hands, and she drew a clean table beside me; an upper servant brought me bread and offered me many things of what there was in the house, and then Circe bade me eat, but I would not, and sat without heeding what was before me, still moody and suspicious.

“When Circe saw me sitting there without eating, and in great grief, she came to me and said, ‘Ulysses, why do you sit like that as though you were dumb, gnawing at your own heart, and refusing both meat and drink? Is it that you are still suspicious? You ought not to be, for I have already sworn solemnly that I will not hurt you.’

“And I said, ‘Circe, no man with any sense of what is right can think of either eating or drinking in your house until you have set his friends free and let him see them. If you want me to eat and drink, you must free my men and bring them to me that I may see them with my own eyes.’

“When I had said this she went straight through the court with her wand in her hand and opened the pigstye doors. My men came out like so many prime hogs and stood looking at her, but she went about among them and anointed each with a second drug, whereon the bristles that the bad drug had given them fell off, and they became men again, younger than they were before, and much taller and better looking. They knew me at once, seized me each of them by the hand, and wept for joy till the whole house was filled with the sound of their halloo-ballooing, and Circe herself was so sorry for them that she came up to me and said, ‘Ulysses, noble son of Laertes, go back at once to the sea where you have left your ship, and first draw it on to the land. Then, hide all your ship’s gear and property in some cave, and come back here with your men.’

“I agreed to this, so I went back to the sea shore, and found the men at the ship weeping and wailing most piteously. When they saw me the silly blubbing fellows began frisking round me as calves break out and gambol round their mothers, when they see them coming home to be milked after they have been feeding all day, and the homestead resounds with their lowing. They seemed as glad to see me as though they had got back to their own rugged Ithaca, where they had been born and bred. ‘Sir,’ said the affectionate creatures, ‘we are as glad to see you back as though we had got safe home to Ithaca; but tell us all about the fate of our comrades.’

“I spoke comfortingly to them and said, ‘We must draw our ship on to the land, and hide the ship’s gear with all our property in some cave; then come with me all of you as fast as you can to Circe’s house, where you will find your comrades eating and

drinking in the midst of great abundance.’

“On this the men would have come with me at once, but Eurylochus tried to hold them back and said, ‘Alas, poor wretches that we are, what will become of us? Rush not on your ruin by going to the house of Circe, who will turn us all into pigs or wolves or lions, and we shall have to keep guard over her house. Remember how the Cyclops treated us when our comrades went inside his cave, and Ulysses with them. It was all through his sheer folly that those men lost their lives.’

“When I heard him I was in two minds whether or no to draw the keen blade that hung by my sturdy thigh and cut his head off in spite of his being a near relation of my own; but the men interceded for him and said, ‘Sir, if it may so be, let this fellow stay here and mind the ship, but take the rest of us with you to Circe’s house.’

“On this we all went inland, and Eurylochus was not left behind after all, but came on too, for he was frightened by the severe reprimand that I had given him.

“Meanwhile Circe had been seeing that the men who had been left behind were washed and anointed with olive oil; she had also given them woollen cloaks and shirts, and when we came we found them all comfortably at dinner in her house. As soon as the men saw each other face to face and knew one another, they wept for joy and cried aloud till the whole palace rang again. Thereon Circe came up to me and said, ‘Ulysses, noble son of Laertes, tell your men to leave off crying; I know how much you have all of you suffered at sea, and how ill you have fared among cruel savages on the mainland, but that is over now, so stay here, and eat and drink till you are once more as strong and hearty as you were when you left Ithaca; for at present you are weakened both in body and mind; you keep all the time thinking of the hardships you have suffered during your travels, so that you have no more cheerfulness left in you.’

“Thus did she speak and we assented. We stayed with Circe for a whole twelvemonth feasting upon an untold quantity both of meat and wine. But when the year had passed in the waning of moons and the long days had come round, my men called me apart and said, ‘Sir, it is time you began to think about going home, if so be you are to be spared to see your house and native country at all.’

“Thus did they speak and I assented. Thereon through the livelong day to the going down of the sun we feasted our fill on meat and wine, but when the sun went down and it came on dark the men laid themselves down to sleep in the covered cloisters. I, however, after I had got into bed with Circe, besought her by her knees, and the goddess listened to what I had got to say. ‘Circe,’ said I, ‘please to keep the promise you made me about furthering me on my homeward voyage. I want to get back and so do my men, they are always pestering me with their complaints as soon as ever your back is turned.’

“And the goddess answered, ‘Ulysses, noble son of Laertes, you shall none of you stay here any longer if you do not want to, but there is another journey which you have got to take before you can sail homewards. You must go to the house of Hades and of dread Proserpine to consult the ghost of the blind Theban prophet Teiresias, whose reason is still unshaken. To him alone has Proserpine left his understanding even in death, but the other ghosts flit about aimlessly.’

“I was dismayed when I heard this. I sat up in bed and wept, and would gladly have lived no longer to see the light of the sun, but presently when I was tired of weeping and tossing myself about, I said, ‘And who shall guide me upon this voyage—for the house of Hades is a port that no ship can reach.’

“‘You will want no guide,’ she answered; ‘raise your mast, set your white sails, sit quite still, and the North Wind will blow you there of itself. When your ship has traversed the waters of Oceanus, you will reach the fertile shore of Proserpine’s country with its groves of tall poplars and willows that shed their fruit untimely; here beach your ship upon the shore of Oceanus, and go straight on to the dark abode of Hades. You will find it near the place where the rivers Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus (which is a branch of the river Styx) flow into Acheron, and you will see a rock near it, just where the two roaring rivers run into one another.

“‘When you have reached this spot, as I now tell you, dig a trench a cubit or so in length, breadth, and depth, and pour into it as a drink-offering to all the dead, first, honey mixed with milk, then wine, and in the third place water—sprinkling white barley meal over the whole. Moreover you must offer many prayers to the poor feeble ghosts, and promise them that when you get back to Ithaca you will sacrifice a barren heifer to them, the best you have, and will load the pyre with good things. More particularly you must promise that Teiresias shall have a black sheep all to himself, the finest in all your flocks.

“‘When you shall have thus besought the ghosts with your prayers, offer them a ram and a black ewe, bending their heads towards Erebus; but yourself turn away from them as though you would make towards the river. On this, many dead men’s ghosts will come to you, and you must tell your men to skin the two sheep that you have just killed, and offer them as a burnt sacrifice with prayers

to Hades and to Proserpine. Then draw your sword and sit there, so as to prevent any other poor ghost from coming near the spilt blood before Teiresias shall have answered your questions. The seer will presently come to you, and will tell you about your voyage—what stages you are to make, and how you are to sail the sea so as to reach your home.’

“It was day-break by the time she had done speaking, so she dressed me in my shirt and cloak. As for herself she threw a beautiful light gossamer fabric over her shoulders, fastening it with a golden girdle round her waist, and she covered her head with a mantle. Then I went about among the men everywhere all over the house, and spoke kindly to each of them man by man: ‘You must not lie sleeping here any longer,’ said I to them, ‘we must be going, for Circe has told me all about it.’ And on this they did as I bade them.

“Even so, however, I did not get them away without misadventure. We had with us a certain youth named Elpenor, not very remarkable for sense or courage, who had got drunk and was lying on the house-top away from the rest of the men, to sleep off his liquor in the cool. When he heard the noise of the men bustling about, he jumped up on a sudden and forgot all about coming down by the main staircase, so he tumbled right off the roof and broke his neck, and his soul went down to the house of Hades.

“When I had got the men together I said to them, ‘You think you are about to start home again, but Circe has explained to me that instead of this, we have got to go to the house of Hades and Proserpine to consult the ghost of the Theban prophet Teiresias.’

“The men were broken-hearted as they heard me, and threw themselves on the ground groaning and tearing their hair, but they did not mend matters by crying. When we reached the sea shore, weeping and lamenting our fate, Circe brought the ram and the ewe, and we made them fast hard by the ship. She passed through the midst of us without our knowing it, for who can see the comings and goings of a god, if the god does not wish to be seen?

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3.4: Tennyson, "Ulysses"

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The main source of this dramatic monologue is Dante's Inferno XXVI, 94-126. Here Ulysses sets out westward through the Pillars of Hercules: "When I left Circe...not fondness for my son, ...nor Penelope's claim to the joys of love could drive out of my mind the lust to experience the far-flung world...I put out on the...open sea/with a single ship/and only those few souls/who stayed true when the rest deserted me." But Tennyson melds details of this account with those of Homer's Odyssey 19-24, after he has returned to Ithaca and been reunited with his wife and son and resumed his duties as king.

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees; all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades^[1]
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy,
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end^[2],
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the scepter and the isle—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail

In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you^[3] and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles^[4],
And see the great Achilles^[5], whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

—1833, 1842

Contributors

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1. A cluster of stars in Taurus, associated by the ancients with rainy weather. [↩](#)
 2. cf. Ulysses' speech in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* 3.3. 144-47: "Perseverance.../Keeps honour bright. To have done is to hang/Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail/In monumental mockery." [↩](#)
 3. The companions of Ulysses. [↩](#)
 4. The Elysian Fields, or Greek paradise. [↩](#)
 5. Greek hero of the *Iliad* who defeated Hector in the Trojan War. When he died, his arms went to Ulysses. [↩](#)
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3.5: Millay, "An Ancient Gesture"

An Ancient Gesture

Millay, Edna St. Vincent (1892 - 1950)

Original Text: Millay, Edna St. Vincent. *Mine the Harvest*. 1954.

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
Penelope did this too.
And more than once: you can't keep weaving all day
And undoing it all through the night;
Your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets tight;
And along towards morning, when you think it will never be light,
And your husband has been gone, and you don't know where, for years,
Suddenly you burst into tears;
There is simply nothing else to do.
And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
He learned it from Penelope ...
Penelope, who really cried.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: The Writing Process

4.1: What Is the Writing Process?

4.2: Why Commit to the Writing Process?

4.3: What Is Academic Argument?

4.4: Introducing an Academic Argument

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4.1: What Is the Writing Process?

Even the most talented writers rarely get a piece right in their first draft. What's more, few writers create a first draft through a single, sustained effort. Instead, the best writers understand that writing is a process: it takes time; sustained attention; and a willingness to change, expand, and even delete words as one writes. Good writing also takes a willingness to seek feedback from peers and mentors and to accept and use the advice they give. In this book, we will refer to and model the **writing process**, showing how student writers like yourself worked toward compelling papers about literary works.

In this video (bigthink.com/ideas/25140), the decorated modern novelist Salman Rushdie, the author of such books as *Midnight's Children* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, talks about his own writing process. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Random House, 2008). Writing, Rushdie insists, “is not inspiration; it's concentration.” Salman Rushdie, “Inspiration Is Nonsense,” interview by Max Miller, directed by Jonathan Fowler, *Big Think*, video, November 29, 2010, bigthink.com/ideas/25140. Rushdie even calls the idea of pure inspiration “nonsense,” saying that writing is “exploratory” and “more a process of discovery.” Salman Rushdie, “Inspiration Is Nonsense,” interview by Max Miller, directed by Jonathan Fowler, *Big Think*, video, November 29, 2010, bigthink.com/ideas/25140. Rushdie is talking about writing fiction, but his insight applies just as well to writing critical papers for a college class: good academic writing requires that you devote time and energy to exploring and discovering new ideas. Fortunately, this means you should not panic if a brilliant paper idea doesn't appear when you first start thinking about a paper topic. If you commit to the writing process the ideas will come.

Your Process

1. How do you typically approach writing assignments in your classes? When do you start working? Do you employ any prewriting techniques?
2. Have you ever been given the chance to revise your writing after receiving feedback from your peers or your instructor? How did the act of revising change your relationship to your paper?

Good writing takes, above all, planning and organization. If you wait until the night before a written assignment is due to begin, your hurrying will supersede the necessary steps of prewriting, researching, outlining, drafting, revising, seeking feedback, and re-revising. Those stages look something like this:

Prewriting

Many of the activities we'll ask you to do in the “Your Process” sections of this book will be **prewriting** activities. We'll ask you to reflect on your reading, to make connections between your experiences and our text, and to jot down ideas spurred by your engagement with the theories presented here. It's from activities like these that writers often get their ideas for writing. The more engaged you are as a reader, the more engaged you'll be when the time comes to write.

Researching

This book will also help you start the research process, in which you hone in on those aspects of a given literary text that interest you and seek out a deeper understanding of those aspects. Literary researchers read not only literary texts but also the work of other literary scholars and even sources that are indirectly related to literature, such as primary historical documents and biographies. In other words, they seek a wide range of texts that can supplement their understanding of the story, poem, play, or other text they want to write about. As you research, you should keep prewriting, keeping a record of what you agree with, what you disagree with, and what you feel needs further exploration in the texts you read.

Outlining

To write well you should have a plan. As you write, that plan may change as you learn more about your topic and begin to fully understand your own ideas. However, papers are easier to tackle when you first sketch out the broad outline of your ideas. Committing those ideas to paper will help you see how different ideas relate to one another (or don't relate to one another). Don't be afraid to revise your outline—play around with the sequence of your ideas and evidence until you find the most logical progression.

Drafting

The most important way to improve your writing is to start writing! Because you're treating writing as a process, it's not important that every word you type be perfectly chosen, or that every sentence be exquisitely crafted. When you're drafting, the most important thing is that you get words on paper. Follow your outline and write.

Revising

After you've committed words to paper (or, more accurately, to your computer screen), you can go back and shape them more deliberately through **revision**. Cognitive research has shown that a significant portion of reading is actually remembering. As a result, if you read your work immediately after writing it, you probably won't notice any of the potential problems with it. Your brain will "fill in the gaps" of poor grammar, misspelling, or faulty reasoning. Because of this, you should give yourself some time in between drafting and revising—the more time the better. As you revise, try to approach your text as your readers will. Ask yourself skeptical questions (e.g., Are there clear connections between the different claims I'm making in this paper? Do I provide enough evidence to convince someone to believe my claims?). Revisions can often be substantial: you may need to rearrange your points, delete significant portions of what you've written, or rewrite sentences and paragraphs to better reflect the ideas you have developed while writing. Most importantly, you should revise your introduction several times. Writers often work into their strongest ideas, which then appear in their conclusions but not (if they do not revise) their introductions. Make sure that your introduction reflects the more nuanced claims that appear in the body and conclusion of your paper.

Seeking Feedback

Even after years of practice revising your writing, you'll never be able to see your writing in an entirely objective light. To really improve your writing, you need feedback from others who can identify where your ideas are not as clear as they should be. You can seek feedback in a number of ways: you can make an appointment in your college's writing center, you can participate in class peer-review workshops, or you can talk to your instructor during his or her office hours. If you will have a chance to revise your paper after your instructor grades it, his or her comments on that graded draft should be considered essential feedback as you revise.

A key notion that drives this textbook is peer review: we believe that you should share your writing with your peers, your classmates. For each chapter in this book, we suggest that you conduct peer review with one or two classmates. We provide peer-review guides for each chapter that can be accessed in Chapter 10.

Re-Revising

One you've garnered feedback on your writing, you should use that feedback to revise your paper yet again. You should not, however, simply make every change that your colleagues or instructor recommended. You should think about the suggestions they've made and ensure that their suggestions will help you make the argument you want to make. You may decide to incorporate some suggestions and not others. When you treat writing as a process, it should become a genuine dialogue between you and your readers.

Publishing

Finally, you will submit your paper to an audience for review. As college students, this primarily means the paper that you turn in to your instructor for evaluation.

The preceding categories suggest that writing is a linear process—that is, that you will follow these steps in the following order:

prewriting → researching → outlining → drafting → revising → feedback → re-revising → publishing.

The reality of the writing process, however, is that as you write you shuttle back and forth in these stages. For example, as you begin writing your thesis paragraph, the beginning of your essay, you will write and revise many times before you are satisfied with your opening; once you have a complete draft, you will more than likely return to the introduction to revise it again to better match the contents of the completed essay. This shuttling highlights the recursive nature of the writing process and can be diagrammed as follows:

prewriting ↔ researching ↔ outlining ↔ drafting ↔ revising ↔ feedback ↔ re-revising ↔ publishing.

Furthermore, you should be aware that each writer has a unique writing process: some will be diligent outliners, while others may discover ideas as they write. There is no right way to write (so to speak), but the key is the notion of process—all strong writers engage in the writing process and recognize the importance of feedback and revision in the process.

Your Process

1. Describe your writing process.
2. Do you normally engage in the stages listed previously?
3. If not, why? If so, what part of the process do you find most helpful?
4. Share your process with the class to discover the variety in approaches writers take when writing.

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4.2: Why Commit to the Writing Process?

In short, you should commit to the writing process because it's the best known method for helping unconfident writers become confident writers. If there's one thing that over fifty years of writing research has shown, it's that students improve their writing skills through practice, practice, and more practice. The more you write in college, the more comfortable you will be with the conventions of academic and professional prose. When you commit to the process of writing, you will begin to understand that writing isn't a rarefied talent available to a privileged few. You'll begin to see that writing is a skill and can be developed through practice. What's more, the writing process does not include the terrifying idea that you produce perfect prose on demand. Instead, you will learn to produce the best prose you can now and to improve it as you develop your ideas. This frees you up to concentrate on developing your skills of argument—skills that will be useful in whatever professional field you eventually work—rather than living in terror that you will make a mistake.

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4.3: What Is Academic Argument?

Your Process

1. When you hear the word “argument,” what other words come immediately to mind? Jot down as many related words as you can think of.

While scientists test their theories through experiments, literary scholars most often engage with their theories through **academic argument**. When you think of the word “argument,” you probably think of conflict. Arguments are loud disagreements; arguments may involve yelling, cursing, or even, in extreme cases, physical violence. That’s not what we mean by academic argument, though. When scholars disagree, they don’t start throwing punches. Instead, academic argument looks more like a conversation. One scholar makes a **claim** about a given text and cites **evidence** to support that claim. Another scholar might dispute that claim by making a **counterclaim** and citing evidence that either challenges the original claim or supports the counterclaim. In an extended academic argument, more points of view emerge: the original scholar might respond or other scholars might intervene, offering claims of their own that support, modify, or challenge the original claims in the argument.

Let’s sketch out an example of an academic argument. First, review William Shakespeare’s famous “Sonnet 130”:

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go:
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she, belied with false compare. William Shakespeare, “CXXX,” in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1609; Project Gutenberg, 2010), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1041>.

We can imagine a critical argument centered on the speaker’s description of his lover. One scholar might claim that the poem is forward-thinking in its attitudes toward gender, refusing to employ the idealized rhetoric of most Renaissance love poetry, which characterized women purely by their adherence to physical standards of beauty. By insisting that his love can be “rare”—meaning here “valuable” or “unique”—even though her lips, hair, breasts, cheeks, breath, and voice do not match society’s expectations for exceptional beauty, this speaker implies that women are complex individuals, not static figures meant to satisfy men’s erotic desires.

Another scholar might disagree with this reading, pointing out that even though the poem refuses certain idealized comparisons (“Coral is far more red than her lips’ red”), it nonetheless dwells only on this woman’s physical features. This scholar might claim that the speaker’s refusal to employ common metaphors to describe his mistress only demonstrates his desire to show his superiority over other poets. The poem’s final line, which ends on “false compare,” says nothing about the woman, but instead insults the metaphors and similes of other poets whom this speaker sees as less talented than himself. The woman is given no name, no voice, and no personality—she is only described through what she is not.

These two critics disagree, but they express that disagreement through careful, reasoned prose. Indeed, they find some common ground: as the second scholar begins to respond, he or she admits that the poem does refuse idealized comparisons. Good academic argument is a give-and-take process, as each participant acknowledges the best points made by his or her interlocutors. The goal of academic argument is (usually) not to prove another scholar wrong, but instead to show how his or her argument could be expanded, supplemented, redirected, modified, or amended.

In this book, we will teach you how to engage in these conversations. Each chapter helps you develop your skills of engagement and will ask you to practice responding to the ideas of other scholars. Through repeated practice, you will learn how to bring these skills of academic argument into your class papers—to move beyond simply summarizing literary works and toward interpreting them. Each chapter also includes a sample paper from student writers so that you can see how your peers have applied both theoretical and rhetorical principles to craft effective academic arguments about a range of literary works and cultural topics.

Note

Our discussions of argument in this textbook largely follow the Toulmin method, which you can read more about in this writing guide provided by Colorado State University (<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/reading/toulmin>). “Writing Guide: The Toulmin Method,” Colorado State University, <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/reading/toulmin>. Our approach is also influenced by the refinements to Toulmin in the Little Red Schoolhouse (LRS) curriculum taught at the University of Chicago, the University of Virginia, and other institutions (<http://redschoolhouse.org/drupal/welcome#3>). “Little Red Schoolhouse Online,” University of Virginia Writing Program, <http://redschoolhouse.org/drupal/welcome>. We have found Toulmin and LRS to be effective methods for beginning academic writers in a range of fields, including English literature.

In addition, we also follow the principles of nonthreatening argument that are presented by Carl Rogers. For more on Rogerian argument, review this article from Colorado State University (<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/co300man/com5e1.cfm>) or Joseph M. Moxley’s article on the topic at *Writing Commons* (<http://writingcommons.org/genres/academic/rogerian-argument>). Kate Kiefer, “What Is Rogerian Argument?,” Colorado State University, <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/co300man/com5e1.cfm>; “Rogerian Argument: Solving Problems by Negotiating Differences,” *Writing Commons* (blog), 2012, <http://writingcommons.org/genres/academic/rogerian-argument>.

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4.4: Introducing an Academic Argument

In order to better understand the broad strokes of academic argument, we will read and analyze an undergraduate paper about Washington Irving's short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Washington Irving, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, and the Spectre Bridegroom: From the "Sketch Book"* (London: J. B. Lippincott, 1875; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 2000), etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin...&division=div1.

Your Process

As you work through this text, these process descriptions will make more sense if you've read the literary work under discussion. For this section, you should read Washington Irving's short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Our discussion of student research and writing will reveal important plot details that you may want to discover on your own first. You can read this as an e-text provided by the University of Virginia (etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin...&division=div1).

You can also listen to a free audiobook of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" at Librivox (<http://librivox.org/the-legend-of-sleepy-hollow-by-washington-irving>).

Monica submitted this paper for an introductory literature class after the students read Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" during their unit on short fiction. Let's look at her introduction first:

When one hears the title "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," a reader might shiver a little and think of the infamous spectre, "the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head ... known, at all the country firesides, by the name of The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow" (Irving 966). It is this legendary phantom that grants Washington Irving's tale the label of ghost story. As such, readers would expect the legend to be overflowing with superstition and opposing forces—good vs. evil, known vs. unknown, supernatural vs. reality. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is in fact meant to be a tale of opposing forces, but not in the same way as ghost story. It is a legend of rivalry, a rivalry between the characters Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt. Readers must understand that the opposing forces presented here are these two characters, the victim and the victor, the underdog and the front-runner—not those of supernatural and reality—in order to understand the true significance of Irving's tale. Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt are meant to be more than just two characters with a rivalry—they are actually representations of the young American nation and its "motherland," Great Britain. When these allegories are understood, and the true opposing forces are revealed, readers will finally be able to understand the ultimate message behind Irving's tale—it is an allegory for the goals, the problems, and the livelihood of an adolescent America.

Your Process

After you finish Monica's introduction, jot down the answer to these questions:

1. How does this introduction entice you to read on? What lines grab your attention? Can you articulate why they do?
2. Are any of the statements overly strong? "Must" we read the story in this particular way to understand it? Are there ways to tone down the language?
3. What do you think will come next in this paper? You have just read "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"—are there details from the story that you think Monica will cite in the longer paper?

What makes Monica's introduction so effective? Note first the way she summarizes one way that many readers interpret the story: "readers would expect the legend to be overflowing with superstition and opposing forces—good vs. evil, known vs. unknown, supernatural vs. reality." In her argument, Monica will challenge this reading, but she does so subtly. "'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' is in fact meant to be a tale of opposing forces," she writes, "but not in the same way as ghost story." Monica establishes common ground with those who read the tale as a ghost story, noting that it "*is...a tale of opposing forces.*" By working from common ground toward a new understanding of the story, Monica follows the principles of argument laid out by Carl Rogers, a psychologist who insisted that effective argument is based not on conflict, but on compromise and negotiation between reader and writer.

However, a reader may sense that Monica is presenting her reading as the most authoritative or the best interpretation of the story, which can make a reader a bit defensive, especially if he or she does not necessarily agree with Monica's claim. Notice the subtle revision (highlighted in bold) that makes the opening even more persuasive because it is less totalizing:

When one hears the title “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” a reader might shiver a little and think of the infamous spectre, “the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head ... known, at all the country firesides, by the name of The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow” (Irving 966). It is this legendary phantom that grants Washington Irving's tale the label of ghost story. As such, readers would expect the legend to be overflowing with superstition and opposing forces—good vs. evil, known vs. unknown, supernatural vs. reality. “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” **can be read as a tale of opposing forces**, but not in the same way as ghost story. It is a legend of rivalry, a rivalry between the characters Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt. Readers **may benefit by understanding** that the opposing forces presented here are these two characters, the victim and the victor, the underdog and the front-runner—not those of supernatural and reality—in order to understand **a major** significance of Irving's tale. Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt are meant to be more than just two characters with a rivalry—they are actually representations of the young American nation and its “motherland,” Great Britain. When these allegories are understood, and **these** opposing forces are revealed, readers will finally be able to understand **a central** message behind Irving's tale—it is an allegory for the goals, the problems, and the livelihood of an adolescent America.

After establishing the common ground more subtly using the principles of **nonthreatening argument**, Monica then turns to her own ideas about the story: the tale, she insists, does focus on opposing forces, “*but not in the same way as a ghost story*” (our emphasis). Monica prepares the reader for her new claims about “Sleepy Hollow” by shifting her focus from the broad theme of opposition to the specific, nonsupernatural opposition of two characters' rivalry. She writes, “It is a legend of rivalry, a rivalry between the characters Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt.” Monica introduces a fact from the story—a small piece of textual evidence—that doesn't quite fit with the common view. Readers who have interpreted “Sleepy Hollow” through the lens of the ghost story want to read on and see how Monica's focus on rivalry will change their view of Irving's tale.



Illustration by John Quidor, *The Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane* (1858).

Of course, most readers are skeptical: for each claim a writer makes, readers ask “So what?” Monica answers that “So what?” question by demonstrating a potential problem with her readers' interpretations of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” In the next sentence of her introduction, Monica shows her readers why her interpretation of the story is significant. “Readers must understand,” she writes, “that the opposing forces presented here are these two characters, the victim and the victor, the underdog and the front-runner—not those of supernatural and reality—in order to understand the true significance of Irving's tale.” Effective introductions to literary interpretations focus on interpretive problems—not for the writer, but for the readers of the paper. Keep in mind that a literary interpretation may not seem significant to every person who reads it. Monica assumes, as you should assume when you write papers for your literature classes, that her readers care about literary works and want to understand them fully and

well. For readers who do care about literature, however, the stakes Monica proposes are significant: readers who insist on interpreting “Sleepy Hollow” as a ghost story will miss the tale’s “true significance.”

Your Process

The University of Virginia provides a number of free modules to help college writers understand the parts of argument we discuss here. To better understand the parts of an effective introduction, you might work through the following modules:

1. “Problem Frames Start Here”: <http://redschoollhouse.org/drupal/?q=...e/LRSintheWild>.
2. “Problem Frame Elements”: <http://redschoollhouse.org/drupal/?q=...e/LRSintheWild>.
3. “State the Consequences of a Conceptual Problem by Answering ‘So What?’”: <http://redschoollhouse.org/drupal/?q=...s/LRSintheWild>.

Once a writer introduces a problem, however, readers expect him or her to also propose a solution to that problem. The first big question readers are likely to ask a writer is, “What do you think?” In the final lines of her introduction, Monica tells her readers what she thinks about this story by making the central claim of her argument. Her claim explains what she believes to be the central opposition in Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”: “Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt are meant to be more than just two characters with a rivalry—they are actually representations of the young American nation and its ‘motherland,’ Great Britain. When these allegories are understood, and the true opposing forces are revealed, readers will finally be able to understand the ultimate message behind Irving’s tale—it is an allegory for the goals, the problems, and the livelihood of an adolescent America.” Monica offers a historicized reading of Irving’s tale (for more on historical theories about literature, see Chapter 7), arguing that the story’s true significance can be found by looking more closely at the time of the story’s composition, when America was an “adolescent” nation still at odds with Great Britain. Monica’s claim is specific, debatable, and significant (at least to readers who care about this story). In the body of her paper, Monica will unpack her claim, using subclaims and reasons to demonstrate to her readers why they should follow her interpretation of the story.

Your Process

1. You can practice developing an effective subclaim using the module “Build Your Argument around a Significant Claim” (<http://redschoollhouse.org/drupal/?q=...t/LRSintheWild>).
2. Choose a literary work to analyze, preferably a short story or short lyric poem.
3. Develop a working thesis that makes a claim about the work, knowing that this thesis claim may be revised.
4. Create an informal outline that highlights the major stages of your argument—the evidence that you will use to support your thesis claim.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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5.1: What is Poetry?

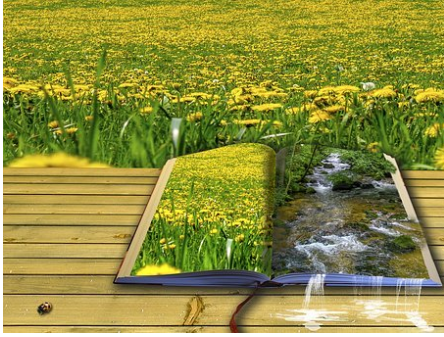


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What is Poetry?

Poetry is a condensed form of writing. As an art, it can effectively invoke a range of emotions in the reader. It can be presented in a number of forms — ranging from traditional rhymed poems such as sonnets to contemporary free verse. Poetry has always been intrinsically tied to music and many poems work with rhythm. It often brings awareness of current issues such as the state of the environment, but can also be read just for the sheer pleasure.

A poet makes the invisible visible. The invisible includes our deepest feelings and angsts, and also our joys, sorrows, and unanswered questions of being human. How is a poet able to do this? A poet uses **fresh** and **original language**, and is more interested in how the arrangement of words affects the reader rather than solely grammatical construction. The poet thinks about how words **sound**, the musicality within each word and also how the words come together.

Like fiction writers, poets mostly **show rather than tell**. They describe the scene vividly using as few words as possible and prefer to describe rather than analyze, leaving the latter to the people who read and write about poetry as you are doing in this class.

The Purpose of Poetry

If you've taken a composition or freshman writing course, you might recognize some familiar terms used above — summarizes, sources, persuades, ethos. These are all words you will rarely, if ever, use in reference to writing poetry. And why is that? Well, what's the purpose of poetry? Perhaps this is not an easy question to answer. In fact, the answer might depend on time and culture. Epics such as *Gilgamesh* aided in memorization and preserved stories meant to be passed down orally. The British [Romantics](#) valued the pleasure derived from hearing and reading poetry. In some cultures poetry is important in ritual and religious practice. In contemporary times, many describe poetry as being a tool for self-expression.

In the excellent glossary in his book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, poet Edward Hirsch provides the following definition for a poem:

Poem: A made thing, a verbal construct, an event in language. The word *poesis* means “making;” and the oldest term for the poet means “maker.” The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* points out that the medieval and Renaissance poets used the word *makers*, as in “courtly makers,” as a precise equivalent for *poets*. (Hence William Dunbar’s “Lament for the Makers.”) The word *poem* came into English in the sixteenth century and has been with us ever since to denote a form of fabrication, a verbal composition, a made thing.

William Carlos Williams defined the poem as “a small (or large) machine made of words.” (He added that there is nothing redundant about a machine.) Wallace Stevens characterized poetry as “a revelation of words by means of the words.” In his helpful essay “What is Poetry?” linguist Roman Jakobson declared:

“Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and internal form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.”

Ben Johnson referred to the art of poetry as “the craft of making.” The old Irish word *cerd*, meaning “people of the craft,” was a designation for artisans, including poets. It is cognate with the Greek *kerdos*, meaning “craft, craftiness.” Two basic metaphors for the art of poetry in the classical world were carpentry and weaving. “Whatsoever else it may be,” W. H. Auden said, “a poem is a verbal artifact which must be as skillfully and solidly constructed as a table or a motorcycle.”

The true poem has been crafted into a living entity. It has magical potency, ineffable spirit. There is always something mysterious and inexplicable in a poem. It is an act—an action—beyond paraphrase because what is said is always inseparable from the way it is being said. A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else. Perhaps it exists in order to create that aesthetic experience. Octavio Paz maintained that the poet and the reader are two moments of a single reality.

Of the many ideas provided here in this definition, perhaps the one to emphasize most is that the poem is “an event in language.” It is also one of the harder to understand concepts. “A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else,” writes Hirsch. Especially not through paraphrase. This means that in order to “experience” a poem, a reader needs to read it as it is. The poem is itself a type of virtual reality.

Jeremy Arnold, a professor of philosophy at the University of Woolamalo in Canada, likens the poem to the “pensieve” device in the *Harry Potter* series: “A poem allows someone to preserve a mental experience so that an outsider can access it as if it were their own.” When coming to poetry, there may be nothing more important to understand because nothing can shape your perspective more on how to write and for what purpose. Poetry requires a reader, an audience; therefore, the poet must learn how to best engage an audience. And this engagement doesn’t happen by sharing ideas, feelings, or experiences, by telling the reader about *your* experiences — it happens by *creating* them on the page with words that evoke the senses. With *images*. These, then, are how the literary genres speak. Images are their muscles. Their heart. Images are poetry’s body and soul.

Activity

Choose a poem from [the Poetry Foundation’s featured poems](#) and look again at Edward Hirsch’s definition of poem. How does this poem typify his explanation? Are there any ways in which it does not? Write a short response (300 words or less) explaining how you see your selected poem in relation to Hirsch’s definition.

Video: Billy Collins, A Poet, Speaks Out

Watch Billy Collins’ audio/visual poem:



Video 6.1.1 : Introduction to Poetry by Billy Collins

After watching the video above, read the poem [here](#), and click on the link below to listen to a [lecture](#) by Billy Collins on his craft and how it relates to the reader.

Contributors and Attributions

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5.2: Poetic Forms and Language

What does poetry do?

In the introductory module, it was suggested that all literature is basically metaphorical in nature. We also explored the important role that **metaphors** play in everyday life — in short, we use metaphors each day to make comparisons between the concrete world that we inhabit and the abstract world of ideas and human experience. In this module, we will explore the art of poetry and, once again, we will develop an understanding of how metaphors, in addition to other types of literary and figurative language, are used in poems to give shape and meaning to a wide range of human experiences.

In his book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, Edward Hirsch suggests that “Poetry is made of metaphor. It is a collision, a collusion, a compression of two unlike things: A is B.” Therefore, reading poetry helps to broaden our understanding of power of language to provide more than just literal meaning — the sort of meaning that can be obtained from a dictionary. Instead, as Hirsch argues, “Poetry evokes a language that moves beyond the literal and, consequently, a mode of thinking that moves beyond the literal.” Because poets use language in unique and often challenging ways, reading poetry, like reading fiction, is an ideal way of developing complex reasoning and proficiency in active reading.

Poetry invites the reader to actively participate in the process of making meaning through language. The basic structure of metaphors consists of drawing comparisons between unlike things, and when we strive to understand, or infer, the connections that may exist between these unlike things, we begin to build our ability to think critically and creatively about language. From a literary standpoint, poetry is an essentially oral art form. It is meant to be read aloud. When we participate in constructing meaning by reading actively and making inferences, we participate in a kind of performance that is very similar to the dynamic between a singer and her audience. The poet will often even rely on the reader to fill-in the gaps or spaces in a poem with our own thoughts and emotions. The very best poetry is, therefore, deeply participatory.

Metaphors are essential to this participatory dynamic. Oftentimes, an entire poem can function as a kind of metaphor that attempts to make an abstract, or less clearly defined, concept more accessible for the reader. Poems do this by employing vivid **imagery** and **similes** (the comparison of two unlike things using *like* or *as*). For example, in his poem “Dulce et Decorum est,” the British poet Wilfred Owen challenges a romantic understanding of the “glories” of war by offering the reader a vivid portrayal of the suffering that he witnessed on the battlefield during World War I. In this poem, Owen contradicts the ancient, patriotic motto, “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country,” by portraying war as a kind of twisted nightmare.

Read and listen to the poem, and pay particular attention to how the poem uses imagery and similes to make the experience of war accessible to readers. ⁽¹⁾

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“Dulce et Decorum est” ⁽¹⁷⁾

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge, Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs And towards our distant rest began to trudge. Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind. Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; But someone still was yelling out and stumbling And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime... Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. If in some smothering dreams you too could pace Behind the wagon that we flung him in, And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin; If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,— My friend, you would not tell with such high zest To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie:*Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori* .

Poetic Forms

The earliest recorded poems are part of **oral tradition** and often are musical. In his book *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong suggests that “language is nested in sound,” and scholars who study the origin of language have theorized that music and language developed alongside of one another in our evolutionary past. Reflecting on the relationship between poetry and African American

musical traditions, such as the blues and work songs, Edward Hirsh suggests that “all these forms model a particular kind of participatory relationship between the poet and the community.” Many modern poetic forms are also clearly influenced by musical forms. For example, Langston Hughes’s “The Weary Blues” borrows heavily from jazz and blues rhythms, yet does not follow classical metrical patterns. Like songs, poems are meant to be performed, recited, and perhaps in their own, sung.

Most traditional forms of poetry have their origins in forms of popular music. Longer poetic artifacts such as the great **epics** of the Greeks (Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), the Romans (Virgil’s *Aeneid*), and from India (the *Vedas* , written in Sanskrit) are well-known. Ancient Babylonian hymns, like the **Enûma Eliš** , written in cuneiform, are widely regarded as the earliest known poems; likewise, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the earliest popular epic. Many scholars have observed the similarities the Babylonia flood myth in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the biblical story of the flood in the book of Genesis.

An **epic poem** is a lengthy narrative poem (a poem that tells a story, often an adventure) written in verse. Similar to music, in poetry, **verse** refers to a piece of writing composed in meter or rhyme. The word verse may appear in some contexts as a synonym for poetry of any meter (or non-meter); this is not precise usage of the word and usually aims to distinguish the form of literature from **prose** , which is structured without the same attention to the meter and length of **line** in poetry.

One of the earliest known works of English poetry is *Caedmon’s Hymn* , composed sometime between 658 and 680 A.D. According to accounts by an English monk and scholar known as St. Bede or the Venerable Bede, the poem was originally composed by an illiterate herdsman who had miraculously acquired the gift of poetry and song from an angel. Its lyrics are composed in a form of early English that originated in a form of ancient German.

Listen to a recording of the poem in West Saxon, a dialect of Old English. ⁽¹⁾

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“*Caedmon’s Hymn*” ⁽¹⁰⁾

Nú scylun hergan hefaenrīcaes Uard, metudæs maecti end his módgidanc, uerc Uuldurfadur, suéh é uundra gihwaes, éci dryctin ór ástelidæ hé ærist scÁp aelda barnum heben til hrófe,& háleg scepén. Thá middungeard moncynnæs Uard, eci Dryctin, æfter tíadæ firum foldu, Fréa allmectig.

A **ballad** is another type of narrative poem that contains repeated phrasing and is intended to be sung. Ballads often relate the deeds, and sometimes suffering, of a protagonist whose life serves as a metaphor for the day-to-day trials of the average person. (An example of a ballad in this module is “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” by Edna St. Vincent Millay). Ballads are typically arranged into **quatrains** , four-line stanzas, with usually only the second and fourth lines rhyming.

In contrast to narrative poetry (poetry that tells a story), **lyric** poetry focuses primarily on conveying emotion through melody and imagery. **Sonnets** fall under the category of lyric poetry; a sonnet is a poem consisting of fourteen lines with a metric pattern and variable rhyme scheme. Elegies (lamentations), haiku, and **odes** (praise poems) are other examples of lyric poetry. (Examples of lyric verse in our course readings include John Milton’s Sonnet 19, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” and Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum est”).

Blank verse is the term for poetry that *does* have a set metrical pattern, yet does *not* rhyme. John Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost* , is a masterful work of blank verse poetry that was highly influential as a work of English literature. However, many modern and contemporary poets write blank verse poetry, such as Robert Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man” and Amy Beeder’s “Dear Drought,” **Free verse** , which did not develop until the 19th century, follows no metrical pattern or rhyme scheme; much of modern poetry is free verse, although many modern poets who usually write in free verse will produce patterned verse on occasion. (Examples of free verse in this module include H.D.’s “Oread” and William Carlos Williams’s “Blizzard.”) ⁽¹⁾

Poetic language

All writing makes use of **figurative language** . Yet, the language of poetry focuses specifically on discovering meaning based on the way that certain combinations of words sound, as well as the way that groups of words appear on the page. Poetic language is fundamentally figurative; figurative language is language used in a nonliteral manner, as in words or phrases that convey meaning beyond or in addition to the dictionary definition of those words. For example, the statement “The town judge is intelligent” is a direct description. However, the sentence “The town judge holds the keys to the kingdom of knowledge” offers a similar

description yet with added layers of creative images and associative meaning that connects with other symbols of power (keys, kingdom); it also uses **alliteration** (repetition of consonants) to create **rhythm** and **pattern** .

Below are the types of figurative language and a full description of common forms of poetic language.

Common Type of Figurative Language:

Apostrophe — A direct address to a person or object not literally listening; ex: “Oh, Great Mother Nature how you test our spirit...”

Allusion — Reference to a well-known object, character, or event, sometimes from another literary work.

Hyperbole — Exaggeration used for emphasis.

Imagery — Words and phrases that appeal to the senses, particularly sight.

Metaphor — A direct comparison of two seemingly dissimilar items (does not use the words *like* or *as*).

Onomatopoeia — A word that imitates the sound of the object the word represents.

Personification — The attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman places or things.

Simile — A comparison of two seemingly dissimilar items using *like* or *as* . ⁽¹⁾

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5.3: Elements of Poetry

Formal Elements of Poetry

Learning to read how a poem is **lineated** is an important skill to develop for understanding poetry. **Lineation** controls where lines of verse begin and end in a poem. These artistic choices can significantly impact the rhythm of a poem and in some cases can be used to create dramatic or thematic tension, as in the use of an **enjambéd line**. **Enjambement** is a French word that means ‘to step over.’ In poetry, the shifting from one line to the next without concluding a thought or without the use of closing punctuation creates a sense of connection and movement that can increase the pacing of the meter of a poem and/or can productively complicate the meaning of the ideas or images between one line and another.

The grouping of lines into organizational units in poetry is known as a **stanza**. Some poetic forms, such as the **couplet**, are identified by how many lines constitute a stanza. (A couplet has two lines per stanza; many poems are composed of a series of couplets rather than a single couplet.)

Rhythm is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry. Everyday speech has rhythm, yet poets make conscious choices to arrange and highlight particular rhythms and rhythm patterns to create meter. Meter refers to specific syllabic patterns in the rhythm of a line of poetry. Learning to **scan** the rhythm and meter of a poem, a process referred to as **scansion**, focuses analysis on the line-by-line structure. A **foot** is the basic unit of rhythm, usually composed of two or three syllables, used in scansion. Four major types of feet are found in most verse: **anapest**, **dactyl**, **iamb**, and **trochee**:

Foot Names	Syllable Arrangements	Examples
Anapest	X X /	X X / X X / X X /
dactyl	/ X X	/ X X / X X Take her up tenderly
iamb	X /	X / X / X / X / The falling out of faithful friends. X / X / X / renewing is of love
trochee	/ X	/ X / X / X / X

Less frequently occurring types of feet in poetry are: **pyrrhic** and **spondee**.

Foot Names	Syllable Arrangements	Examples
pyrrhic	X X	/ / X X // X X X / X My way is to begin with the beginning
spondee	/ /	X X / / X X / /

The number of feet in a line of poetry determine its length. Although a line may be of any length, common line lengths in verse include: **tetrameter**, **pentameter** and **octameter**.

Line Length Names	Number of Feet	Number of Syllables	Examples
tetrameter	four	eight	How dreary to be somebody! How drear y to be some body
pentameter	five	ten	Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Shall I compare thee to a sum mer's day?
octameter	eight	sixteen	And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain. And the silken sad un certain rustling of each purple curtain.

William Shakespeare is renowned for his use of iambic pentameter. Read and listen to his poem “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day (Sonnet 18)” and pay close attention to how his rhythm and meter enhance the auditory effects of his poetry. As a famous playwright, Shakespeare was especially concerned with the verbal performance of poetic language. Some scholars have even argued that Shakespeare’s use of iambic pentameter resembles the *lub-dub* rhythm of the human heartbeat. ⁽¹⁾

“*Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day (Sonnet 18)*” ⁽¹⁹⁾

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer’s lease hath all too short a date. Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, And often is his gold complexion dimmed; And every fair from fair sometime declines, By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimmed; But thy eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st, Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade, When in eternal lines to Time thou grow’st. So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Rhyme is created when two words are similar in sound, as found in the words ‘dog’ and ‘fog.’ **End rhyme** occurs when the last words in two lines of poetry rhyme. Rhyming between two words within the same line is called **internal rhyme**. **Slant rhyme** (or approximate rhyme) is the term used to refer to the suggestion of a rhyme that is not exact, as found in the words ‘laugh’ and ‘taught.’

The larger pattern of rhyme in a poem is referred to as the **rhyme scheme**. Rhyme schemes are commonly indicated by a letter pattern where a different represents a new rhyme, as in *abab cdcd efef gg*. The effectiveness of a poem’s rhyme scheme is shaped not only by the **repetition** of, but the **variation** between, the types of rhyme and meter. Analysis of poetry frequently looks at the occurrence of ‘repetition and variation’ as a linked literary device.

Besides rhyme, poets also may make use of other sound patterns including **assonance**, **consonance**, and **alliteration**. Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds, usually two or more times in short succession, whereas consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds. Alliteration is the repetition of the identical initial consonant in neighboring or consecutive words. ⁽¹⁾

Reading in Context

While it is important to ground our analysis of poetry in a **close reading** based on a detailed understanding of formal elements and poetic structure, we should not become so carried away that we neglect the roles history and cultural circumstance can play in shaping a poem. Likewise, as Edward Hirsch suggests, it is also important to recognize the contribution that you make as a reader to the construction of a poem’s meaning.

Consider, once more, “Dulce et Decorum est” by Wilfred Owen. The content of the poem is moving enough, yet the added emotional weight of understanding the poem’s **context** — the mass casualties in Europe during World War I — lends a potent specificity to the imagery in Owen’s poem. The poem’s effect is made all the more palpable by the knowledge that he was killed in action one week before the Armistice that ended the fighting in Western Europe. With this historical context in mind, it might be possible then to consider what your own experience or views on war might be. What is your response to Owen’s portrayal of the battlefield? What knowledge or insight can be gained from the way that the poem attempts to make the violence of war intelligible to its reader?

The context of a poem can play a major role in what gives it a lasting literary value. However, when a powerful historical context meets masterful formal execution, it can be tempting to assume everything in the poem is a direct line to the poet’s heart and mind.

But when analyzing a poem, the **speaker** of the poem, the “I” voice, should not be conflated with the author of the poem. In written analysis we refer to “the author” when speaking of his or her craftsmanship and authorial choices, as in “the author repeats the symbol of the bird at the beginning and the end of the poem.” We use “the speaker” when discussing the point-of-view of the “I” speaking in the poem, as in “the speaker longs to be free” or “the speaker bemoans the impending loss of her child.” In our analysis we can suggest that “the poet” is closely aligned with “the speaker,” but we should not assume they are one in the same. The conventions of poetry veil a direct connection in contrast to a literary form, such as autobiography.

Even more than historical periods, we can connect the analysis of one particular poem to a wider literary movement. In our course readings, for example, are two writers whose poems exemplify the modernist movement known as Imagism: H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and William Carlos Williams. **Imagism** valued precision and clarity of both image and language; it rejected the sentimentality of the previous generation of poets and sought to create poems around single, powerful images that might speak of the essential nature of a thing, person, or place. Understanding a poem’s historical and literary context is important, but it is equally important to acknowledge the active role that the reader plays in the construction of meaning, as Edward Hirsch suggests. ⁽¹⁾

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5.4: John Keats (1795-1821)

John Keats (1795-1821) Selected Poems British Romanticism The epitaph on John Keats' grave in Italy reads: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." The words on his tombstone signify the short, tragic life of this Romantic poetic genius. Keats, like many of the Romantic poets before him, was influenced by Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. When describing the genius of Shakespeare in a letter to his brother, Keats coined the phrase "negative capability," or the ability to accept the transcendence of mystery without the need of rational explanation. Keats used this ability, as well as his understanding and empathy for human suffering, to create some of the period's greatest poetry. Keats' own story is one of tremendous loss, a story only surpassed by the beauty he finds in nature and relates in his powerful verse. His father died when he was young, leaving a wife and four children financially insecure. His mother left home, abandoning the children to the care of grandparents. When Keats' mother returned, she was dying of tuberculosis. A few years later, Keats' brother Tom would succumb to the same disease. When Keats began coughing up blood, he knew from experience what his limited life would be like. Never financially able to marry, Keats nevertheless enjoyed a brief engagement with Fanny Brawne before his death at the age of twenty-five. From the depth of his suffering, we inherit some of most sublime lines in English poetry:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: Its loveliness increases; it will never Pass into nothingness; but still will keep A bower quiet for us, and a sleep Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing. *Endymion*

The haunting lines of "Ode to a Nightingale" reflect the impending mortality of the poet, who has been "half in love with easeful Death," and the ending lines of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" proclaim, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Consider while reading:

1. Discuss the immortality of the nightingale.
2. Discuss the immortality of the lovers on the Grecian urn.
3. What is Keats' greatest fear?

Written by Karen Dodson

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5.5: "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats

Published: 1819

1.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.¹⁰

[108]

2.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:²⁰

3.

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,[¹⁰⁹
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.³⁰

4.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.⁴⁰

[110]

5.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.⁵⁰

6.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,^[111]
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.⁶⁰

7.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.⁷⁰
[112]

8.
Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?⁸⁰

Notes on the Ode to a Nightingale

In the early months of 1819 Keats was living with his friend Brown at Hampstead (Wentworth Place). In April a nightingale built her nest in the garden, and Brown writes: 'Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass-plot under a plum, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale. The [233]writing was not well legible, and it was difficult to arrange the stanza on so many scraps. With his assistance I succeeded, and this was his Ode to a Nightingale.'

Page 107. l. 4. Lethe. Cf. *Lamia*, i. 81, note.

l. 7. Dryad. Cf. *Lamia*, i. 5, note.

Page 108. l. 13. Flora, the goddess of flowers.

l. 14. sunburnt mirth. An instance of Keats's power of concentration. The people are not mentioned at all, yet this phrase conjures up a picture of merry, laughing, sunburnt peasants, as surely as could a long and elaborate description.

l. 15. the warm South. As if the wine brought all this with it.

l. 16. Hippocrene, the spring of the Muses on Mount Helicon.

l. 23. The weariness . . . fret. Cf. 'The fretful stir unprofitable and the fever of the world' in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, which Keats well knew.

Page 109. l. 26. Where youth . . . dies. See Introduction to the Odes, p. 230.

l. 29. Beauty . . . eyes. Cf. Ode on Melancholy, 'Beauty that must die.'

l. 32. Not . . . pards. Not wine, but poetry, shall give him release from the cares of this world. Keats is again obviously thinking of Titian's picture (Cf. *Lamia*, i. 58, note).

l. 40. Notice the balmy softness which is given to this line by the use of long vowels and liquid consonants.

Page 110. ll. 41 seq. The dark, warm, sweet atmosphere seems to enfold us. It would be hard to find a more fragrant passage.

[234]l. 50. The murmurous . . . eves. We seem to hear them. Tennyson, inspired by Keats, with more self-conscious art, uses somewhat similar effects, e.g.:

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

The Princess, vii.

l. 51. Darkling. Cf. *The Eve of St. Agnes*, l. 355, note.

l. 61. Thou . . . Bird. Because, so far as we are concerned, the nightingale we heard years ago is the same as the one we hear to-night. The next lines make it clear that this is what Keats means.

l. 64. clown, peasant.

l. 67. alien corn. Transference of the adjective from person to surroundings. Cf. *Eve of St. Agnes*, l. 16; *Hyperion*, iii. 9.

ll. 69-70. magic . . . forlorn. Perhaps inspired by a picture of Claude's, 'The Enchanted Castle,' of which Keats had written before in a poetical epistle to his friend Reynolds—'The windows [look] as if latch'd by Fays and Elves.'

Page 112. l. 72. Toll. To him it has a deeply melancholy sound, and it strikes the death-blow to his illusion.

l. 75. plaintive. It did not sound sad to Keats at first, but as it dies away it takes colour from his own melancholy and sounds pathetic to him. Cf. *Ode on Melancholy*: he finds both bliss and pain in the contemplation of beauty.

ll. 76-8. Past . . . glades. The whole country speeds past our eyes in these three lines.

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5.6: "Ode On a Grecian Urn" by John Keats

Published: 1819

1.

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?¹⁰

[114]

2.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!²⁰

3.

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;^[115]
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.³⁰

4.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.⁴⁰

[116]

5.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.⁵⁰

Notes on the Ode On a Grecian Urn

This poem is not, apparently, inspired by any one actual vase, but by many Greek sculptures, some seen in the British Museum, some known only from engravings. Keats, in his imagination, combines them all into one work of supreme beauty.

Perhaps Keats had some recollection of Wordsworth's sonnet 'Upon the sight of a beautiful picture,' beginning 'Praised be the art.'

Page 113. l. 2. foster-child. The child of its maker, but preserved and cared for by these foster-parents.

l. 7. Tempe was a famous glen in Thessaly.

Arcady. Arcadia, a very mountainous country, the centre of the Peloponnese, was the last stronghold of the aboriginal Greeks. The people were largely shepherds and goatherds, and Pan was a local Arcadian god till the Persian wars (c. 400 b.c.). In late Greek and in Roman pastoral poetry, as in modern literature, Arcadia is a sort of ideal land of poetic shepherds.

Page 114. ll. 17-18. Bold . . . goal. The one thing denied to the figures—actual life. But Keats quickly turns to their rich compensations.

Page 115. ll. 28-30. All . . . tongue. Cf. Shelley's To a Skylark:

Thou lovest—but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

ll. 31 seq. Keats is now looking at the other side of the urn. This verse strongly recalls certain parts of the frieze of the Parthenon (British Museum).

Page 116. l. 41. Attic, Greek.

[236]brede, embroidery. Cf. Lamia, i. 159. Here used of carving.

l. 44. tease us out of thought. Make us think till thought is lost in mystery.

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5.7: Marianne Moore (1887 - 1972)



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If Robert Frost’s poems demonstrate a continuing fascination with decay, it may be said that Marianne Moore’s poetry reveals an equally compelling fascination with development. Like Dickinson and Whitman in the previous century, Moore was a compulsive editor and revisionist who apparently struggled over the publication of each of her poems. Like Dickinson, she wished to see her poems laid out exactly as she wished, but as a professional, rather than an amateur poet, she seized upon each opportunity for publication as a chance for revision. Thus, like with Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, it is difficult to call any of Moore’s poems finished. Each time they were printed anew, she revised them. In this way, Moore’s poetry works on a number of textual levels. Like Dickinson, Moore expressed hesitation at the appearance of her published work, but like her Modernist contemporaries, she embraced the opportunities that twentieth-century publishing, and the existence of numerous “little magazines,” offered.

Moore’s first published poems appeared in these “little magazines,” the literary and artistic journals of the early twentieth century, around 1915, and her work was widely praised by the literary gatekeepers of the day, including Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. But it was her first collection of twenty-four entries, *Poems*, published without her knowledge in July 1921, that made her name widely known in the literary world. By the time that Moore herself produced a collection of poems, 1924’s *Observations*, she was beginning to develop a reputation as a “poet’s poet” that was only strengthened by winning the *Dial* prize in 1925. After winning the prize in 1925, Moore became editor of the *Dial*, a post that she held for the next four years.

“Poetry,” the selection that follows, is a manifesto for Modernism, a demonstration of Moore’s command of both technique and artistry, and an instruction manual. As a manifesto, “Poetry” is both disdainful of the rigid forms that dominated most poetry what Moore calls, “this fiddle,” and celebratory of the experience of reading poetry. The experience of reading poetry, she argues, must yield an understanding of “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” and not be merely sites for “high-sounding,” but “unintelligible,” attempts at communication. Thus poetry, Moore argues, must be both precise and genuine.

Moore demonstrates both precision and authenticity throughout the poem by using concrete, rather than traditionally poetic, language and by avoiding many of our expectations about poetry. Not only does Moore’s poetry fail to rhyme, but she also rejects Dickinson’s rigid hymnody, eschews Whitman’s free verse, and ignores Frost’s blank verse in favor of poetry that shares more of its syntax with prose and the spoken word than it does with traditional poetic forms. In place of lines and stanzas, Moore forces us to confront her poetry as a single unit where the expression begins with the first capital “I,” and concludes with a single period at the end of the last line. Entangled in this extended expression, Moore guides the reader to a new understanding of poetry that reminds readers of Whitman’s *Song of Myself* while it advocates not for a song in the traditional sense but for the importance of ordinary human speech. While reading “Poetry,” careful readers should take note of the differences between Moore’s monologue, in which no response is required from the reader, and the dramatic monologues of Frost whose speaker is always questioning.

5.7.1 “Poetry”

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond
all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a
high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful.
When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we do not admire what
we cannot understand:
the bat holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse
that feels a flea, the base ball fan,
the statistician nor is it valid
to discriminate against “business documents and
school-books”; all these phenomena are important.
One must make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets,
the result is not poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be
“literalists of the imagination” above
insolence and triviality and can present
for inspection, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,”
shall we have it. In the meantime,
if you demand on the one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

5.7.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. How does the presentation of Moore’s poem the ragged lines, the uneven breaks shape our understanding of the poem?
2. How does Moore distinguish her work from the work of her predecessors like Dickinson and Whitman?

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5.8: Jamaica Kincaid (1949-)

Jamaica Kincaid (1949-) *Girl* Antiguan-American Contemporary Literature Jamaica Kincaid, whose original name is Elaine Potter Richardson, was born in Antigua in 1949. She is currently Professor of African and African-American Studies at Harvard University. She grew up in Antigua in poverty, and she had a troubled relationship with her mother, whom she believed neglected her in favor of her brothers. She has said that this relationship shaped her as a writer. As a teenager, she moved to New York city, where she began her career as a writer in her twenties publishing short stories in teen magazines but eventually publishing short fiction in *The Village Voice*, *The Paris Review*, and *The New Yorker*. While she has no college degree, Kincaid wrote for *The New Yorker* for nearly 20 years. Kincaid's work is often semi-autobiographical; she explores themes of race and gender, particularly in a neo-colonial setting. "Girl" was originally published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1978. Written as a dispute between a mother and a daughter, it is a powerful illustration of the limits of a young woman's life in the Caribbean culture of the time. Consider while reading:

1. Why is the story written in second person?
2. What does the mother tell the young girl about her role as a woman?
3. How does the tone change as the conversation progresses?
4. How does this very short story reflect the author's experiences?

Written by Anita Turlington

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5.9: "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid

Source: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1978/06/26/girl?verso=true>

Girl

By **Jamaica Kincaid**

June 19, 1978

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk bare-head in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum in it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread? ♦

Published in the print edition of the [June 26, 1978 New Yorker](#) issue.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Writing about Form - Developing the Foundations of Close Reading

Learning Objectives

- Understand the theory of New Criticism as the foundation for close reading.
- Apply the New Critical methodology to works of literature.
- Engage in the writing process of a peer writer, including peer review.
- Review and evaluate a variety of New Critical papers by peer writers.
- Draft and revise a New Critical paper on a literary work.

[6.1: The Foundations of New Criticism- An Overview](#)

[6.2: Close Reading Strategies - A Process Approach](#)

[6.3: Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

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6.1: The Foundations of New Criticism- An Overview

John Donne (1572–1631), the great metaphysical poet, provides a metaphor that is useful for close reading. In “The Canonization” (1633) he writes:

We'll build sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve

Us canonized for Love. John Donne, “The Canonization,” Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173353>.

Another poet returns to the same metaphor 118 years later. Thomas Gray, in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), writes:

Can storied urn or animated bust

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath? Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Courtyard,” Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173564>.

Both Donne and Gray use the image of the urn in their poetry. An *urn*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, is “an earthenware or metal vessel or vase of a rounded or ovaloid form and with a circular base, used by various peoples especially in former times...to preserve the ashes of the dead. Hence vaguely used (esp. *poet.*) for ‘a tomb or sepulchre, the grave.’” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “urn.” Donne and Gray use the urn poetically, or metaphorically, for the urn is an image, a container to hold poetic meaning. To Donne, the poet can “build sonnets pretty rooms; / As well a well-wrought urn becomes”; to Gray the urn becomes “storied” or an “animated bust” capable of containing stories and meaning. As an image, then, the urn becomes symbolic: poets argue that a poem is like an urn, a container for artistic meaning.

Let’s add one final component to our *urn* image. Jump ahead another sixty-nine years from Gray’s poem and read John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820). At the end of this poem, Keats writes:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919; Bartleby.com, 1999), <http://www.bartleby.com/101/625.html>.

Donne’s “**well-wrought urn**” became the title of a book by Cleanth Brooks—*The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1956).—a central manifesto of the New Criticism. New Criticism is synonymous with close reading, so the urn becomes an important symbol for the New Critics: the urn as artistic container of beauty and meaning represents the New Critical enterprise. A poem, a play, a novel, a short story is like a “storied urn” or “well-wrought urn,” capable of conveying poetic beauty and truth. Even if the poem is “Jabberwocky”!

In all likelihood, you have already practiced **New Criticism**, the close reading of a poem, short story, or longer narrative that focuses on the unity of that work. When you examine a short story for its character development, a drama for its plot construction, or a poem for its imagery, you are reading as a New Critic, looking at the literary work through the lens of close reading. In a sense, New Critical close reading is at the heart of every form of literary analysis you do, regardless of the theoretical approach taken. Thus it becomes essential that you become proficient in close readings of texts, for this skill is the foundation of all forms of literary criticism. If you cannot read a text closely and analyze it, you will have difficulty reading from any critical perspective.

Your Process

1. List the papers, if any, you have written in high school or college using the close reading approach.
2. Describe your experience writing such papers.
3. What challenges or questions do you remember having as you were working on these papers?
4. On which literary work have you decided to write your paper?
5. What are the fundamental questions you have about this work?

Focus on New Critical Strategies

The New Critics, as we discussed, regard a literary work as an *urn*—a well-wrought, storied urn, or a Grecian urn. As Keats writes, this urn contains not only beauty but also truth: a work of literature has some objective meaning that is integral to its artistic design. In other words, literature is the art of conveying truth about the world. Thus the New Critics view the study of literature as an inherently valuable enterprise; literary criticism, it follows, is fruitful because it clarifies art by assigning a truth value to this art. To quote the nineteenth-century poet and critic Matthew Arnold, as he writes in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1865), literature reflects “the best that is known and thought in the world.” Matthew Arnold, *Function of Criticism in the Present Time* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010). To the New Critics, as you can see, literature—in particular the analysis of it—was a profound activity.

A central concern of the New Critics is to understand how meaning and form interweave into a total artistic effect, the well-wrought urn. A New Critical reading assumes that the literary work has an organic structure that leads to unity or harmony in the work. An important concern for New Critics, consequently, is to show how meaning is achieved or dependent on the organic structure—the form—of the work. A New Critical reading, then, focuses on the various elements of literature that complement and create the theme.

Basic Philosophy of Close Reading

A New Critic’s toolbox will hold those elements of literature that allow for the discussion of form and technique as it applies to meaning. Since New Critics perform a close reading of the text to illustrate how structure and theme are inseparable, they are eager to tell us both how to read and how *not* to read. They identify various fallacies of reading that must be avoided:

The Intentional Fallacy

The **intentional fallacy** occurs when readers claim to understand an author’s intended meaning for a work of literature. The New Critics believed that a literary work belongs to the readers, to the public, which suggests that we should read the work isolated from what the author may have said about the work. In other words, the critic never knows specifically what the author intended. Indeed, an author may have conveyed meanings he or she did not intend at all, but those meanings are still present in their work. The literary critic, then, must concentrate solely on the extrinsic formal qualities of the poem, play, short story, or novel.

The Biographical Fallacy

Related to the intentional fallacy is the **biographical fallacy**, which, as you might suspect, is committed when you use an author’s life as a frame of reference to interpret a work of art. The New Critics took painstaking measures to keep the focus on the work of art itself.

The Affective Fallacy

The **affective fallacy** is produced when the critic brings in his or her personal feelings about how a literary work moves them. While New Critics were aware that many readers found meaning in the emotional impact of literature, they were careful to distinguish between subjective emotional responses and objective critical statements about a literary work. Critics, then, should stick closely to the work of art, eliminating the author’s intention from consideration, and they should also eliminate their emotional involvement in the reading experience. We discover later in our study that many critical theories—psychoanalytic and reader-response theories, in particular—are diametrically opposed to New Criticism: both psychoanalytic and reader-response theories highlight the way a literary work affects a reader’s emotional and intellectual responses.

The Heresy of Paraphrase

Finally, the New Critics warned against the **heresy of paraphrase**, which happens when readers artificially separate meaning from structure or form. You have probably fallen into this trap once or twice when you concentrated on summarizing a work's plot rather than analyzing its meaning. New Criticism teaches us not to assign a meaning to a literary work *unless* that meaning can be supported by a close examination of the artistic elements of the text. To say that Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is about the death of a migrant worker fails to acknowledge that the poem does not support such a reading. Humpty Dumpty, in fact, could be accused of the heresy of paraphrase, as Amy Chisnell explores in her student paper later in the chapter.

In review, a close reading, as defined by the New Critics, focuses narrowly on the literary work as a well-wrought urn. All we need for our interpretation is the literary work itself, where we examine how the artistry of the work leads to a larger theme that reflects the truth value of the work. Easy to state, more difficult to do! So let's now turn to see how a close reading can be connected to the writing process itself.

Your Process

1. How do you react to such rules that define the philosophy of New Critical close reading?
2. What do you see as the strengths to such an approach?
3. What do you see as some of the limits to this approach?

The Writing Process and the Protocols of Close Reading

If New Critics provide us with so many strategies for *not* reading a text, they should present us with strategies *for* reading texts. And they do. They suggest protocols of reading that are the heart of traditional close readings of texts. In a nutshell, a close reading exposes a problem or issue that needs examination to bring unity to the work; a close reading demonstrates how a literary work's meaning is unified, balanced, and harmonized by its aesthetic—or literary—structure. Your close reading, then, often identifies a **tension** or **ambiguity**—the issue or problem—that can be resolved by showing that the literary work achieves unity even in the apparent tension or ambiguity. Consequently, the critic can often examine how language creates tension through **paradox** or **irony**. Paradox (when something appears contradictory or discordant, but finally proves to be actually true) and irony (when a perceived meaning or intention is eventually found not to be accurate) are a result of a writer's use of language in a *metaphorical* way.

Your Process

1. Read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (<http://www.bartleby.com/101/625.html>).
2. Examine the last two lines of the poem (49–50).
3. Do you think the urn is speaking the lines at the end? Does it matter?
4. Read Cleanth Brooks's interpretation of the ending lines (www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html).
5. Then read the following overview.

There is no more famous example of a professional critical reading than Cleanth Brooks's "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes." Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. You can access the essay at www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html.

Brooks's reading of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" begins by disagreeing with T. S. Eliot, who believed the concluding lines of the poem—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—constituted a major flaw in the poem, for, as Brooks relates, "the troubling assertion is apparently an intrusion upon the poem—does not grow out of it—is not dramatically accommodated to it." Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. Eliot feels the urn's speech doesn't make much sense—and that the statement simply isn't true. Brooks sets out to counter Eliot and prove that the poem is unified around the central paradox of the poem: "What is the relation of the beauty (the goodness, the perfection) of a poem to the truth or falsity of what it seems to assert?"

Brooks contends that the poem is "a parable on the nature of poetry, and of art in general" and that the concluding lines must be taken in the "total context of the poem." Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," Mr. Bauld's English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. When read in this manner, the urn's speech was "'in character,' was dramatically

appropriate, [and] was properly prepared for.”Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. To support his contention, Brooks provides a stanza-by-stanza close reading in which he suggests that the paradox of the speaking urn is naturally part of each stanza and related to a key thematic concept: the poem highlights the tension between bustling life depicted on the urn and the frozen vignettes of the “Cold Pastoral.” Brooks concludes, “If the urn has been properly dramatized, if we have followed the development of the metaphors, if we have been alive to the paradoxes which work throughout the poem, perhaps then, we shall be prepared for the enigmatic, final paradox which the ‘silent form’ utters.”Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html. In concluding his essay, Brooks warns readers not to fall into the trap of paraphrase, for we must ultimately focus on “the world-view, or ‘philosophy,’ or ‘truth’ of the *poem as a whole* in terms of its dramatic wholeness” (Brooks’s emphasis).Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” Mr. Bauld’s English, www.mrbauld.com/keatsurn.html.

Brooks’s reading of Keats’s ode is an exemplar of New Critical reading. Remember, a close reading will examine a literary work and find some objective meaning (a theme) that is harmonized with structure, thus balancing theme and form.

Implementing the Reading Protocols: A Strategy

To perform a close reading, use the following strategy:

1. Identify a tension or ambiguity in the literary work, the “problem” that needs to be solved by a close reading. In other words, your interpretation will highlight a theme or meaning that resides in the work.
2. Demonstrate how the work sustains or achieves this meaning through its artistic “principle of composition,” which might include an examination of the following:
 - o imagery
 - o character
 - o plot
 - o symbol
 - o setting
 - o point of view
 - o language use (i.e., denotation, connotation, metaphor, simile, personification, rhythm)

Of course, the principle of composition is determined by the literary genre you are analyzing (i.e., short story, poetry, drama, novel). By showing that #1 is dependent on #2, you present a New Critical interpretation reflecting how meaning is integral to theme.

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6.2: Close Reading Strategies - A Process Approach

To review, New Criticism provides us with concrete strategies to use when we read and interpret works of literature. Such reading and interpreting, however, never happens after just a first reading; in fact, all critics—New Critics and the others we examine later in this text—reread works multiple times before venturing an interpretation. You can see, then, the connection between reading and writing: as Chapter 1 indicates, writers create multiple drafts before settling for a finished product (writing is never adequately “finished”); the writing process, in turn, is dependent on the multiple rereadings the writer has performed to gather evidence for the paper. It’s important that you integrate the reading and writing process together. As a model, use the following ten-step plan as you write using New Critical theory:

1. Carefully *read the work* you will analyze.
2. *Formulate a general question* after your initial reading that identifies a problem—a tension—that is fruitful for discussion.
3. *Reread the work*, paying particular attention to the question you posed. *Take notes*, which should be focused on your central question. *Write an exploratory journal entry or blog post* that allows you to play with ideas.
4. *Construct a working thesis* that makes a claim about the work and accounts for the following:
 1. What does the work mean?
 2. How does the work artistically demonstrate the theme you’ve identified?
 3. “So what” is significant about the work? That is, why is it important for you to write about this work? What will readers learn from reading your interpretation?
5. *Reread the text to gather textual evidence* for support. What literary devices are used to achieve theme?
6. *Construct an informal outline* that demonstrates how you will support your interpretation.
7. *Write a first draft*.
8. *Receive feedback* from peers and your instructor via *peer review* and *conferencing* with your instructor (if possible).
9. *Revise the paper*, which will include revising your original thesis statement and restructuring your paper to best support the thesis. Note: You probably will revise many times, so it is important to receive feedback at every draft stage if possible.
10. *Edit and proofread* for correctness, clarity, and style.

We recommend that you follow this process for every paper that you write from this textbook. Of course, these steps can be modified to fit your writing process, but the plan does ensure that you will engage in a thorough reading of the text as you work through the writing process, which demands that you allow plenty of time for reading, reflecting, writing, reviewing, and revising.

Peer Reviewing

A central stage in the writing process is the feedback stage, in which you receive revision suggestions from classmates and your instructor. By receiving feedback on your paper, you will be able to make more intelligent revision decisions. Furthermore, by reading and responding to your peers’ papers, you become a more astute reader, which will help when you revise your own papers. In Chapter 10, you will find peer-review sheets for each chapter.

Your Process

1. Have you partaken in peer review before? Describe this experience.
2. Do you regularly get feedback from others on your writing (no matter for which class)? Why or why not?

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6.3: Suggestions for Further Reading

Sources on New Criticism

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Writing about Character and Motivation - Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

Learning Objectives

- Understand the varieties of psychoanalytic literary theories.
- Apply a psychoanalytic theory to a literary work.
- Engage in the writing process of a peer writer, including peer review.
- Review and evaluate a variety of model papers by peer writers.
- Draft and revise a psychoanalytic paper on a literary work.

[7.1: Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism- An Overview](#)

[7.2: Focus on Sigmund Freud \(1856–1939\)- Unconscious Repressed Desire](#)

[7.3: Focus on Jacques Lacan \(1901–81\)- Repressed Desire and the Limits of Language](#)

[7.4: Focus on Carl Jung \(1875–1961\) - The Archetypal Collective Unconsciousness](#)

[7.5: Reading Keats’s “Urn” through the Psychoanalytic Lens](#)

[7.6: Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

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7.1: Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism- An Overview

“Do I wake or sleep?” Keats’s question is perplexing, one we have probably asked ourselves. For our dreams often seem as real as our waking life. We dream, we wake, and we try to recollect our dream, which somehow seems to tell us something that we should know. We may tell friends our dreams, especially those strange ones that haunt our imagination, and they may venture an interpretation for us by reading our dream. Dreams are stories of our mind, albeit often bewildering narratives in need of interpretation.

Your Process

1. Keep a dream journal for a least one week, jotting down those dreams that you can remember most vividly.
2. Take one of your dreams and analyze it like a story: What is the plot? Who are the characters? What symbols seem to be operating in the dream-story?
3. Now try to understand your dream: What might be the theme of your dream-story?

Psychoanalytical literary criticism, on one level, concerns itself with dreams, for dreams are a reflection of the unconscious psychological states of dreamers. Freud, for example, contends that dreams are “the guardians of sleep” where they become “disguised fulfillments of repressed wishes.” Sigmund Freud. *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, (New York: Norton, 1989). To Freud, dreams are the “royal road” to the personal unconscious of the dreamer and have a direct relation to literature, which often has the structure of a dream. Jacques Lacan, a disciple of Freud, was influenced by Freud’s psychoanalytical theories and contended that dreams mirrored our unconscious and reflected the way we use language; dreams, therefore, operate like language, having their own rhetorical qualities. Another Freud disciple, Carl Jung, eventually rejected Freud’s theory that dreams are manifestations of the personal unconsciousness, claiming, instead, that they reflect archetypes that tap into the “collective unconsciousness” of all humanity. Sigmund Freud. *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, (New York: Norton, 1989).

In this chapter, we explore three popular psychoanalytical approaches for interpreting literature—Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian. In general, there are four ways to focus a psychoanalytical interpretation:

1. You can analyze the author’s life.
2. You can analyze the thematic content of the work, especially the motivations of characters and the narrator(s).
3. You can analyze the artistic construction of a text.
4. You can analyze yourself or the reader of the literary work using reader-response theory, which we examine in detail in Chapter 6.

Here is a quick overview of some psychoanalytical interpretations that demonstrate these approaches.

Analyze the Author’s Life

In *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1933), Marie Bonaparte psychoanalyzes Poe, concluding that his fiction and poetry are driven by his desire to be reunited with his dead mother (she died when he was three). Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Image Publishing, 1949). This desire leaves him symbolically castrated, unable to have normal relationships with others (primarily women). Bonaparte analyzes Poe’s stories from this perspective, reading them as dreams reflecting Poe’s repressed desires for his mother. While such an interpretation is fascinating—and can be quite useful—you probably won’t attempt to get into the mind of the author for a short paper. But you will find, however, that examining the life of an author can be a fruitful enterprise, for there may be details from an author’s life that might become useful evidence in your paper.

Analyze the Thematic Content: The Motivations of Characters and the Narrator(s)

An example showing a psychoanalytic focus on literary characters is Frederick Crews’s reading in *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* (1966). Frederick Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Crews first provides a psychoanalytical reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s life: he sees reflected in Hawthorne’s characters a thwarted Oedipus complex (no worries, we’ll define that a bit later), which creates repression. Furthermore, Hawthorne’s ties to the Puritan past engenders his work with a profound sense of guilt, further repressing

characters. Crews reads “The Birthmark,” for example, as a tale of sexual repression. Crews’s study is a model for psychoanalyzing characters in fiction and remains a powerful and persuasive interpretation.

You can read “The Birthmark,” Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birthmark,” in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Modern Library ed., ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Random House, 1937; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1996), etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/HawBirt.html. which will become the story of choice for the three student sample papers in this chapter, at etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/HawBirt.html.

Analyze the Artistic Construction

Jacques Lacan shows us how a psychoanalytical reading can focus on the formal, artistic construction of a literary text. In other words, Lacan believes that our unconscious is “structured like a language” and that a literary text mirrors this sense of the unconscious. In “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (you can access the essay at <http://www.lacan.com/purloined.htm>), Lacan argues that Edgar Allan Poe’s tale is not necessarily about the meaning of the message in the stolen letter; rather, the tale is about who controls the letter, who has power over the language contained in the letter. Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” Lacan.com, <http://www.lacan.com/purloined.htm>. You can read “The Purloined Letter” Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (London: J. M. Dent, 1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1994), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PoePurl.html>. at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PoePurl.html>.

Analyze the Reader

Finally, a psychoanalytical reading can examine the reader and how a literary work is interpreted according to the psychological needs of the reader. We examine this approach in detail in Chapter 6 on reader-response criticism.

Your Process

1. Choose three authors and/or literary works that you think might be fruitful for applying the first three psychoanalytical approaches (remember, we’ll learn about the fourth approach in reader-response theory).
2. Now jot down two reasons why you think your author and/or work might work well with these theories.
3. Keep this material, for you may have already developed an idea for your paper, which you’ll be ready to write after reading the rest of this chapter.

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7.2: Focus on Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)- Unconscious Repressed Desire

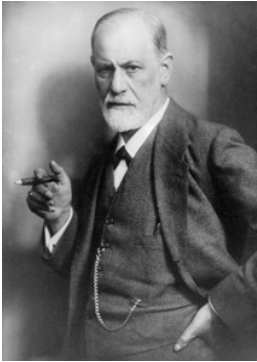


Photo by Max Halberstadt, 1922.

“Freud is inescapable. It may be a commonplace by now that we all speak Freud whether we know it or not, but the commonplace remains both true and important. Freud’s terminology and his essential ideas pervade contemporary ways of thinking about human feelings and conduct.” So writes Peter Gay, a recent biographer of Freud, in his introduction to *The Freud Reader* (1989). Peter Gay, "Introduction" in *The Freud Reader*, (New York: Norton, 1989) pg. xiii.

Gay is certainly correct: Freud is part of our everyday vocabulary: the “Oedipal complex” and “slips-of-the-tongue” are two Freudian concepts with which you are probably familiar already.

Freud’s legacy resides in his theory of human sexual development. He believes humans are driven by the **pleasure principle**, where sexual desires and aggressive behavior are controlled by the **reality principle**, the so-called restrictions we follow to conform to proper behavior. Consequently, our drive for unbridled pleasure is repressed by the reality principle and becomes sublimated or buried in the **unconscious**. Initially, Freud categorized the mind according to three levels: the conscious (what we remember), the preconscious (what we can easily retrieve from our memory), and the unconscious (what cannot be retrieved into consciousness). Freud’s map of the mind focuses on the tension between the conscious and the unconscious.

Ultimately, much of Freudian psychoanalysis concerns itself with how the unconsciousness attempts to break through the repression barrier and enter consciousness. A popular way to view the tension between the conscious and the unconscious is to imagine an iceberg:

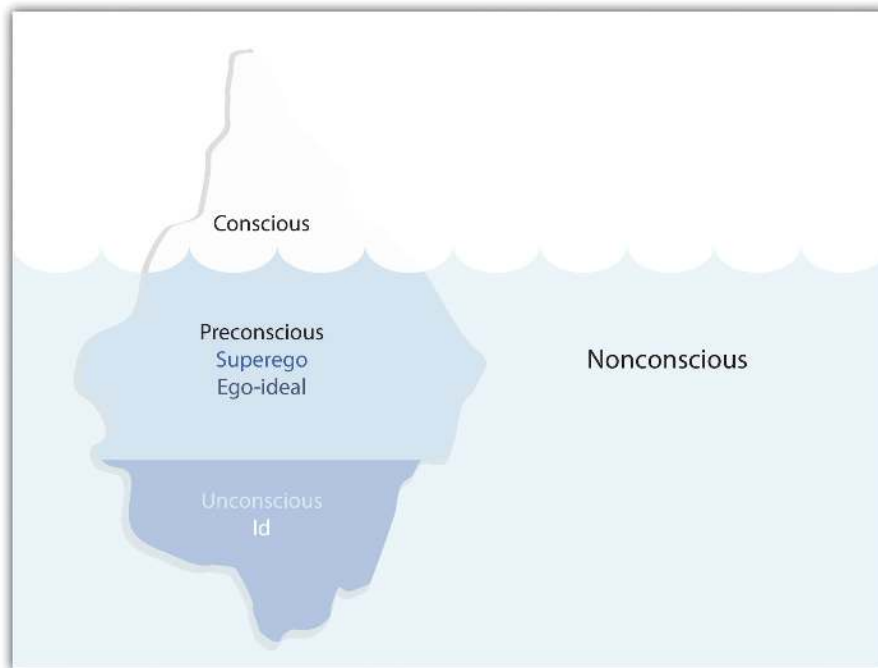


Figure 7.2.1: Freud's Conception of the Human Psyche. *Note: Ego is free-floating in all three levels.

In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud further defines his conception of the mind. He theorizes that the mind contains the **id**, the **ego**, and the **superego** (or the **ego-ideal**). Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams in The Freud Reader*, (New York: Norton, 1989) p. 630–638. The id (the “it”) is the center of our instincts, our libido, which naturally seeks gratification, and is driven by the pleasure principle; the id is primarily sexual and aggressive in nature, purely biological. In turn, the superego (the “above me”) is the moral conscience—the “law”—that tells us what is right or wrong, permissible or not permissible. The superego is constructed from parental authority, societal law, religious prohibitions, and so on; is societal; and is driven by the reality principle. It follows, then, that the ego (the “I”) is the moderator of the id (pleasure) and the superego (moral conscience). In other words, the ego is the compromise of the id and the superego, a delicate balance of the mind.

Freud posits that mental illnesses result from a faulty ego, one unable to accept the id-superego push and pull. If the mind is unable to release those repressed desires through some outlet, then a person can develop a mental illness—various neuroses like psychosis, paranoia, and schizophrenia. The goal of this chapter is not to provide you with an overview of Freudian psychoanalysis as it relates to treating mental illness; instead, our goal is to show you how to apply Freud's theories to the interpretation of literature.

Central to Freud's schematic of the mind is the **Oedipal or Oedipus complex** (OC), for it is the OC that ultimately forms the ego. To Freud, all humans pass through three stages of sexual development. During the **oral stage**, a child is one with its libido, its sexual desire satisfied by oral sucking, particularly of the mother's breast. Continued thumb-sucking during childhood, for example, represents a child not completely through the oral stage of development. Next, the child passes through the **anal stage**, whereby it experiences the mastery of its own bodily functions, gaining pleasure from the ability to control bodily functions. Freud believes the anal stage is primarily aggressive and leads to the desire for mastery over others. Those who have read William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) will recognize that the stranded children are stuck in the anal stage without any authority to control them, especially after the breaking of the conch shell. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (New York: Penguin, 1984). Finally, the child enters the **phallic stage**, where the child's sexual desire is concentrated on the genitals, which become an erogenous zone that fulfills pleasure. In effect, the oral, anal, and phallic stages reflect libidinal sexual desires central to the pleasure principle.

Enter the father. Enter the reality principle. Enter the OC. The OC comes directly from Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, a tragedy about the hero Oedipus, who learns from the Delphic oracle that he will kill his father and marry his mother; he tries to avoid the prophecy, only to fall victim to patricide and incest. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 2007). Unknowingly, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. After learning what he has done, Oedipus blinds himself in penance of his horrific deeds. Now that's a twisted tale! Freud's OC approximates the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*: the boy, as Freud tells us, has

a desire for the mother and begins to see the father as a threat to this desire. Thus the boy wishes to rid himself of his father and possess the mother. The father, symbolic of the law or lawgiver, steps in and, with the threat of castration or emasculation, turns the boy away from the mother. The boy then represses his desire for his mother (and his desire to be rid of the father) into the unconscious. In a sense, the father represents the superego, the authority. By successfully negotiating the OC, the boy is gendered; he learns how to direct his sexual desire to appropriate objects and usually grows into a healthy sexual human being.

What of the girl, you ask? Well, you probably shouldn't ask. Freud's OC is highly sexist. At one point in his career Freud referred to women as the "dark continent," and he is known most for his rhetorical question: "What does a woman want?" Indeed, Freud did not have an answer, and many feminists would argue that he didn't even have a clue! He does not provide an adequate explanation for the girl's journey through the process; in fact, Freud claims that the girl has an easier route through the OC since she accepts the notion of castration because she doesn't have the male appendage. In other words, the girl, already symbolically castrated, does not fear the father; instead, she turns toward the father for the missing phallus, her completion, and thus rivals the mother for the father's affection. You can probably see why nearly all of Freud's critics have recognized the limitations of his claims about women.

At this point you may be shaking your head in skeptical amazement, for Freud's theories do tax the imagination. One major critique of Freud is that we cannot verify his theories empirically. In other words, we are asked to believe Freud because he tells us to believe him. For literary critics, however, this theory—or story—that Freud creates, one that he develop from reading literature (*Oedipus Rex*), has tantalizing possibilities for literary interpretation.

There's a bit more to Freud that we'll want to examine—dreams—but let's look at another use of the Freudian OC in literary analysis. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975) provides a provocative—and controversial—case for a Freudian interpretation of literature, in this case fairy tales. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1976). Bettelheim contends that fairy tales often depict Oedipal tensions. Let's look at one example, "Jack and the Beanstalk," which you can read at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/English_Fairy_Tales/Jack_and_the_Beanstalk. "Jack and the Beanstalk," in *English Fairy Tales*, 3rd ed., ed. Joseph Jacobs (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1890), http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/English_Fairy_Tales/Jack_and_the_Beanstalk.

This tale exemplifies a child's journey through the OC. The beanstalk, symbolizing the phallus, is a metaphor for fatherly authority. Jack's stealing of the goose that lays the golden egg from the giant and subsequent cutting down of the beanstalk, which leads to the giant's demise, symbolizes Jack's freedom from the fear of the fatherly authority as he becomes his own person, his own man. By chopping down the beanstalk, then, Jack symbolically castrates the giant and is able to give up his pleasurable desire for the land of plenty on top of the beanstalk and live in the world of reality. Of course, it helps to have that goose. If fairy tales suggest Freudian designs, as Bettelheim tells us, then it seems reasonable other literature may reflect Oedipal desires. Thus a psychoanalytic reading of a text may lead to some illuminating conclusions. As with any Freudian readings, there are those who will reject Freud's very premises, and this is true with Bettelheim, for many fairy-tale scholars have looked at the limits of his claims. Yet they are still powerful.



Illustration by Herbert Cole for Ernest Rhys's *Fairy Gold: A Book of Old English Fairy Tales* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906).

We must add another dimension to Freud's theory to complete its frame, which will come full circle and connect us to Alice's concern that she is a dream of the Red King. To summarize Freudian theory so far, the human mind is structured around the id-ego-superego triad that represents the tension between the pleasure and the reality principle; the ego is the moderator between pleasure and reality and is formed by entering the OC. The ego balances the id and superego by repressing those id desires that are not socially acceptable—which includes the desire for the mother—into the unconscious. To remain psychologically healthy, according to Freud, the human mind must be able to let those repressed desires escape. Slips of the tongue and jokes are two outlets. Think of dirty jokes. By telling a dirty joke or laughing at one, we are able to alleviate our fears or laugh at something that is normally not permissible. Think of a slip of the tongue, where you are repressing some desire that unconsciously slips out in normal conversation. A clever definition of such a slip is as follows: *It's when you say one thing, but mean a mother.* Get it?

Yet there is one other outlet that is vital to Freud: dreams. They are the primary outlets for these repressed desires, the “royal road,” as Freud expressed it, to the unconscious.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the importance of dreams to psychoanalytic literary criticism. And Freud's theory of dreams may be his most important contribution to literary analysis. Freud defines dreams as hidden ways of accessing repressed wishes or desires. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is Freud's masterwork on dream interpretation. If dreams are fulfillments of repressed wishes and desires, then dreams provide a means for the pleasure principle—the id—to have a convenient outlet. Freud identifies the **dreamwork** as constructed of the **latent content**, the **manifest content**, and the **secondary revision**. The latent content is like a bubbling cauldron of desire, so deep and seething that it appears unintelligible. To bring some meaning to this cauldron, the dreamwork operates by allowing the manifest content to provide a structure for the latent content; the manifest content orders and arranges the dream into a story that uses images and symbols to convey meaning. To continue with our analogy, as the dreamer looks into the bubbling cauldron of the latent content, he or she takes a ladle and dips into the cauldron and pours latent content into a bowl, the bowl representing the manifest content, a smaller and more structured container. Literal food for thought!

The primary recipe for such symbolization and image making is a dash of **condensation** (compression of information) and a tablespoon of **displacement** (placing desire onto a safe/other object). Condensation operates by taking two or more images and compressing them into a composite picture (i.e., a dream where a person looks like an amalgam of other people you know). Displacement, on the other hand, operates by substituting one thing or image for another (i.e., Freud once interpreted a car to represent the autoeroticism of the dreamer). Secondary revision, finally, is the dream the dreamer remembers and attempts to interpret (or have someone else interpret); during the secondary revision, any gaps or illogicalities of the dream from the manifest content is filled in and smoothed over—the dreamer revises the story to make it more literary, to imbue it with more sense. Another way to see secondary revision is to view it as interpretation: as we interpret a dream, we interpret a piece of literature. If a dream has a narrative structure, then it follows that it requires reading and interpreting, making a dream similar to a poem, play, short story, or novel.

In *On Dreams* (1914), Freud provides some strategies for reading dreams by discussing various symbols that work by condensation and displacement and become dramatized or put into a story form. Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams* (New York: Cosimo, 2010). A central dream symbol, one that is essential to the OC, is the **phallic symbol**—guns, knives, swords, pens, even a banana. Related to the phallic symbol is the **yonic symbol**, any round object or object of fecundity that may symbolize female fertility—symbols of the womb. Some symbols become more universal: agricultural images represent fertilization, as do spring and summer. Be forewarned: not everything in a text is a phallic or yonic symbol. Freudian symbol hunting can at times be a dangerous occupation, for every pen—say the one you are probably holding in your hand right now—is not necessarily a phallic symbol, even if as some Freudians pun: “Pen-is power”! Freud once said that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but that leaves open the possibility that sometimes that cigar might mean something else.

Freud also suggests that the dream symbolism of condensation and displacement also operates through various defense mechanisms or coping strategies that we use every day. **Repression**(forgetting or refusing to think about something that was unpleasant or traumatic); **sublimation**(channeling one’s emotions into a socially acceptable outlet); **projection** (assigning one’s own feelings to someone else); **reaction formation** (expressing the opposite of what one really feels); and **rationalization** (trying to justify something, to explain it away) are other ways for the mind to grapple with unconscious desires that haunt the psyche. And Freud contends that as the mind is split between the unconscious and the conscious, this schism is a product of the two great motivating factors—**Eros** (desire, sexual intimacy, love) and **Thanatos** (death, the fear and attraction of death). That our desire for life will ultimately be defeated by the inevitable reality of death is a central concern that leads to repression.

Freud’s psychoanalytic theories have been extremely influential to literary criticism. Dreams are, after all, like literature in need of interpretation. In fact, argues Freud, literature operates like a dream. In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908), Freud specifically connects psychoanalysis to literature and literary interpretation. Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” in *On Freud’s “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,”* ed. Peter Fonagy, Ethel Spector Person, and Servulo A. Figueira (London: Karnac, 1995). A writer is a dreamer, finding outlets for his or her unconscious, repressed desires. As reader and interpreter of a literary work, then, you gain pleasure from reading. We see in Chapter 6 that reader-response interpretation approximates Freud’s reader “wish-fulfillment” as a textual strategy.

In general, Freudian literary criticism is a powerful critical lens to use when viewing much literature. You have at your disposal a wide array of literary tools to use: repression of the conscious mind into the unconscious, pleasure versus reality principles, the id-ego-superego connection, the Oedipal complex, dreams and dream symbolism, and the various defense mechanisms. Often, a psychoanalytical reading will open up the text dramatically. We can now examine the theories of Jacques Lacan, who makes Freud even more applicable to literary interpretation.

Your Process

1. What aspect(s) of Freud’s theory most interests you?
2. How could you take that interest in Freud and apply it to a work of literature?
3. What can you envision as the benefits of such an application?
4. Are there any concerns you might have about your approach?

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7.3: Focus on Jacques Lacan (1901–81)- Repressed Desire and the Limits of Language

Jacques Lacan, in many ways, is more popular than Freud in literary analysis, though Freud is certainly more famous across disciplines. And the fact remains that Lacan is a Freudian—his theory is dependent on Freud. When Lacan writes that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” he moves Freud from the biological realm into the realm of language. Dor, Joël. Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language. (New York: Other Press, 1998) pg. 244. Freudian literary criticism is primarily external to a work of art: we read and interpret according to Freud’s theories, applying, for example, the id-ego-superego triad to Hawthorne’s short story “The Birthmark,” as a student example demonstrates later in the chapter. Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism, on the other hand, can be seen as internal to the work, for it focuses on the actual language of the literary work. In other words, the text becomes alive, having its own mind, its own psyche. Lacanian psychoanalysis is textual, part of the artistic, formal construction of the literary work.

As you remember, Freud posits that the mind is divided between the conscious and unconscious, the dividing line between the two states representing the repression barrier. Lacan positions language in this dichotomy by modifying the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that words (or signs) work within a system of other signs (our language). However, Saussure believes a sign is only an arbitrary marker between the **signifier** (the form the sign takes—a sound, a symbol, or a word) and its **signified** (the concept the sign represents). Lacan, who felt that the signifier (the word) dominated the signified (the actual “thing” the word represents), represents the sign system as follows:

Thus to say a cat is a *cat* is to say the following:

This “bonding” between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, argues Saussure, for we could have easily labeled the “essence of the cat” a *trilgy* and been hollering for years, “Here, trilgy...trilgy...trilgy.” But Saussure contends that once an arbitrary sign is constructed, it remains bonded together and unchangeable, like two sides to a piece of paper. Language, consequently, is a system of signs, where words take on their meaning only in relationship to other words. Lacan revises Saussure by suggesting that signs are *not* stable, but in fact are continually shifting; words are a mere approximation of meaning, thus Lacan’s emphasis on the word over the actual “thing” the word represents.

Lacan, then, views words, the signifiers, the marks of letters on a page, as central to the creation of meaning (or the essence of the signified). Words bring meaning *to* the object; the signified is meaningless without the signifier. Language, consequently, throws a person into a sign system that never captures meaning, the human thrust into the language of desire. Or to put it plainly, if you like cats, then having the word *cat* nicely printed in your lap is not as fulfilling as having that actual furry creature purring in your lap.

To a degree, the sign, split between the signifier and the signified, acts like a repression barrier: Freud’s unconscious becomes the Lacanian signified—meaning—which can never be fulfilled since language—the signifier—approximates meaning. If Lacan is correct (and, of course, this is a pretty big “if”), then our unconscious is “structured like a language,” and it follows that the human subject is divided between our name (for us, John Pennington and Ryan Cordell) and our signified (for us, the essence of “John Pennington” and “Ryan Cordell”). Lacan distinguishes the dual self by labeling the *moi* (the image the person has of himself or herself) and the *je* (the speaking subject that positions the person in language) as parts of the self:

Another way of comprehending the *moi/je* dichotomy is to understand how a pronoun operates in a conversation. If *you* say to a friend—“I would love to go to a movie tonight, wouldn’t you?”—*I = You* and the *You = Your friend*. When your friend responds—“You have a good idea; I’d sure like to go”—the *I = Your Friend* and *You = You*. Lacan claims that language creates our identity and places us within the system of language, which, as we remember, is arbitrary and approximate. Language, as Lacan defines it, represents “the unconscious [that] is structured like a language,” yet this language “is the discourse of the Other,” the Other being language. Dor, Joël. Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language. (New York: Other Press, 1998) pg. 244.

Central to Freud’s psychoanalytic theory is the Oedipal complex, and Lacan modifies the complex by making it a product of language acquisition. He argues that a child passes through the **Imaginary** and the **Symbolic** and strives to attain the **Real**, roughly equivalent to the anal, oral, and phallic stages. The Imaginary stage is prelinguistic, similar to the id with its chaotic collection of desire. During the Imaginary stage, the child has no clearly defined sense of self; instead, it is a mass of fluid desire, Lacan’s image for this is an *omelet* or *egg*, a human Humpty Dumpty so-to-speak. In this amorphous Imaginary state, the child has no boundaries

since it has no self. However, the child passes through the **Mirror stage**, where it sees itself reflected in the mirror, and this reflection provides the child with an image of itself, one at first of ideal completeness. The child identifies with the reflection in the mirror. Yet this image of completeness is quickly shattered, for the child must misread itself, for it simultaneously sees itself as unified and as an object, an Other. Thus the beginning of the split subject. It is important to note that during the Mirror stage the child begins to acquire language, learning immediately that what is desired and the words used to identify that object of desire are not the same. Language in the Mirror stage fragments the myth of the unified self contained in the Imaginary stage.

During the Imaginary and Mirror stages, the child is subject to the **desire-of-the-mother**, whereby the child has complete desire for the mother and believes the mother in turn exists solely for the child's pleasure. Again, a division occurs as the self misreads itself in terms of the image the self projects into the mirror (or interprets from the reflection). Mother is both self and other, as is the child's identity. Enter the father—again. By this time, the child is cast into the Symbolic stage by being thrust into the language of differences. Since language is based on the signifier | signified, it follows that once a child is inserted into language it sees that its desire—the naming of objects—is never fulfilled by the object itself, for language is arbitrary and empty. Furthermore, the child is thrown into a world of differences, for words only take on meaning in relation to other words, primarily the differences between words: male/female; father/son; mother/daughter; *moi/je*.

Consequently, the child, now split from itself, seeks fulfillment in other objects, the ***objet petit a***, loosely translated as “little object ‘a.’” The *objet petit a* is a product of language, so it cannot really be found. Lacan contends that language operates as to preclude the child's fulfillment of finding an *objet petit a*. The mirror reflection becomes an apt metaphor: you are the reflection in the mirror, yet that reflection only “reflects” you (it truly isn't you). The distance between the mirror and where you are standing symbolizes the gap or gulf between words and a person's identity. That Alice is able to cross through the mirror into Looking-Glass Land, for example, represents her desire—she is in an imaginary realm (her mind?) where she can attempt to satiate her desire.

Lacan insists then language is a source of our desire but that language becomes the source of frustrated desire since words can never capture desire or the essence of meaning. Think about what happens when you stumble across a word you don't know: you look it up in a dictionary, only to find that the word is defined by other words, which have their own meanings, which you could look up in a dictionary, which...and we are in an endless, infinite loop. Take the word *liminal*. What does it mean? The *Merriam-Webster Online* dictionary defines *liminal* as a “sensory threshold,” as something “barely perceptible,” and as an “intermediate state, phase, or condition” that might exist between *life and death*. *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “liminal,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liminal>. Now do you know what the word really means? Or are you a bit frustrated? One thing we do know for sure is that Alice travels to liminal spaces when she tumbles to Wonderland and when she crosses over to Looking-Glass Land.

Let's place all this in a tighter format. Remember, Freud claims that the dreamwork uses displacement and condensation to create the manifest content of the dream. For Lacan the dreamwork is a manifestation of language—displacement resides in **metonymy** and condensation in **metaphor**:

Wondering what *metonymy* and *metaphor* are? In *A Handbook to Literature*, C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon provide excellent definitions of these literary devices. *Metonymy* is “the substitution of the name of an object closely associated with a word for the word itself. We commonly speak of the monarch as ‘the crown,’ an object closely associated with royalty thus being made to stand for it.” C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, eds., *A Handbook to Literature* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson, 2009). *Metaphor* is “an analogy identifying one object with another and ascribing to the first object one or more of the qualities of the second.” C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, eds., *A Handbook to Literature* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson, 2009).

In effect, metonymy works by displacement, residing on a horizontal axis that reflects the displacement; thus, “a” is displaced by “b,” which is displaced by “c,” and so on. Metaphor, in turn, operates by substitution, and can be placed on a vertical axis where one thing stands in completely for another: “a” = “b.”

You can now see how Lacan's theory begins to come together. Metonymy, being displacement, is a result of the Mirror stage where the child recognizes its reflection first as a complete substitution for itself (a metaphor), but it soon realizes that the reflection is of an Other, a displacement of the self (a metonym). Thus, since language is split between signifier | signified, it primarily operates as metonymy. Language as metonymy always leaves a gap or **absence or lack**, since no complete meaning can be attained. Language, consequently, is like the unconscious, which strives to fulfill repressed desire. Another way of understanding language as a gap is to open a dictionary to find a meaning of a word, as we have discussed earlier. Cast into a language of desire, humans are unable to

find stable meaning, for language cannot satisfy desire; we continually search for an *objet petit a* that will fulfill us, but that *objet* is based on a lack, for it is simply a product of language.

If Lacan subscribes to Freud's Oedipal complex, then the father must become a significant player in the development drama of the individual. Lacan argues that the desire-of-the-mother, a product of the Imaginary stage, is replaced by the **name-of-the-father**, the **phallus**, which represents law and authority and brings some boundary to the self. The phallus or name-of-the-father is not the sexual organ itself, but a symbolic representation that is similar to the superego. The phallus is another *objet petit a*, but it operates as an anchoring point along the horizontal axis of metonymy. As the human subject floats through language on the metonymic plane, it searches for the phallus and temporarily finds the phallus as a metaphor on the vertical plane. Thus the phallus becomes the privileged signifier, for it helps the split subject achieve temporary meaning in the endless journey through the language of desire. However, the phallus can never be secured, for it too resides in language and quickly slips away. Thus the search for the phallus or name-of-the-father is a frustrated desire since it is a product of language.

Finally, Lacan constructs the ideal realm called the Real, the ultimate place where the Imaginary and Symbolic stages can meet. To Lacan, though, the Real is only symbolic and beyond the reach of language—it represents the unattainable; it represents desire. The Imaginary and Symbolic are like two sides of a sheet of paper, similar to the signifier and signified; the Real is like a Möbius strip constructed from strands of paper where the Imaginary and Symbolic become entangled and lost in the web between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

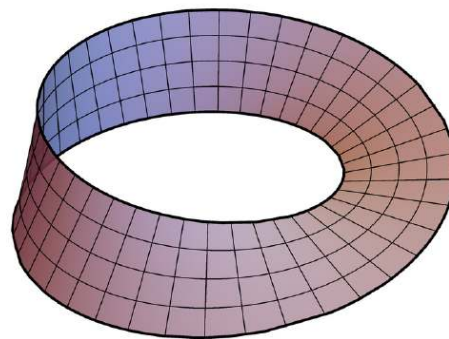


Figure 7.3.2: Diagram of Möbius strip. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Stevvers via [Wikipedia](#))

Lacan's theory is complex and at times confusing, yet like Freud's it is intriguing. His revising of Freud's concepts "into" language makes his theory particularly applicable to literary interpretation, for literature is based on language, which is structured like the unconscious. Whereas Freud suggests the literary work is structured like an author's dream in need of interpretation, Lacan proposes that language itself is a dream of condensation and displacement; therefore, Lacan's theory is centered more in actual language and less in the peculiar workings of each individual author and reader. Literary interpretation based on language, then, attempts to find meaning in a work that will elude us because language slides away from us. Our desire for interpretation, in a sense, can only be temporarily reached via an anchoring point (a written paper), but that point will be undercut with subsequent papers and interpretations.

Furthermore, Lacan's Imaginary, prelinguistic stage is appealing to feminist critics, for the Imaginary seems a maternal stage of unity that does not rely on a girl's symbolic castration to enter into the realm of the Symbolic, for both male and female are immersed into language, which casts each into a world of differences. In Freud's theory, a girl is defined by lacking—she desires the male organ that she does not have. Lacan, however, situates all this in language, revealing that women are marginalized not biologically but linguistically, for the privileged signifier is the phallus, or patriarchy.

Your Process

1. What aspect of Lacan's theory most interests you?
2. How could you take that interest in Lacan and apply it to a work of literature?
3. What can you envision as the benefits of such an application?
4. Are there any concerns you might have about your approach?

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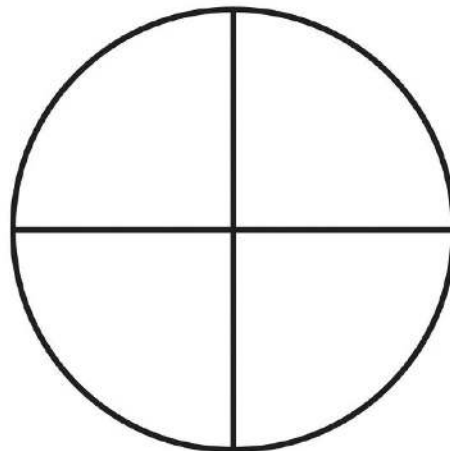
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7.4: Focus on Carl Jung (1875–1961) - The Archetypal Collective Unconsciousness

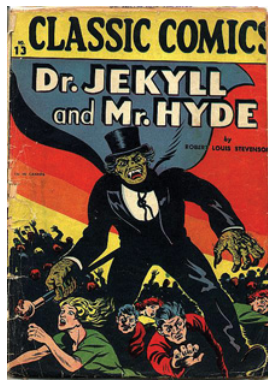
Carl Jung, like Lacan, was a disciple of Freud's, but unlike Lacan, Jung eventually split from Freud, believing that Freud focused too heavily on the importance of sexual desire and the repression that that desire causes. Jung felt that Freud's theories were, simply, too vague and could be manipulated to fit any scheme. Jung's complaint seems justified, for Freudian analysis can become reductive as a reader finds phallic symbolism in every knife and fork and yonic symbolism in the soup bowl. Freud's claim that the unconscious is a result of a person's repressed desire (which of course is sexual, libidinal), is challenged by Jung, who argues that the mind is constructed of multiple layers of consciousness, the unconscious composing only one of those layers. Jung's map of the mind is like a house with several stories: on one level lives the conscious, on another the personal unconscious (similar to Freud's unconscious), on another the **collective unconscious**, which represents a universal storehouse of images that are common to all humanity. Jung clearly separates himself from Freud, for the collective unconscious is much larger than the unconscious, suggesting that a commonality is shared by all humans—including the importance of myth, ritual, and religion.

The collective unconscious can be accessed through various **archetypes** that represent for a particular culture a variation of the collective unconscious. Archetypes are like universal Tupperware containers; a particular culture, society, or individual fills that container with its more "personal" symbol-mixture that is molded by the archetype container yet maintains its individual flavor. Thus an archetype is simultaneously universal and particular. Archetypes are those "big dreams" of a culture.

The overriding archetype for Jung is the **Self**, the image of wholeness or individuation. Jung's graphic depiction of the Self is the **mandala**, a circle containing four harmonious parts.



The mandala is beginning and end, perfectly balanced by the four chambers, which composes the unification of the whole Self. Jung's concept of the collective Self, as you can see, is diametrically opposed to Freud's and Lacan's fractured and split individual self. According to Jung each person wears an outward face to the world, a **mask or persona**, while the inward face contains the **shadow** and the anima/animus. The shadow is the dark side of the Self that we all hope to hide; it is also the "moral problem" that the Self must grapple with on its way to wholeness. The Self must eventually recognize its shadow as part of its nature. The *doppelgänger* is the German literary term for the double, and it captures the dark side of the human. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) is a prototypical story of the double; it focuses on the experiences of the mannered Dr. Henry Jekyll and his alter ego, the beastly Mr. Hyde. Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886; Project Gutenberg, 2011), <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/42/pg42.html>. Stevenson's novel famously suggests that the shadow resides naturally in the Self, though the Self wears a mask to hide that shadow side to the world and to the Self.



Classics Illustrated cover for Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1943).

Furthermore, every Self has its own masculine or feminine counterpart to the personality: the **anima** is the female part of the male; the **animus** is the masculine part of the female. The anima embodies Eros—desire—a maternal archetype that is both positive (the nurturing mother) and negative (the devouring witch). Anima archetypes include the Great Mother, the Tempting Whore, and the Destroying Crone. Conversely, the animus embodies Logos—reason—and is paternal, symbolized by the Great Father, the Wise Old Man, the Lover, and the Destroying Angel archetypes. Both anima and animus have positive and negative dimensions. As the shadow side of the Self is usually hidden or repressed inside, the anima or animus side of the Self is also internalized and hidden, for the Self is unwilling to recognize its feminine or masculine side. That is why the Self will project its opposite onto others, which explains erotic heterosexual love: the male and female are united, finding their anima or animus completed by their partner. Jung falls into the same trap as Freud to a degree—they both make essentialist assumptions about gender.

Since the goal of the Self is harmony, as seen in the mandala, the Self undertakes the archetypal quest to achieve **syzygy**, the fulfillment of unity, of balance. Jung fathoms that the **myths** of a culture highlight the Self’s quest for completeness, symbolized by the mandala, and the quaternion Christ is the ideal unified Self, containing Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and Mary (thus balancing the anima and animus). Unlike Freud, who saw no value in religion, Jung’s theory is cemented in religion, with the Self a reflection of God. The quest to find the Self, consequently, is a quest for God within the Self, symbolized by Christ, the purest archetype of the God-in-the-human-self. The quest for the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend, for example, symbolizes search for the unity of Self and God. Such a quest becomes the foundation for a culture’s archetype, this archetype being a variation of the “big dream” of the collective unconscious, the grand archetype.

But how can you apply Jung to literary criticism? In “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry” (1922), Jung explains how literature and the writer operate under the archetype. Carl Jung, “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” in *Twentieth Century Theories of Art*, ed. James M. Thompson (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1999), 151–67. Literature is not necessarily based on the personal unconscious of the writer, but on the unconscious mythology that is part of the collective unconsciousness. A writer, then, draws from the collective unconscious for the archetype. Literature is a powerful tool that operates like myth, ritual, and religion.

Other critics have adapted Jungian ideas. Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), an anthropological compendium of cross-cultural myths, complements Jung’s theories of myth. Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1922; Project Gutenberg, 2003), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3623>. Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) positions Jung in his definition of the monomyth—the departure, initiation, and return of the hero who finds completeness and wholeness during the quest. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008). George Lucas, for example, wrote the original *Star Wars Trilogy* as a modern myth that exemplifies Campbell’s archetypal patterns. Darth Vader, the dark side of the Self, must be confronted, while the need for balance and control and harmony is found in Ben Kenobi’s “force,” which Luke Skywalker must master in order to confront his dark side, his Self, his father. *Star Wars Trilogy: Episode IV, A New Hope; Episode V, The Empire Strikes Back; and Episode VI, Return of the Jedi*, directed by George Lucas (1980; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2004), DVD. The most recent example of this myth is seen in Harry Potter’s confrontation with Voldemort.

Jungian criticism is often applied to literature that is considered more mythic—fairy tales, fantasy, and medieval romances. In *Fairy Tales: Allegories of Inner Life* (1983), J. C. Cooper argues that “Jack and the Beanstalk” depicts common archetypes of the Fool and Trickster, as Jack moves from the fool (for buying “magic” beans) to the trickster (who can outwit the giant). J. C. Cooper,

Fairy Tales: Allegories of Inner Life (London: Aquarian, 1983). To Cooper, the fairy tale is about the universal pattern where goodness triumphs over evil, where ingenuity and innocence defeat brutality. Cooper's reading is far different than Bettelheim's.

While Jungian criticism is often applied to texts that privilege fantasy over realistic narrative, the theory can find uses in all forms of contemporary literature, as seen in John Neary's recent *Shadows and Illuminations: Literature as Spiritual Journey* (2011), in which he examines the work of writers as diverse as Jonathan Safran Foer, Yann Martel, Toni Morrison, to Jane Hamilton. John Neary, *Shadows and Illuminations: Literature as Spiritual Journey* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

Your Process

1. What aspect of Jung's theory most interests you?
2. How could you take that interest in Jung and apply it to a work of literature?
3. What can you envision as the benefits of such an application?
4. Are there any concerns you might have about your approach?

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7.5: Reading Keats's "Urn" through the Psychoanalytic Lens

THOU still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?
Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!
Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearièd,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea-shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul, to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.
O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

CLASS PROCESS

1. Have your class read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919; Bartleby.com, 1999), <http://www.bartleby.com/101/625.html>.
2. Break up into at least three groups.
3. Assign each group one critic: Freud, Lacan, or Jung.
4. Have them discuss ways to apply their theory to the poem.
5. Have them develop a claim about the poem that uses the theory.
6. Bring the class back together and have groups present their theories.
7. Engage in a larger group discussion about psychoanalytic literary criticism.
8. Now look at the following overview and compare with your class discussion.

Keats's "Urn," as you have discovered, lends itself well to the psychoanalytic perspective. Compare the classroom discussion with some critical applications of psychoanalytic theory to Keats's poem. Leon Waldoff in *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (1985), for example, demonstrates how Keats's loss of family members creates "feelings of separation anxiety," especially the loss of his mother and brother Tom. Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). This loss becomes manifest in "an unconscious determinant" that creates key symbols in Keats's odes, the Grecian urn being an example. Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). The urn symbolizes, argues Waldoff, an "undying longing for permanence" that symbolizes an "unending quest conducted at the deepest levels of the mind by the silent work of the imagination, which repeatedly seeks to heal an insistent sense of loss and to deal with its more conscious complement—a penetrating awareness of the transience of human life and a concern with philosophical questions raised by that awareness." Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). The urn, like the other artifacts in Keats's odes (nightingale, autumn, melancholy), shows "the fundamental impossibility of controlling imagination and the desire impelling it toward a finer conception of its object." Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Waldoff contends Keats's melancholia that results from familial loss "provides a structure or context within which the unconscious processes evident in the poetry may be seen to work with cohesion and unity of purpose in the direction they give to the imagination." Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Keats's life, then, is the key subtext that is the foundation of the odes.

A Lacanian reading could extend Waldoff's argument: the poet, unable to regain the lost past, attempts through poetry to fulfill this desire for his mother and brothers. The urn is an object of desire—*objet petit a*—that acts as a temporary anchoring point for the poet. However, since the poem generates meaning through language, and since language cannot fulfill desire, the urn image ultimately fails to fulfill; it is a “Cold Pastoral.” Keats's repetition of the word *happy* in stanza three—“More happy love! more happy, happy love”; “Ah, happy, happy boughs”; “And happy melodist”—reflects the emptiness of language that tries to capture true desire. *Happy* can only approximate “happiness,” the signified that the poet wishes to convey. In a sense, Keats's poem attempts to reach the Real to satiate the longing to move from the Symbolic realm that continually frustrates fulfillment.

Finally, in *The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats's Odes* (1964), Katharine M. Wilson provides a Jungian interpretation of the odes. She argues that Keats's odes are attempts to tap into the archetypal collective unconsciousness, for poetry works by “images...which come from the deeper layers of the poet's psyche, rather than from his superficial observation, or from his personal unconscious.” Katharine M. Wilson, *The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats's Odes* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964). The odes are Keats's “quest for the Self.” In “Urn,” in particular, “beauty for Keats was entangled with intimation of the Self”; thus beauty's “permanence lies in the realm of the psyche.” “The urn is like a frozen archetype,” argues Wilson. “It is a permanent object passed from generation to generation of sorrowing humanity, but has fixed on its objects of beauty.” Katharine M. Wilson, *The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats's Odes* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964). The urn, consequently, as frozen archetype epitomizes truth and beauty that resides in the Self, that Self tapping the larger collective unconscious for its images.

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7.6: Suggestions for Further Reading

Sources by and about Freud

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Dor, Joël. *Introduction to the Readings of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language*. New York: Other Press, 1998.

Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Mellard, James M. *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel. *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

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Jung, Carl. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Vol. 9, Part 1 of *Collected Works*. 2nd ed. Edited by Gerhard Adler. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Drama

8.1: Drama as a Genre

8.2: Elements of Drama

8.3: A One-Act Play

8.4: Trifles by Susan Glaspell

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8.1: Drama as a Genre

Like fiction, drama features characters caught up in a plot. In fact, some plays have been based on novels, and novels on plays. Yet, whereas the narrator of a novel can spend pages painting a picture of the story's circumstances for the reader, a play is restricted to the space of the stage and the time frame of a couple of hours. What strategies are available to the playwright to ensure that the play successfully conveys its intended effects and themes?

To provide the story's setting, a play requires sets. If you've ever been involved with a play, you know that the set can be made up of detailed backdrops, specifically designed props, strategic lighting, and sometimes even background noise. A set, along with the characters' subtle indications of the scene, can generate a full setting in the audience's imagination. Another difference between fiction and drama is that usually a play's plot is primarily forwarded through dialogue and action. Although a novel's narrator can describe in detail the thoughts and impressions of its characters, a play's effects depend much more heavily on what the characters say and do. A play is a performance, a spectacle, rather than words on paper. Some plays do include a narrator or a chorus, to introduce the scene or set the tone of the play, but the bulk of the production's effect is generated through the dialogue and its visual devices, and since the play's script dictates what the characters will say and often, through stage direction, its production strategies as well, the script is crucial to a successful performance.

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8.2: Elements of Drama

Formal Elements of Drama

The elements of fiction discussed in Module 2 — **plot** , **character** , **setting** , **conflict** , and **theme** — can be applied to drama. An additional concept to consider relating to the plot of a play is the common convention of the play beginning in the middle of the action. The Greeks referred to this convention as *in medias res* — literally — “in the midst of things.”™ A literary advantage for drama beginning *in medias res* is that without an exposition, the dramatic tension and conflict is presented immediately to the audience, which is more conducive to live performance.

An **act** is a major division in the action of the play, often used to demarcate key parts of the plot. Plays may have only one or as many as five or more acts. A **scene** is a smaller unit within an act, often signaled by the entrance or exit of a character or change in setting or focus of the action.

When analyzing **character** , the terms **dialogue** , **monologue** , and **soliloquy** take on increased importance. Conversation between two or more characters is referred to as **dialogue** (usually the majority of speech in plays consists of dialogue). A **monologue** is when one character delivers a speech to convey his or her thoughts, although other characters may remain on stage in scene. Similar to a monologue, **soliloquy** is a speech made by one character but delivered when he or she is alone on stage. Knowing the root words of each term can help clarify the distinction. Monologue comes from the Greek words *monos* (single) and *legein* (to speak); soliloquy comes from the Latin words *solus* (alone) and *loqui* (to speak).

Clearly the **setting** of a play takes on extra importance as readers can pay close attention to the staging, costuming, and other directorial notes included in the text of the play. For example, the content of one scene can be set in an incongruous location or a character might be wearing a costume that contradicts the actions he is performing, thus resulting in **dramatic irony** . Understanding the subtleties between what is written as dialogue to be spoken by the actors and what is written to be gestured or achieved through **lighting** , **scenery** , **costumes** , **props** , and other elements of staging is critical for interpreting the meaning of a given scene. (The professional term for staging a character’s movements and position on the stage is known as **blocking** .)

As always, attention to the use of **figurative language** whether presented in dialogue between characters or in monologue or soliloquy, will end layers of depth and add compelling specificity to any analysis — and a robust consideration of the historical **context** including relevant social issues or cultural norms (or resistance to those norms) represented directly or indirectly in the play will demonstrate a more advanced level of critical thinking. ⁽¹⁾

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SECTION OVERVIEW

8.3: A One-Act Play

Although the following script is only that, a script, it does give us a place to start as we investigate drama as a genre. *Trifles* is a one-act play, which is a drama that can usually be performed in an hour or less and in which the entire story is performed in one act as opposed to several. Although a one *act* play can contain scene changes, this one only employs one scene.

In *Trifles*, Glaspell employs some round characters and some flat, or stock, characters. Round, complex characters, like Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale, and Mrs. Peters, reflect the complicated personalities and experiences that most of us can identify with. When Mrs. Peters seems torn between following the wishes of her husband, who represents the law, and showing sympathy with Mrs. Wright, we understand her conflict. Most of us have encountered similar conflicts in our daily lives. However, we tend to dislike Mr. Henderson, partly because he insults Mrs. Wright, but also, notably, because he is a flat character. He does not reveal the capacity or the habit of complex thought, but rather reacts to his surroundings based on his stereotype-based assumptions. Since the male characters represent dominant male society, including familiar patriarchs (Mr. Wright is the authority in his house), a society in which women have not yet been granted the right to vote, and a legal system that does not recognize women as full citizens, they are sustained as flat. While it may seem that the use of flat characters would yield a weak play, it is important to consider why writers use flat characters at all. Since these characters carry with them a ready-made impression, less dialogue has to be devoted to developing them, thereby creating more dialogue-space for other important characters or ideas. In this short play, most of the script focuses on the dialogue and actions of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, allowing Glaspell to develop the theme successfully.

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8.4: Trifles by Susan Glaspell

Published: 1916

CHARACTERS

- GEORGE HENDERSON (County Attorney)
- HENRY PETERS (Sheriff)
- LEWIS HALE, A neighboring farmer
- MRS PETERS
- MRS HALE

SCENE: *The kitchen is the now abandoned farmhouse of JOHN WRIGHT, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleting work. At the rear the outer door opens and the SHERIFF comes in followed by the COUNTY ATTORNEY and HALE. The SHERIFF and HALE are men in middle life, the COUNTY ATTORNEY is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the SHERIFF’S wife first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face. MRS HALE is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly, and stand close together near the door.*

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(rubbing his hands)* This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies.

MRS PETERS: *(after taking a step forward)* I’m not – cold.

SHERIFF: *(unbuttoning his overcoat and stepping away from the stove as if to mark the beginning of official business)* Now, Mr Hale, before we move things about, you explain to Mr Henderson just what you saw when you came here yesterday morning.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: By the way, has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday?

SHERIFF: *(looking about)* It’s just the same. When it dropped below zero last night I thought I’d better send Frank out this morning to make a fire for us – no use getting pneumonia with a big case on, but I told him not to touch anything except the stove – and you know Frank.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Somebody should have been left here yesterday.

SHERIFF: Oh – yesterday. When I had to send Frank to Morris Center for that man who went crazy – I want you to know I had my hands full yesterday. I knew you could get back from Omaha by today and as long as I went over everything here myself –

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, Mr Hale, tell just what happened when you came here yesterday morning.

HALE: Harry and I had started to town with a load of potatoes. We came along the road from my place and as I got here I said, I’m going to see if I can’t get John Wright to go in with me on a party telephone. I spoke to Wright about it once before and he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet—I guess you know about how much he talked himself; but I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, though I said to Harry that I didn’t know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John –

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Let’s talk about that later, Mr Hale. I do want to talk about that, but tell now just what happened when you got to the house.

HALE: I didn’t hear or see anything; I knocked at the door, and still it was all quiet inside. I knew they must be up, it was past eight o’clock. So I knocked again, and I thought I heard somebody say, ‘Come in.’ I wasn’t sure, I’m not sure yet, but I opened the door—this door *(indicating the door by which the two women are still standing)* and there in that rocker – *(pointing to it)* sat Mrs Wright.

(They all look at the rocker.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: What – was she doing?

HALE: She was rockin’ back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of – pleating it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And how did she – look?

HALE: Well, she looked queer.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How do you mean – queer?

HALE: Well, as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of done up.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How did she seem to feel about your coming?

HALE: Why, I don't think she minded – one way or other. She didn't pay much attention. I said, 'How do, Mrs Wright it's cold, ain't it?' And she said, 'Is it?' – and went on kind of pleating at her apron. Well, I was surprised; she didn't ask me to come up to the stove, or to set down, but just sat there, not even looking at me, so I said, 'I want to see John.' And then she – laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh. I thought of Harry and the team outside, so I said a little sharp: 'Can't I see John?' 'No', she says, kind o' dull like. 'Ain't he home?' says I. 'Yes', says she, 'he's home'. 'Then why can't I see him?' I asked her, out of patience. 'Cause he's dead', says she. 'Dead?' says I. She just nodded her head, not getting a bit excited, but rockin' back and forth. 'Why – where is he?' says I, not knowing what to say. She just pointed upstairs—like that (*himself pointing to the room above*) I got up, with the idea of going up there. I walked from there to here—then I says, 'Why, what did he die of?' 'He died of a rope round his neck', says she, and just went on pleatin' at her apron. Well, I went out and called Harry. I thought I might – need help. We went upstairs and there he was lyin' –

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I think I'd rather have you go into that upstairs, where you can point it all out. Just go on now with the rest of the story.

HALE: Well, my first thought was to get that rope off. It looked ... (*stops, his face twitches*) ... but Harry, he went up to him, and he said, 'No, he's dead all right, and we'd better not touch anything.' So we went back down stairs. She was still sitting that same way. 'Has anybody been notified?' I asked. 'No', says she unconcerned. 'Who did this, Mrs Wright?' said Harry. He said it business-like—and she stopped pleatin' of her apron. 'I don't know', she says. 'You don't know?' says Harry. 'No', says she. 'Weren't you sleepin' in the bed with him?' says Harry. 'Yes', says she, 'but I was on the inside'. 'Somebody slipped a rope round his neck and strangled him and you didn't wake up?' says Harry. 'I didn't wake up', she said after him. We must 'a looked as if we didn't see how that could be, for after a minute she said, 'I sleep sound'. Harry was going to ask her more questions but I said maybe we ought to let her tell her story first to the coroner, or the sheriff, so Harry went fast as he could to Rivers' place, where there's a telephone.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And what did Mrs Wright do when she knew that you had gone for the coroner?

HALE: She moved from that chair to this one over here (*pointing to a small chair in the corner*) and just sat there with her hands held together and looking down. I got a feeling that I ought to make some conversation, so I said I had come in to see if John wanted to put in a telephone, and at that she started to laugh, and then she stopped and looked at me – scared, (*the COUNTY ATTORNEY, who has had his notebook out, makes a note*) I dunno, maybe it wasn't scared. I wouldn't like to say it was. Soon Harry got back, and then Dr Lloyd came, and you, Mr Peters, and so I guess that's all I know that you don't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*looking around*) I guess we'll go upstairs first – and then out to the barn and around there, (*to the SHERIFF*) You're convinced that there was nothing important here – nothing that would point to any motive.

SHERIFF: Nothing here but kitchen things.

(*The COUNTY ATTORNEY, after again looking around the kitchen, opens the door of a cupboard closet. He gets up on a chair and looks on a shelf. Pulls his hand away, sticky.*)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Here's a nice mess.

(*The women draw nearer.*)

MRS PETERS: (*to the other woman*) Oh, her fruit; it did freeze, (*to the LAWYER*) She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

SHERIFF: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.

(The two women move a little closer together.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(with the gallantry of a young politician)* And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies? *(the women do not unbend. He goes to the sink, takes a dipperful of water from the pail and pouring it into a basin, washes his hands. Starts to wipe them on the roller-towel, turns it for a cleaner place)* Dirty towels! *(kicks his foot against the pans under the sink)* Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?

MRS HALE: *(stiffly)* There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: To be sure. And yet *(with a little bow to her)* I know there are some Dickson county farmhouses which do not have such roller towels. *(He gives it a pull to expose its length again.)*

MRS HALE: Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Ah, loyal to your sex, I see. But you and Mrs Wright were neighbors. I suppose you were friends, too.

MRS HALE: *(shaking her head)* I've not seen much of her of late years. I've not been in this house – it's more than a year.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And why was that? You didn't like her?

MRS HALE: I liked her all well enough. Farmers' wives have their hands full, Mr Henderson. And then –

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes – ?

MRS HALE: *(looking about)* It never seemed a very cheerful place.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No – it's not cheerful. I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't know as Wright had, either.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: You mean that they didn't get on very well?

MRS HALE: No, I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'd like to talk more of that a little later. I want to get the lay of things upstairs now. *(He goes to the left, where three steps lead to a stair door.)*

SHERIFF: I suppose anything Mrs Peters does'll be all right. She was to take in some clothes for her, you know, and a few little things. We left in such a hurry yesterday.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes, but I would like to see what you take, Mrs Peters, and keep an eye out for anything that might be of use to us.

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mr Henderson.

(The women listen to the men's steps on the stairs, then look about the kitchen.)

MRS HALE: I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticising.

(She arranges the pans under sink which the LAWYER had shoved out of place.)

MRS PETERS: Of course it's no more than their duty.

MRS HALE: Duty's all right, but I guess that deputy sheriff that came out to make the fire might have got a little of this on. *(gives the roller towel a pull)* Wish I'd thought of that sooner. Seems mean to talk about her for not having things slicked up when she had to come away in such a hurry.

MRS PETERS: *(who has gone to a small table in the left rear corner of the room, and lifted one end of a towel that covers a pan)* She had bread set. *(Stands still.)*

MRS HALE: *(eyes fixed on a loaf of bread beside the bread-box, which is on a low shelf at the other side of the room. Moves slowly toward it)* She was going to put this in there, *(picks up loaf, then abruptly drops it. In a manner of returning to familiar things)* It's a shame about her fruit. I wonder if it's all gone. *(gets up on the chair and looks)* I think there's some here that's all right, Mrs Peters. Yes – here; *(holding it toward the window)* this is cherries, too. *(looking again)* I declare I believe that's the only one. *(gets down, bottle in her hand. Goes to the sink and wipes it off on the outside)* She'll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer.

(She puts the bottle on the big kitchen table, center of the room. With a sigh, is about to sit down in the rocking-chair. Before she is seated realizes what chair it is; with a slow look at it, steps back. The chair which she has touched rocks back and forth.)

MRS PETERS: Well, I must get those things from the front room closet, *(she goes to the door at the right, but after looking into the other room, steps back)* You coming with me, Mrs Hale? You could help me carry them.

(They go in the other room; reappear, MRS PETERS carrying a dress and skirt, MRS HALE following with a pair of shoes.)

MRS PETERS: My, it's cold in there.

(She puts the clothes on the big table, and hurries to the stove.)

MRS HALE: *(examining the skirt)* Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn't do her part, and then you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby. She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that – oh, that was thirty years ago. This all you was to take in?

MRS PETERS: She said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want, for there isn't much to get you dirty in jail, goodness knows. But I suppose just to make her feel more natural. She said they was in the top drawer in this cupboard. Yes, here. And then her little shawl that always hung behind the door. *(opens stair door and looks)* Yes, here it is.

(Quickly shuts door leading upstairs.)

MRS HALE: *(abruptly moving toward her)* Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Do you think she did it?

MRS PETERS: *(in a frightened voice)* Oh, I don't know.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit.

MRS PETERS: *(starts to speak, glances up, where footsteps are heard in the room above. In a low voice)* Mr Peters says it looks bad for her. Mr Henderson is awful sarcastic in a speech and he'll make fun of her sayin' she didn't wake up.

MRS HALE: Well, I guess John Wright didn't wake when they was slipping that rope under his neck.

MRS PETERS: No, it's strange. It must have been done awful crafty and still. They say it was such a – funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that.

MRS HALE: That's just what Mr Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that's what he can't understand.

MRS PETERS: Mr Henderson said coming out that what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or – sudden feeling.

MRS HALE: *(who is standing by the table)* Well, I don't see any signs of anger around here, *(she puts her hand on the dish towel which lies on the table, stands looking down at table, one half of which is clean, the other half messy)* It's wiped to here, *(makes a move as if to finish work, then turns and looks at loaf of bread outside the breadbox. Drops towel. In that voice of coming back to familiar things.)* Wonder how they are finding things upstairs. I hope she had it a little more red-up up there. You know, it seems kind of sneaking. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!

MRS PETERS: But Mrs Hale, the law is the law.

MRS HALE: I s'pose 'tis, *(unbuttoning her coat)* Better loosen up your things, Mrs Peters. You won't feel them when you go out.

(MRS PETERS takes off her fur tippet, goes to hang it on hook at back of room, stands looking at the under part of the small corner table.)

MRS PETERS: She was piecing a quilt. *(She brings the large sewing basket and they look at the bright pieces.)*

MRS HALE: It's log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn't it? I wonder if she was goin' to quilt it or just knot it?

(Footsteps have been heard coming down the stairs. The SHERIFF enters followed by HALE and the COUNTY ATTORNEY.)

SHERIFF: They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it! *(The men laugh, the women look abashed.)*

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*rubbing his hands over the stove*) Frank's fire didn't do much up there, did it? Well, let's go out to the barn and get that cleared up. (*The men go outside.*)

MRS HALE: (*resentfully*) I don't know as there's anything so strange, our takin' up our time with little things while we're waiting for them to get the evidence. (*she sits down at the big table smoothing out a block with decision*) I don't see as it's anything to laugh about.

MRS PETERS: (*apologetically*) Of course they've got awful important things on their minds.

(*Pulls up a chair and joins MRS HALE at the table.*)

MRS HALE: (*examining another block*) Mrs Peters, look at this one. Here, this is the one she was working on, and look at the sewing! All the rest of it has been so nice and even. And look at this! It's all over the place! Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!

(*After she has said this they look at each other, then start to glance back at the door. After an instant MRS HALE has pulled at a knot and ripped the sewing.*)

MRS PETERS: Oh, what are you doing, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: (*mildly*) Just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good. (*threading a needle*) Bad sewing always made me fidgety.

MRS PETERS: (*nervously*) I don't think we ought to touch things.

MRS HALE: I'll just finish up this end. (*suddenly stopping and leaning forward*) Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: What do you suppose she was so nervous about?

MRS PETERS: Oh—I don't know. I don't know as she was nervous. I sometimes sew awful queer when I'm just tired. (MRS HALE *starts to say something, looks at MRS PETERS, then goes on sewing*) Well I must get these things wrapped up. They may be through sooner than we think, (*putting apron and other things together*) I wonder where I can find a piece of paper, and string.

MRS HALE: In that cupboard, maybe.

MRS PETERS: (*looking in cupboard*) Why, here's a bird-cage, (*holds it up*) Did she have a bird, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Why, I don't know whether she did or not – I've not been here for so long. There was a man around last year selling canaries cheap, but I don't know as she took one; maybe she did. She used to sing real pretty herself.

MRS PETERS: (*glancing around*) Seems funny to think of a bird here. But she must have had one, or why would she have a cage? I wonder what happened to it.

MRS HALE: I s'pose maybe the cat got it.

MRS PETERS: No, she didn't have a cat. She's got that feeling some people have about cats – being afraid of them. My cat got in her room and she was real upset and asked me to take it out.

MRS HALE: My sister Bessie was like that. Queer, ain't it?

MRS PETERS: (*examining the cage*) Why, look at this door. It's broke. One hinge is pulled apart.

MRS HALE: (*looking too*) Looks as if someone must have been rough with it.

MRS PETERS: Why, yes.

(*She brings the cage forward and puts it on the table.*)

MRS HALE: I wish if they're going to find any evidence they'd be about it. I don't like this place.

MRS PETERS: But I'm awful glad you came with me, Mrs Hale. It would be lonesome for me sitting here alone.

MRS HALE: It would, wouldn't it? (*dropping her sewing*) But I tell you what I do wish, Mrs Peters. I wish I had come over sometimes when *she* was here. I – (*looking around the room*) – wish I had.

MRS PETERS: But of course you were awful busy, Mrs Hale – your house and your children.

MRS HALE: I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful – and that's why I ought to have come. I – I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now – (*shakes her head*)

MRS PETERS: Well, you mustn't reproach yourself, Mrs Hale. Somehow we just don't see how it is with other folks until – something comes up.

MRS HALE: Not having children makes less work – but it makes a quiet house, and Wright out to work all day, and no company when he did come in. Did you know John Wright, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not to know him; I've seen him in town. They say he was a good man.

MRS HALE: Yes – good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, Mrs Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him – (*shivers*) Like a raw wind that gets to the bone, (*pauses, her eye falling on the cage*) I should think she would 'a wanted a bird. But what do you suppose went with it?

MRS PETERS: I don't know, unless it got sick and died.

(*She reaches over and swings the broken door, swings it again, both women watch it.*)

MRS HALE: You weren't raised round here, were you? (*MRS PETERS shakes her head*) You didn't know – her?

MRS PETERS: Not till they brought her yesterday.

MRS HALE: She – come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself – real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and – fluttery. How – she – did – change. (*silence; then as if struck by a happy thought and relieved to get back to everyday things*) Tell you what, Mrs Peters, why don't you take the quilt in with you? It might take up her mind.

MRS PETERS: Why, I think that's a real nice idea, Mrs Hale. There couldn't possibly be any objection to it, could there? Now, just what would I take? I wonder if her patches are in here – and her things.

(*They look in the sewing basket.*)

MRS HALE: Here's some red. I expect this has got sewing things in it. (*brings out a fancy box*) What a pretty box. Looks like something somebody would give you. Maybe her scissors are in here. (*Opens box. Suddenly puts her hand to her nose*) Why – (*MRS PETERS bends nearer, then turns her face away*) There's something wrapped up in this piece of silk.

MRS PETERS: Why, this isn't her scissors.

MRS HALE: (*lifting the silk*) Oh, Mrs Peters – it's –

(*MRS PETERS bends closer.*)

MRS PETERS: It's the bird.

MRS HALE: (*jumping up*) But, Mrs Peters—look at it! It's neck! Look at its neck!

It's all – other side to.

MRS PETERS: Somebody – wrung – its – neck.

(*Their eyes meet. A look of growing comprehension, of horror. Steps are heard outside. MRS HALE slips box under quilt pieces, and sinks into her chair. Enter SHERIFF and COUNTY ATTORNEY. MRS PETERS rises.*)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*as one turning from serious things to little pleasantries*) Well ladies, have you decided whether she was going to quilt it or knot it?

MRS PETERS: We think she was going to – knot it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, that's interesting, I'm sure. (*seeing the birdcage*) Has the bird flown?

MRS HALE: (*putting more quilt pieces over the box*) We think the – cat got it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*preoccupied*) Is there a cat?

(MRS HALE *glances in a quick covert way at MRS PETERS.*)

MRS PETERS: Well, not now. They're superstitious, you know. They leave.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (to SHERIFF PETERS, *continuing an interrupted conversation*) No sign at all of anyone having come from the outside. Their own rope. Now let's go up again and go over it piece by piece. (*they start upstairs*) It would have to have been someone who knew just the –

(MRS PETERS *sits down. The two women sit there not looking at one another, but as if peering into something and at the same time holding back. When they talk now it is in the manner of feeling their way over strange ground, as if afraid of what they are saying, but as if they can not help saying it.*)

MRS HALE: She liked the bird. She was going to bury it in that pretty box.

MRS PETERS: (*in a whisper*) When I was a girl – my kitten – there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes – and before I could get there – (*covers her face an instant*) If they hadn't held me back I would have – (*catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly*) – hurt him.

MRS HALE: (*with a slow look around her*) I wonder how it would seem never to have had any children around, (*pause*) No, Wright wouldn't like the bird – a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too.

MRS PETERS: (*moving uneasily*) We don't know who killed the bird.

MRS HALE: I knew John Wright.

MRS PETERS: It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him.

MRS HALE: His neck. Choked the life out of him.

(*Her hand goes out and rests on the bird-cage.*)

MRS PETERS: (*with rising voice*) We don't know who killed him. We don't know.

MRS HALE: (*her own feeling not interrupted*) If there'd been years and years of nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still, after the bird was still.

MRS PETERS: (*something within her speaking*) I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died – after he was two years old, and me with no other then –

MRS HALE: (*moving*) How soon do you suppose they'll be through, looking for the evidence?

MRS PETERS: I know what stillness is. (*pulling herself back*) The law has got to punish crime, Mrs Hale.

MRS HALE: (*not as if answering that*) I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang. (*a look around the room*) Oh, I wish I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?

MRS PETERS: (*looking upstairs*) We mustn't – take on.

MRS HALE: I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be – for women. I tell you, it's queer, Mrs Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things – it's all just a different kind of the same thing. (*brushes her eyes, noticing the bottle of fruit, reaches out for it*) If I was you, I wouldn't tell her her fruit was gone. Tell her it *ain't*. Tell her it's all right. Take this in to prove it to her. She – she may never know whether it was broke or not.

MRS PETERS: (*takes the bottle, looks about for something to wrap it in; takes petticoat from the clothes brought from the other room, very nervously begins winding this around the bottle. In a false voice*) My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a – dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with – with – wouldn't they *laugh!*

(*The men are heard coming down stairs.*)

MRS HALE: (*under her breath*) Maybe they would – maybe they wouldn't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No, Peters, it's all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show—something to make a story about—a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it—

(The women's eyes meet for an instant. Enter HALE from outer door.)

HALE: Well, I've got the team around. Pretty cold out there.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'm going to stay here a while by myself, *(to the SHERIFF)* You can send Frank out for me, can't you? I want to go over everything. I'm not satisfied that we can't do better.

SHERIFF: Do you want to see what Mrs Peters is going to take in?

(The LAWYER goes to the table, picks up the apron, laughs.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out. *(Moves a few things about, disturbing the quilt pieces which cover the box. Steps back)* No, Mrs Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not – just that way.

SHERIFF: *(chuckling)* Married to the law. *(moves toward the other room)* I just want you to come in here a minute, George. We ought to take a look at these windows.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(scoffingly)* Oh, windows!

SHERIFF: We'll be right out, Mr Hale.

(HALE goes outside. The SHERIFF follows the COUNTY ATTORNEY into the other room. Then MRS HALE rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at MRS PETERS, whose eyes make a slow turn, finally meeting MRS HALE's. A moment MRS HALE holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly MRS PETERS throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing. It is too big. She opens box, starts to take bird out, cannot touch it, goes to pieces, stands there helpless. Sound of a knob turning in the other room. MRS HALE snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat. Enter COUNTY ATTORNEY and SHERIFF.)

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(facetiously)* Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to – what is it you call it, ladies?

MRS HALE: *(her hand against her pocket)* We call it – knot it, Mr Henderson.

(CURTAIN)

Susan Keating Glaspell (July 1, 1876 – July 28, 1948) was an American Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, novelist, journalist and actress. With her husband George Cram Cook she founded the Provincetown Players, the first modern American theater company. During the Great Depression she served in the Works Progress Administration as Midwest Bureau Director of the Federal Theater Project.

A prolific writer, Glaspell is known to have composed nine novels, fifteen plays, over fifty short stories and one biography. Often set in her native Midwest, these semi-autobiographical tales frequently address contemporary social issues, such as gender, ethics and dissent, while featuring deep, sympathetic characters who make principled stands.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Writing about Gender and Sexuality - Applying Feminist and Gender Criticism

Learning Objectives

- Understand the theory of feminism.
- Understand the theory of gender criticism, including queer theory and masculinity studies.
- Apply a feminist and/or gender methodology to works of literature.
- Engage in the writing process of a peer writer, including peer review.
- Review and evaluate a variety of feminist and gender papers by peer writers.
- Draft and revise a feminist or gender paper on a literary work.

[9.1: Literary Snapshot- "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"](#)

[9.2: Feminist Theory- An Overview](#)

[9.3: Gender Criticism and Queer Theory](#)

[9.4: Gender Criticism- Masculinity Studies](#)

[9.5: Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

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9.1: Literary Snapshot- "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"

Lewis Carroll, as we found out in previous chapters, is most famous for two books: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). These books describe the adventures of seven-year-old Alice, who finds herself in a nonsensical world of the imagination after she tumbles down a rabbit hole (*Wonderland*) and enters a magic mirror (*Looking-Glass*).

Let's observe the interaction between Alice and the Caterpillar, which comes from chapter 5 of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, "Advice from a Caterpillar":

The Caterpillar was the first to speak.

"What size do you want to be?" it asked.

"Oh, I'm not particular as to size," Alice hastily replied; "Only one doesn't like changing so often, you know."

"I *don't* know," said the Caterpillar.

Alice said nothing; she had never been so much contradicted in all her life before, and she felt that she was losing her temper.

"Are you content now?" said the Caterpillar.

"Well, I should like to be a *little* larger, sir, if you wouldn't mind," said Alice: "three inches is such a wretched height to be."

"It is a very good height indeed!" said the Caterpillar angrily, rearing itself upright as it spoke (it was exactly three inches high).

"But I'm not used to it!" pleaded poor Alice in a piteous tone. And she thought to herself, "I wish the creatures wouldn't be so easily offended!"

"You'll get used to it in time," said the Caterpillar; and it put the hookah into its mouth and began smoking again.

This time Alice waited patiently until it chose to speak again. In a minute or two the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth and yawned once or twice, and shook itself. Then it got down off the mushroom, and crawled away into the grass merely remarking as it went, "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter."

"One side of *what*? The other side of *what* thought Alice to herself.

"Of the mushroom," said the Caterpillar, just if she had asked it aloud; and in another moment it was out of sight.

Alice remained looking thoughtfully at the mushroom room for a minute, trying to make out which were the two sides of it; and as it was perfectly round, she found this a very difficult question. However, at last she stretched her arms round it as far as they would go, and broke off a bit of the edge with each hand

"And now which is which?" she said to herself, and nibbled a little of the right-hand bit to try the effect; the next moment she felt a violent blow underneath her chin: it had struck her foot! She was a good deal frightened by this very sudden change, but she felt that there was no time to be lost, as she was shrinking rapidly; so she set to work at once to eat some of the other bit. Her chin was pressed so closely against her foot that there was hardly room to open her mouth; but she did it at last, and managed to swallow a morsel of the left-hand bit.

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"Come, my head's free at last!" said Alice in a tone of delight, which changed into alarm in another moment, when she found that her shoulders were nowhere to be found: all she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her.

"What *can* all that green stuff be?" said Alice. "And where *have* my shoulders got to? And oh, my poor hands, how is it I can't see you?" She was moving them about as she spoke, but no result seemed to follow, except a little shaking among the distant green leaves.

As there seemed to be no chance of getting her hands up to her head, she tried to get her head down to them, and was delighted to find that her neck would bend about easily in any direction, like a serpent. She had just succeeded in curving it down into a graceful zigzag, and was going to dive in among the leaves, which she found to be nothing but the tops of the trees under which she had been wandering, when a sharp hiss made her draw back in a hurry: a large pigeon had flown into her face, and was beating her violently with its wings.



Illustration by Sir John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

“Serpent!” screamed the Pigeon.

“I’m *not* a serpent!” said Alice indignantly. “Let me alone!”

“Serpent, I say again!” repeated the Pigeon, but in a more subdued tone, and added with a kind of sob, “I’ve tried every way, and nothing seems to suit them!”

“I haven’t the least idea what you’re talking about,” said Alice.

“I’ve tried the roots of trees, and I’ve tried banks, and I’ve tried hedges,” the Pigeon went on, without attending to her; “but those serpents! There’s no pleasing them!”

Alice was more and more puzzled, but she thought there was no use saying anything more till the Pigeon had finished.

“As if it wasn’t trouble enough hatching the eggs,” said the Pigeon; “but I must be on the look out for serpents night and day! Why, I haven’t had a wink of sleep these three weeks!”

“I’m very sorry you’ve been annoyed,” said Alice, who was beginning to see its meaning.

“And just as I’d taken the highest tree in the wood,” continued the Pigeon, raising its voice to a shriek, “and just as I was thinking I should be free of them at last, they must needs come wriggling down from the sky! Ugh, Serpent!”

“But I’m *not* a serpent, I tell you!” said Alice. “I’m a—I’m a—”

“Well! *What* are you?” said the Pigeon. “I can see you’re trying to invent something!”

“I—I’m a little girl,” said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

“A likely story indeed!” said the Pigeon in tone of the deepest contempt. “I’ve seen a good many little girls in my time, but never *one* with such a neck as that! No, no! You’re a serpent; and there’s no use denying it. I suppose you’ll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!”

“I *have* tasted eggs, certainly,” said Alice, who was a very truthful child; “but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.”

“I don’t believe it,” said the Pigeon; “but if they do, why, then they’re a kind of serpent, that’s all I can say.”

This was such a new idea to Alice, that she was quite silent for a minute or two, which gave the pigeon the opportunity of adding, “You’re looking for eggs, I know *that* well enough; and what does matter to me whether you’re a little girl or a serpent?”

“It matters a good deal to *me*,” said Alice hastily; “but I’m not looking for eggs, as it happens; and if I was, I shouldn’t want *yours*: I don’t like them raw.”

“Well, be off then!” said the Pigeon in a sulky tone, as it settled down again into its nest. Alice crouched down among the trees as well as she could, for her neck kept getting entangled among the branches, and every now and then she had to stop and untwist it. After a while she remembered that she still held the pieces of mushroom in her hands, and she set to work very carefully, nibbling it at one and then at the other, and growing sometimes taller and sometimes shorter, until she had succeeded in bringing herself down to her usual height. Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 5, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>.

A major theme that runs throughout Carroll’s fantasies is that of identity—Alice wanders through Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land trying to find out who she is. In this excerpt she pinpoints a key element to her identity—she is a *girl*.

Gender defines who and what we are. If you were to finish the sentence “girls are...” or “boys are...,” you’ll likely discover that we all have unconscious norms—that is, assumptions about girls and boys, about men and women, about husbands and wives. The list could go on. These assumptions, though, socialize or train us into accepting particular gender roles that may not be desirable. For example, the first demarcation we make is whether the baby is a girl or a boy, and then we often associate this biological sexual distinction with given gender distinctions: girls are often put in pink, while boys are in blue. Male and female infants are put in “gender-appropriate” clothing to highlight the sex of the baby. This quick example situates us in feminist and gender criticism, which are powerful theories that allow literary critics to examine sex and gender in various texts. Alice begins to do that for us in the excerpt we just read.

The excerpt also highlights some essential notions about feminist and gender criticism, which we learn more about a bit later in this chapter. As Alice contemplates who she is, the Pigeon dismisses her by saying that she’s “trying to invent something.” That “something,” we find out, is Alice’s gender—she’s a *girl*. In other words, we’ll learn that in feminist and gender criticism, sex and gender are different: sex is a set of the biological markers that define whether someone is female, male, or intersex (having biological characteristics that do not fit neatly into either category), while gender evokes the attitudes a society has toward each sex—that is, how we view a person according to his or her gender. We will also complicate this notion in the section on gender criticism, for the male-female heterosexual dynamic excludes gay and lesbian identity, as well as bisexual and transgendered selves. **LGBTQ** (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) issues are at the heart of a category of gender criticism called queer theory.

In addition, though Alice claims that she is a girl, the Pigeon is adamant about her being a *serpent*, which cleverly calls to mind larger themes in feminist criticism that date back to biblical times. In chapter 3 of Genesis, Eve is tempted by the serpent and subsequently tempts Adam to taste the forbidden fruit, thus violating God’s prohibition and forcing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Gen. 3:1–6 (King James Version). In other words, the Fall of humans supposedly is a result of Eve’s indiscretion. John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667), a central, canonical text in English literature, essentially argues that our fall is Eve’s fault, a heavy burden to place on a woman. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667; University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1993), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/MilPL67.html>. Such a burden is not lost on feminist critics, and a key early examination of female characters and writers in nineteenth-century literature is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which argues that women are often depicted by authors as either pure, virginal creatures or madwomen-demons. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). Nina Auerbach’s *Woman and the Demon* (1982) also plays with this dichotomy. Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

We should add one further dynamic to our discussion about Alice. When she claims that she is a *girl*, Alice also suggests that she is not a *boy*, highlighting the fact that the gender construction of men is important. Masculinity studies focuses on the social construction of maleness and how stereotypes of what is constituted as being male become a profound force on how men (and women) act in society.

Alice's gender issues have not been lost on those interpreting Carroll's books. Tim Burton's reimagining of Alice's story in the film *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) *Alice in Wonderland*, directed by Tim Burton (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD. situates Carroll's narrative as a Victorian matrimonial tale. The film begins with nineteen-year-old Alice (not the seven-year-old of the novel) being confronted with an unwanted marriage proposal; at nineteen, Alice is expected to marry, and to marry well. But Alice has no desire to be wed and escapes her predicament by following the white rabbit down the rabbit hole to the fantastical world, where she encounters a variety of strange creatures and adventures. At the end of the movie, she returns to the real Victorian world and stands up for her right not to wed. She succeeds, and the end of the movie finds her being an apprentice (which is typically reserved for men) in a shipping business where she will travel to China to open trade routes. Burton's film can be seen as a feminist interpretation of Carroll's books, yet it also draws attention to gender expectations of the Victorian age: Do we, for example, know that Alice's suitor really wants to marry her? Or is he, too, being subjected to the gender expectations of men? And what of all those odd characters that Alice meets? The Mad Hatter, for example, is certainly male, but his gender seems polymorphous—he doesn't fit the conventional view of what it means to be a man; in the same way, the Red Queen doesn't fit the conventional view of being a woman.

We've made this short excerpt from *Alice in Wonderland* do a lot of work to introduce the concepts of feminist and gender criticism. So let's follow the example of Humpty Dumpty, who tells Alice that when he makes a word mean multiple things, he always pays it extra: "They've a temper, some of them—particularly verbs, they're the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what *I* say!"

We hope that our chapter on feminist and gender criticism uses words precisely so that these important theories are clear and penetrable.

CLASS PROCESS

1. Have each student in the class keep a "gender log" for one week. In that log have students write down their observations about the gender relationships they see on campus.
2. Do gender stereotypes hold true?
3. What happens when someone defies such stereotypes?

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9.2: Feminist Theory- An Overview

Let's whet our appetite for literature in a different, maybe more peculiar way. Let's read a different text, this one from a local Wisconsin cookbook, the *Amberg Centennial 1890–1990 Cookbook*. American Legion Auxiliary #428, *Amberg Centennial 1890–1990 Cookbook* (n.p.: n.d.). The two recipes come from the section “Game.”

Duck with Wild Rice

2 ducks	1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
1 onion, chopped	1 ½ teaspoons salt
1 (5 ounce) package wild rice	1 (8 ounce) can mushrooms and liquid
½ cup butter	½ cup flour
1 ½ cups half and half	1 (4 ounce) package slivered almonds, toasted
2 ribs celery, chopped	salt and pepper to taste

Boil duck, onion, and celery until tender. Remove meat from bones. Set aside. Cook rice. Set aside. Melt butter and sauté onion. Stir in flour and half-and-half to make cream sauce. Add parsley and seasonings. Add cooked duck, rice, mushrooms, and almonds to cream sauce. Bake mixture in a casserole at 350° for 30–45 minutes. Serves 6–8.

—Mrs. Charles T. Dekuester (Doris Van Vleit)

Bessie's Birds

12 birds (dove or quail)	1 cup beef consommé
1 cup uncooked rice	1 (10–¾ ounce) can onion soup
¼ cup chopped bell pepper	½ cup flour
¼ cup chopped onion	salt and pepper
butter or bacon drippings	

Sauté salted and floured birds in small amount of butter or bacon drippings to brown well. Put rice in bottom of buttered oblong casserole dish. Place birds on top of rice. Sprinkle peppers and onion on top. Pour consommé and onion soup over casserole. Cover casserole with aluminum foil and bake at 350° for 45 minutes. Serves 6.

Chicken may be substituted for the birds.

—Mrs. Hugh Guy (Viola Barette)

CLASS PROCESS

1. Put students in groups of three or four.
2. Have them read the recipes carefully.
3. Have them interpret the recipes as they would examine a story or poem.
4. What “themes” can they find in the recipe text?
5. Generate class discussion, as you are guided by the discussion following the excerpt.

The recipes reflect a particular view of women and their role in the domestic space. In other words, the woman's domain is in the house, her workspace the kitchen, where she will cook for her husband (and by extension the children). Notice that each recipe privileges the male name, with the woman's maiden name—her original name and identity—put in parenthesis. Even the use of *Mrs.* denotes her married status, whereby *Mr.* does not tell us the married status of the male. We are in the realm of **patriarchy**, the condition that demonstrates male domination over women. The recipes are even more interesting, for the section of this cookbook is “Game,” further suggesting particular gender roles: men, the sportsmen, go hunting for this game, while the women, remaining at

home, cook up that game for the family. If we interpret these recipes as we might a piece of literature, we can identify particular themes that represent feminist criticism: women are inferior to men in patriarchy; women's space is the private place of domesticity, the man's space is public (in this case the rugged wild); the woman's identity is determined by her husband's identity (she, like Eve, is dependent on her husband's rib, so to speak).

Now let's look at a literary use of the kitchen as a domestic space. Here is the cast of characters and opening set description for Susan Glaspell's one-act play, *Trifles* (1916). The play was first performed by the Provincetown Players in Massachusetts, with Glaspell playing the role of Mrs. Hale. A year later, Glaspell turned the play into a short story, "A Jury of Her Peers," partly to reach a larger reading audience. The inspiration for the play came from a murder reported in the *Des Moines Register*. Articles on case: www.midnightassassin.com/sgarticles.html.

- GEORGE HENDERSON (County Attorney)
- HENRY PETERS (Sheriff)
- LEWIS HALE, A neighboring farmer
- MRS PETERS
- MRS HALE

SCENE: *The kitchen is the now abandoned farmhouse of JOHN WRIGHT, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleted work. At the rear the outer door opens and the SHERIFF comes in followed by the COUNTY ATTORNEY and HALE. The SHERIFF and HALE are men in middle life, the COUNTY ATTORNEY is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the SHERIFF's wife first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face. MRS HALE is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly, and stand close together near the door.* Susan Glaspell, *Trifles* (1916; Project Gutenberg, 2011), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10623/10623-h/10623-h.htm#TRIFLES>.

The following excerpt is the opening of the short story "A Jury of Her Peers":

WHEN Martha Hale opened the storm-door and got a cut of the north wind, she ran back for her big woolen scarf. As she hurriedly wound that round her head her eye made a scandalized sweep of her kitchen. It was no ordinary thing that called her away—it was probably farther from ordinary than anything that had ever happened in Dickson County. But what her eye took in was that her kitchen was in no shape for leaving; her bread all ready for mixing, half the flour sifted and half unsifted.

She hated to see things half done; but she had been at that when the team from town stopped to get Mr. Hale, and then the sheriff came running in to say his wife wished Mrs. Hale would come too—adding, with a grin, that he guessed she was getting scarey and wanted another woman along. So she had dropped everything right where it was. Susan Glaspell, "A Jury of Her Peers," in *The Best Short Stories of 1917*, ed. Edward J. O'Brien (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1918; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1996), [etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin...ublic&part=all](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/...ublic&part=all).

CLASS PROCESS

1. Have the students read *Trifles*.
2. Ask the students to make a chart on a piece of paper: label the left side "men," the right side "women."
3. Students should then fill in the chart: what symbols are associated with the men and women?

When we turn to the *Trifles* example, we see how a writer uses this domestic space and its implications to create a symbolic statement about gender. The men all have first and last names and are given an occupation (attorney, sheriff, or farmer); the women are only known by their husband's names—they are not even given first names. This naming becomes important in the play, for the suspected murderer Minnie Wright is referred to as Minnie Foster by Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, suggesting that she had lost her identity by marrying her husband, who was a cold and cruel man, even preventing her from singing in the choir or having a telephone in the house (see Gretchen Panzer's sample paper on voice in *The Great Gatsby* later in the chapter).

Furthermore, the setting of the play is important—all the action on stage takes place in the kitchen, a kitchen that is in disarray. The men, of course, view the messy kitchen as a fault of Minnie's: she just isn't a very good housewife and housekeeper, for that is her primary role according to the men. To be a housewife, in addition, means that women are only concerned with "trifles," insignificant things. Later in the play and the short story we find out that Minnie's canning—her preserves—have been ruined

because the jars have frozen and burst. Again, the men see this as sloppy housekeeping, while the women view the preserves as Minnie's hard work to care for her family. The idea of "preserves" or "preservation" becomes a central theme in Glaspell's work, for Minnie must preserve her dignity as a woman, even if it means that she must murder her husband. The great irony of the play and short story is that the women discover the evidence—the strangled bird—that would be enough to convict Minnie of murder, but they withhold this evidence, thus implying that Minnie will be set free. The women create their own justice system, becoming a jury of their peers: women.

Feminism is a powerful literary theory that is dedicated to social and political change. "How to define feminism? Ah, that is the question," a befuddled Hamlet might ask. A useful definition can be found in Michael Kimmel and Thomas Mosmiller's *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776–1990: A Documentary History* (1992). They focus on four central points:

1. There is evidence that women are treated differently and unequally.
2. Women are not treated equally in the private and public sphere.
3. If these points are true, then that's wrong and becomes a moral problem.
4. Thus feminism is a commitment to change. Michael Kimmel and Thomas Mosmiller, *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776–1990 a Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

CLASS PROCESS

1. On the blackboard or whiteboard, have the students generate examples for points 1 and 2 of the list. This should lead to a spirited discussion.

Two other definitions will be useful to you: Barbara Smith argues that "feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement." from *A History of U.S. Feminisms* by Kory Dicker (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), p. 7. Noted feminist author bell hooks adds, "Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganize society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires." bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto, 2000).

Feminist literary criticism is also about this commitment to equality, to change, and it works its way by arguing that literature is a powerful cultural force that mirrors gender attitudes. Feminist literary criticism can be categorized into three stages: patriarchal criticism, gynocriticism, and feminine writing.

Patriarchal criticism examines the prejudices against women by male writers. Such criticism analyzes the way that canonical authors—mostly men—create images of women. For example, Gretchen Panzer's sample paper in this chapter explores how F. Scott Fitzgerald silences Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, further reinforcing the notion that this great American novel depicts women in demeaning ways. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2003). This criticism is often focused on close textual study since it will examine how men and women are depicted in literary texts. Patriarchal criticism will be central to this chapter.

Gynocriticism is concerned with women writers, particularly in the ways that women writers have become included within the canon. In American literature, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are classic examples; Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, 2nd ed., ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000). these texts, now part of the canon of American literature, have only been seen as such for the past twenty-five years or so. Another interesting example is the evolution of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which reflects the insertion of women into the canon. The edition for 1968, M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968). which covers the Middle Ages, the seventeenth century, the Restoration and the eighteenth century, the Romantic period, the Victorian age, and the twentieth century, includes no women. That's right—not one single woman! The latest (eighth) edition of this anthology, Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996). published thirty-eight years later, includes the following women writers:

- *Middle Ages*: Marie De France and Margery Kempe

- *Sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*: Queen Elizabeth, Mary (Sydney) Herbert, Aemilia Lanyer, Mary Wroth, Katherine Philips, and Margaret Cavendish
- *Restoration and eighteenth century*: Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Frances Burney
- *Romantic period*: Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Felicia Dorothea Hemans
- *Victorian age*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Christina Rossetti
- *Twentieth century*: Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Jean Rhys, Nadine Gordimer, Alice Munro, and Anne Carson

What does it mean, consequently, when there are no representations of women? Historically, if women didn't exist in the canon, then we did not—we could not—study them. But with the rise of the field of women's studies in the 1960s, which introduced the idea of feminist literary criticism, we now value the study of women and their accomplishments, as well as thinking about how gender is constructed and perpetuated generally. This evolution about women and literature is mirrored in the evolving contents of the Norton anthology, which also reflects the evolving canon that is more inclusive, particularly to women writers.

Feminine writing explores the notion that women may write differently than men, suggesting that there may be a “women's writing” that is an alternative to male writing. Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). traces women's writing into three stages. The first stage is **Imitation** or **Feminine** (1840–80), where women imitated men. The classic examples of this are Charlotte and Emily Brontë (of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* fame, respectively), who took on male names—Currer Bell and Acton Bell. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: Norton, 2001); Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: Norton, 2003). To give another famous example, George Eliot, who wrote the Victorian classic *Middlemarch*, was actually Mary Ann Evans. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: Norton, 2000). The second stage of women's writing is **Protest** or **Feminist** (1880–1920), which sees women becoming much more political as writers, reacting directly to male domination in society and literature. Kate Chopin is an example of this stage, as is Virginia Woolf. Finally, the third stage, **Self-Discovery** or **Female** (1920–), becomes more radical as women turn inward toward the female, toward the body, creating works that mirror a writing particular to women.

As you can see, to narrowly define feminist literary criticism is difficult, for there are a myriad of approaches to take. Feminism is often referred to in the plural—feminisms—because there is such diversity within feminism about core terms and philosophies. A useful starting point is *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by [Robyn R. Warhol](#) and [Diane Price Herndl](#). Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997). You can examine the table of contents at www.amazon.com/Feminisms-Anthology-Literary-Theory-Criticism/dp/0813523893#reader_0813523893.

A look at this table of contents will show you the complexity of feminist literary criticism and provide you with some ideas to focus your feminist paper on.

Your Process

1. Choose a literary work to examine: either a male or female writer.
2. Look through the table of contents of *Feminisms* and choose three chapter areas that might lead to a focus for your paper.
3. Write down several possible working thesis ideas for your paper.
4. Remember, you may decide to focus your paper on gender criticism or masculinity studies, which are defined in the Key Terms.

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9.3: Gender Criticism and Queer Theory

Gender criticism is an extension of feminist literary criticism, focusing not just on women but on the construction of gender and sexuality, especially LGBTQ issues, which gives rise to queer theory. Gender criticism suggests that power is not just top down or patriarchal—a man dominating a woman; it suggests that power is multifaceted and never just in one direction. For example, in the nineteenth century while many women argued for suffrage (or the right to vote), at the same time those very women who were white could be dominating or holding power over African Americans in the American slave system. In the nineteenth century, many white women were pictured as angelic, ideal, and the angel in the house who protected men from the cruel world of commerce (see Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House* Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, The Victorian Web, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel>. at <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel>). But that idealized view of women is incomplete given that we know from diaries and other historical evidence that white women could have sexual longing (shocking!), treat others barbarically, or even be sadistic and murderous. Thus identity is complicated and rich, involving much more than gender alone. It is the intersection of a variety of things—including geographical location, age, race, class, nationality, ability, and sexuality as well as gender—that make up our identities.

A key to gender criticism, consequently, is that gender is a socially constructed ideology that is reflected in our culture and political, social, economic, educational, and religious institutions and is coded in the very language we use. For example, the adjective *queer*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*(*OED*) tells us, originally meant something “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric,” the earliest use being from 1513.*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “queer.” Not until 1894, partly a result of the sodomy trial of Oscar Wilde, where he was convicted of being a homosexual and sentenced to prison, “Famous World Trials: The Trials of Oscar Wilde, 1895,” University of Missouri–Kansas City, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/wilde.htm>. did the word *queer* (as an adjective or a noun) come to be associated with homosexuality, and then in a strictly derogatory sense.

Like feminism, gender criticism examines how gender is caught between the notion of **essentialism**—the belief that women are naturally and fundamentally different than men based on their biological sex, that nonheterosexual identities are deviant from the biological heteronormative distinction between male and female—and **constructionism**—the belief that gender is not essentialist or based on biological nature but is constructed through culture. One of the most famous scenes from literature depicting this essentialism versus constructionism debate comes from Mark Twain’s classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At the end of chapter 10, Jim and Huck determine that the best way to find information so that the two can avoid capture is to have Huck put on a disguise and go into the nearby town:

“Next morning I said it was getting slow and dull, and I wanted to get a stirring up some way. I said I reckoned I would slip over the river and find out what was going on. Jim liked that notion; but he said I must go in the dark and look sharp. Then he studied it over and said, couldn’t I put on some of them old things and dress up like a girl? That was a good notion, too. So we shortened up one of the calico gowns, and I turned up my trouser-legs to my knees and got into it. Jim hitched it behind with the hooks, and it was a fair fit. I put on the sun-bonnet and tied it under my chin, and then for a body to look in and see my face was like looking down a joint of stove-pipe. Jim said nobody would know me, even in the daytime, hardly. I practiced around all day to get the hang of the things, and by and by I could do pretty well in them, only Jim said I didn’t walk like a girl; and he said I must quit pulling up my gown to get at my britches-pocket. I took notice, and done better.”Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1995), chap. 10, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>.

In the next chapter, Huck, dressed as a girl, meets Mrs. Judith Loftus. Huck tells her his name is Sarah Williams, and Mrs. Loftus asks Huck-Sarah to help her with a few tasks, such as throwing a piece of lead at a rat and helping with threading a needle. When she tosses an extra piece of lead to Huck-Sarah, his true identity as a boy is exposed. After Huck tells Mrs. Loftus that his name is George, she criticizes his attempt to fool her:

“Well, try to remember it, George. Don’t forget and tell me it’s Elexander before you go, and then get out by saying it’s George Elexander when I catch you. And don’t go about women in that old calico. You do a girl tolerable poor, but you might fool men, maybe. Bless you, child, when you set out to thread a needle don’t hold the thread still and fetch the needle up to it; hold the needle still and poke the thread at it; that’s the way a woman most always does, but a man always does t’other way. And when you throw at a rat or anything, hitch yourself up a tiptoe and fetch your hand up over your head as awkward as you can, and miss your rat about six or seven foot. Throw stiff-armed from the shoulder, like there was a pivot there for it to turn on, like a girl; not from the wrist and elbow, with your arm out to one side, like a boy. And, mind you, when a girl tries to catch anything in her lap she throws

her knees apart; she don't clap them together, the way you did when you caught the lump of lead. Why, I spotted you for a boy when you was threading the needle; and I contrived the other things just to make certain. Now trot along to your uncle, Sarah Mary Williams George Elexander Peters, and if you get into trouble you send word to Mrs. Judith Loftus, which is me, and I'll do what I can to get you out of it. Keep the river road all the way, and next time you tramp take shoes and socks with you. The river road's a rocky one, and your feet'll be in a condition when you get to Goshen, I reckon."Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1995), chap. 11, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>.

Mrs. Judith Loftus views sexuality as essentialist—there are real, innate differences between a girl and boy, which perpetuate the stereotypes about gender. Another way to view her comments, however, is to acknowledge that gender is a performance, a role that we play or construct. If we read Judith's comments in this light, then *Huckleberry Finn* becomes a more enlightened text on gender than one might initially think.

Just as we think gender is constructed, queer theorists argue that sexuality is constructed and not just “natural” as well. Lady Gaga sings, “Baby I was born this way,” but others, like Adrienne Rich, argue that sexuality exists on a continuum and is more fluid than a binary equation of straight or gay. Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227–54. Rich suggests that “**compulsory heterosexuality**,” the drive to make everything heterosexual, shapes our sexual socialization to such an extent that the only choice is to be straight. Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993). Building from Sigmund Freud's ideas on sexuality, sex researcher Alfred Kinsey created the Kinsey scale, which suggests that human sexuality exists on a 0–6 scale, with 0 being exclusively homosexual and 6 being exclusively heterosexual. In all his research, he discovered that most people were somewhere around a 3 (bisexual) and that few people were at either ends of the straight/gay spectrum. “Kinsey's Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale,” Kinsey Institute, <http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/research/ak-hhscale.html>.

In addition, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a prominent queer theorist, suggests culture is so **heteronormative** (making heterosexuality the norm) that gay characters—and, particularly, the affection between men in literature—is rendered invisible and must be routed through a character of the opposite gender to be acceptable. A classic example comes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850); Hester becomes the target as Dimmesdale and Chillingworth work about their male desire by competing for Hester. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; Project Gutenberg, 2005), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/33>. In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Sedgwick coins the term “**homosocial desire**” to refer to relationships between men that are not explicitly sexual, but could actually have erotic components if allowed to exist. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Homosocial worlds include all-male contexts like boarding schools, the military, and sports. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). The recent idea of the “bromance” from films such as *I Love You, Man* (2009) is an example of homosocial expression. It is no accident that we often laugh when using the term “bromance” because it seems ludicrous, given the norms of masculinity in our culture, that men might love one another and express that love as women in female friendships often do. It would require heterosexual men to potentially break out of certain norms of how they are supposed to act. We'll discuss this more in a minute when we talk about masculinity.

This idea that some expressions or identities are invisible and then visible once you have a particular lens to see them (theorists call this ideology) is as important to feminist literary criticism as it is to gender and sexuality criticism. What if we look at Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* anew in a way that focuses on how men might care for and love one another as they are sequestered on this famous, frightening ship, the *Pequod*. Chapter 94, “A Squeeze of the Hand,” finds the whalemens breaking up the spermaceti from a just-harvested sperm whale. Spermaceti is the wax or oil in the skull of the sperm whale, and this oil was valuable and used to make candles and various ointments. Suddenly, Melville's description of the squeezing of the whale sperm takes on an erotic meaning perhaps previously unnoticed. This interpretation changes the way we may traditionally read the book:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings,

why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Harper, 1851; Power Moby-Dick, 1998), <http://www.powermobydick.com/Moby094.html>.

After this paragraph, Ishmael states,

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Harper, 1851; Power Moby-Dick, 1998), <http://www.powermobydick.com/Moby094.html>.

Melville's text flirts with homoerotic desire, but that desire is short-lived as the narrator suggests that men must "lower" their desire to other outlets—"but in the wife."

Ultimately, gender and sexuality theorists go back in history and look at who might have been left out. Where are there absences in the canon such that gay and lesbian authors and characters might be included? And when gay and lesbian characters are present, how are they perceived?

What about a supposedly "straight" text that appears to have a queer subtext previously unseen? For example, Julia Ward Howe was a nineteenth-century author who wrote the famous "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and founded Mother's Day. However, she also wrote a secret novel, *The Hermaphrodite*, which featured a male gender-bending protagonist who loves both sexes but particularly another man. Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite*, ed. Gary Williams (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). Once discovered, this book was a shocking addition to the profile people had created of Howe. Howe's text is considered a "recovered" text and has been brought back into circulation, a common phenomenon in the literature of marginalized groups where texts have disappeared only to be rediscovered and read.

Your Process

1. Can you think of texts where a character is forced into certain roles, behaviors, and actions because of compulsory heterosexuality?
2. Is that character's sexuality more complex than you realized?
3. When you consider sexuality on a continuum, does it change how characters interact?
4. Could your observations lead to a focus for a literary analysis?

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9.4: Gender Criticism- Masculinity Studies

Just as feminist literary criticism and gender and sexuality criticism consider how identity shapes us, so does **masculinity studies** grow out of these fields and consider how men are often forced into what theorist Jackson Katz calls a “**man box**,” or the very narrow box that defines what a “real man” is. Jackson Katz, *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis in Masculinity*, directed by Sut Jhally (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1999), DVD. If you are a sports fan, you will see many “man-box” commercials during a football game, for example, and often the humorous ads are those when a man doesn’t act like a “man.”

In his recent book, *Dude, You’re a Fag* (2012), C. J. Pascoe looks at masculinity and sexuality in high school and examines all the ways that gay baiting (using gayness as a way to taunt someone about nongender- and nonsexuality-conforming behavior) is used to shore up young men’s sense of self. C. J. Pascoe, *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). For example, consider the difference of a girl being called a tomboy or a boy being called a sissy. Which is worse? Typically for a young man to be called a sissy is a kind of social death. Why? When a man is compared to someone who is perceived to have less power, in this instance a woman, then he is considered less manly and, therefore, by implication he must be gay, which creates pressure for men to conform to one idea of maleness. Media representations constantly assert what is proper masculinity, and it typically involves being a violent, hypersexual thug who is never dominated but only dominates.

How does this construction of masculinity affect maleness in literature? Consider Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 2003). The book is narrated by Jake Barnes and concerns the exploits of the Lost Generation after World War I. Jake loves the femme fatale Brett Ashley, but he has been wounded in the war and is impotent. He’s not fully a man. While much of Hemingway’s work is challenged by feminists for being antiwoman, or **misogynist**, particularly in the depiction of Brett Ashley, a masculinity studies reading of the text depicts the unbearable struggle Jake encounters because he can’t fulfill the societal expectations of being a man, which emphasize sexual potency. By reading Jake through a masculinity studies lens, we now have more compassion for Jake, and we may have a more complex view of Hemingway as a writer as we see him grappling with characters who can’t fit neatly into the man box.

We can see more clearly through the lens of masculinity studies how gender norms are not exclusive to women but also affect men, which in turn affects the scope of a text.

Your Process

1. Read Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” (<http://www.bartleby.com/101/720.html>). Robert Browning, “Porphyria’s Lover,” Bartleby.com, <http://www.bartleby.com/101/720.html>.
2. List the attributes of the man and the woman in lines 1–30.
3. Do those attributes for the male narrator change after line 30?
4. How might a reader’s attitude evolve about the narrator using masculinity studies? Do you have more sympathy for the narrator, even though he is a murderer? Is he driven insane by his desire to fulfill his masculinity, whether as he sees himself, as Porphyria sees him, or as society might see him?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Writing about Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Identity

Learning Objectives

- Examine the concerns of scholars working with African American, ethnic, and postcolonial theories.
- Apply various cultural theories to works of literature.
- Review works of poetry and fiction that explore issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity.
- Learn how to respectfully disagree with other scholars within an academic argument.
- Draft and revise a critique of a work of literature based on racial, ethnic, or cultural issues within the work.

[10.1: Literary Snapshot- "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"](#)

[10.2: Postcolonial, Racial, and Ethnic Theory- An Overview](#)

[10.3: Strategies for Starting Your Cultural Identity Paper](#)

Thumbnail: pixabay.com/vectors/martin-l...t-face-155551/

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10.1: Literary Snapshot- "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"

Lewis Carroll, as we found out in previous chapters, is most famous for two books: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). These books follow the adventures of a seven-year-old, Alice, who tumbles down a rabbit hole (*Wonderland*) and enters a magic mirror (*Looking-Glass*), entering a nonsensical world of the imagination. If you have not already read these classic books—or wish to reread them—you can access them at the following links:

<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>

etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/CarGlas.html

In one of the most well-known scenes from *Wonderland*, Alice encounters a Caterpillar sitting on top of a mushroom, “with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah, and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.” Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 4, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>. The two engage in an exchange typical of this novel: their conversation is long, confrontational, and convoluted, as each partner in the conversation fails to understand or be understood by the other:

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

“Who are *you*?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

“What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar sternly. “**Explain yourself!**”

“I can’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, sir,” said Alice, “because I’m not myself, you see.”

“I don’t see,” said the Caterpillar.

“I’m afraid I can’t put it more clearly,” Alice replied very politely, “for I can’t understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.”

“It isn’t,” said the Caterpillar.

“Well, perhaps you haven’t found it so yet,” said Alice; “but when you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will some day, you know—and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you’ll feel it a little queer, won’t you?”

“Not a bit,” said the Caterpillar.

“Well, perhaps your feelings may be different,” said Alice; “all I know is, it would feel very queer to *me*.”

“You!” said the Caterpillar contemptuously. “Who are **you**?”

Which brought them back again to the beginning of the conversation. Alice felt a little irritated at the Caterpillar’s making such *very* short remarks, and she drew herself up and said, very gravely, “I think, you ought to tell me who *you* are, first.”

“Why?” said the Caterpillar.

Here was another puzzling question; and as Alice could not think of any good reason, and as the Caterpillar seemed to be in a *very* unpleasant state of mind, she turned away.

“Come back!” the Caterpillar called after her. “I’ve something important to say!”

This sounded promising, certainly: Alice turned and came back again.

“Keep your temper,” said the Caterpillar.

“Is that all?” said Alice, swallowing down her anger as well as she could.

“No,” said the Caterpillar.

Alice thought she might as well wait, as she had nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might tell her something worth hearing. For some minutes it puffed away without speaking, but at last it unfolded its arms, took the hookah out of its mouth again, and said, “So you think you’re changed, do you?” [bold added] Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 5, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>.

Many readers identify closely with Alice in these scenes. They’re bewildered at the behavior of the creatures Alice encounters and, perhaps, become as frustrated as she does when the citizens of Wonderland talk in circles around her. The “puzzling questions” Alice encounters seem unanswerable, simply nonsense that Alice is right to dismiss.

However, if we think of *Wonderland* as a narrative of encounter—a story of different cultures colliding—we might draw more nuanced conclusions about these scenes. Could we, for instance, read such scenes from the perspective of the inhabitants of Wonderland? How might the Caterpillar think of Alice during their exchanges? Consider these paragraphs:

The Caterpillar was the first to speak.

“What size do you want to be?” it asked.

“Oh, I’m not particular as to size,” Alice hastily replied; “only one doesn’t like changing so often, you know.”

“I *don’t* know,” said the Caterpillar.

Alice said nothing; she had never been so much contradicted in her life before, and she felt that she was losing her temper.

“Are you content now?” said the Caterpillar.

“Well, I should like to be a *little* larger, sir, if you wouldn’t mind,” said Alice: “three inches is such a wretched height to be.”

“It is a very good height indeed!” said the Caterpillar angrily, rearing itself upright as it spoke (it was exactly three inches high).

“But I’m not used to it!” pleaded poor Alice in a piteous tone. And she thought of herself, “I wish the creatures wouldn’t be so easily offended!”

“You’ll get used to it in time,” said the Caterpillar; and it put the hookah into its mouth and began smoking again. Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 5, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>.

The Caterpillar takes offense when Alice suggests that “three inches is such a wretched height to be.” As the story points out, the Caterpillar is “exactly three inches high,” and it is angered that Alice defines the best possible height as her own height, dismissing its body as “wretched” without even considering its feelings. When Alice thinks, “I wish the creatures wouldn’t be so easily offended,” she reveals a feeling of innate superiority over the beings she encounters. Though the Caterpillar speaks with her, it is a “creature” who shouldn’t be “so easily offended” even though she directly insults it.

As we see in Chapter 4, literary scholars are often interested in questions of identity in literary works. In that chapter we discuss identities drawn from gender and sexuality; in this chapter we look at identities drawn from race, ethnicity, and/or cultural background. For scholars interested in literary depictions of race and ethnicity, scenes such as the Caterpillar’s in *Wonderland* can be read as demonstrating problematic attitudes toward minorities within Western cultures or toward people in non-Western societies. Such problematic attitudes are particularly disconcerting when found in widely read, **canonical** stories such as *Wonderland*. Let’s look for a minute at the way the Caterpillar is depicted in the text and in early illustrations of the novel.



Illustration by Sir John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

The Caterpillar is described as “quietly smoking a long hookah” and appears, from behind, almost like a thin man sitting cross-legged while smoking. Keep in mind that *Wonderland* was published in 1865, when the British Empire stretched around the world and was described as a “vast empire on which the sun never sets.” The British Empire in 1865 controlled territories in the Mideast and Asia, including Hong Kong, India, and Singapore. The 1860s were also, as Jon Stratton points out in *Writing Sites: A Genealogy of the Postmodern World*, “the major period of British exploration and colonisation (sic) of Africa.” Jon Stratton, *Writing Sites: A Genealogy of the Postmodern World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 168. You can see how far the British Empire expanded by looking at the red areas (British territories) on this map of the British Empire in 1886.



Map of the world by Captain J.C.R. Colomb and Maclure & Co. Published as a supplement for *The Graphic*, as the “Imperial Federation” (July, 1886).

To its original British readers, then, the Caterpillar would have evoked romanticized images of these “exotic” civilizations, smoking with a device that originated in the Middle East and would have been familiar to British citizens because of their presence in India. By contrast, Alice is drawn as the ideal of a nineteenth-century English girl, with white skin and blonde hair, knowledge of diverse academic subjects such as biology and poetry, and a heightened sense of manners and propriety.

For Stratton, *Wonderland* can be read as a “fantasy of civilising [sic] the natives” as Alice enters “an Other world where people behave differently,” to which she “brings her own standards and manners to bear without any reference to the local set.” Jon Stratton, *Writing Sites: A Genealogy of the Postmodern World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 170. Because Alice believes that her rules and standards are universal and should be obvious to all the people she encounters in Wonderland, she can be seen as a symbol of the British Empire, which worked to impose British standards of education, manners, religion, and politics on the people whose countries they controlled. “Were Alice to lose her place as the arbiter of meaning,” Stratton claims, “she would lose her privileged position in Wonderland,” a place where “colonial Otherness threatens the fixity of meaning by offering alternatives.” Jon Stratton, *Writing Sites: A Genealogy of the Postmodern World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 172. Like the female image of Britannia in the center of the map shown, Alice is surrounded by exotic “natives” who she expects will look to her as a model of civilization.

The Caterpillar disrupts Alice’s presumption of her own authority in Wonderland. He demands to know “Who are you?” and the question confuses and disturbs Alice. She insists, “I think, you ought to tell me who you are, first,” but when the Caterpillar asks her “Why?” she “could not think of any good reason.” Alice maintains a belief in her own superiority—a belief that she should be able to demand answers of the Caterpillar but not the other way around—but her experiences in Wonderland unsettle those beliefs.

Though Alice insists that the citizens of Wonderland are strange or foreign, for the citizens of Wonderland, Alice is the stranger unfairly judging their society and its customs based on her own cultural biases and assumptions.

Interestingly, the **colonial** ideas that are implicit in Carroll's original *Wonderland* become explicit in the latest film adaptation of the novel, Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). At the end of that film, Alice (who is nineteen in Burton's version) decides that she will help her father expand his business to China. As Kevin Slaten points out, this means that Alice will likely be involved in British-Chinese relations during the time of the Opium Wars, a pair of conflicts that decimated many areas along China's coast and led to what Chinese historians deemed a "century of humiliation" for the nation. Kevin Slaten, "Who Else Might Be Mad at Alice? China," *Real Clear World*, March 12, 2010, http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2010/03/12/who_else_might_be_mad_at_alice_china_98853.html. In other words, Burton places Alice in China during a period of colonial aggression, perhaps signaling that Alice's insistence on her authority over the denizens of Wonderland has prepared her to enact such authority on behalf of British trade interests in the "real world." Tim Burton's ending to *Alice in Wonderland* can be seen as a **postcolonial** interpretation of Lewis Carroll's novel: a critique of the politics underlying what seems to be a simple children's story.

Your Process

1. What are some other scenes in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that might read differently if you considered the other characters' perspectives rather than just Alice's?
2. What are some literary works that you think of as "ethnic" or "cultural"—that seem different or foreign to your own experience? Create a list in your notes. Then create a list of works that seem "normal," or familiar to your own experience. Compare your two lists. How is your experience of literature shaped by your own cultural, ethnic, or racial background?

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10.2: Postcolonial, Racial, and Ethnic Theory- An Overview

As you've seen throughout this textbook, the field of English or literary studies has changed significantly through the years. At one time, to study English meant to study only literature from England. In fact, it meant to study, almost exclusively, poetry from England. As we see in Chapter 4, the poetry that English students read for the majority of the field's history was almost exclusively written by men. It may not surprise you to learn that the majority of the men that English students read came from Western cultures and were white. The experiences of minorities (within Western culture) and non-Western people were largely excluded from the canon. When their experiences did appear in widely read books, poems, plays, and essays, their experiences were usually filtered through perspective of a white author.

Over the past decades, many literary scholars have begun working to change this reality. Drawing from a range of disciplines, including history, anthropology, and sociology, these scholars have demonstrated how the literary canon excludes the voices of minority and non-Western writers, thinkers, and subjects. They have exposed attitudes of prejudice within canonical works. They have also worked to recover and celebrate works by writers from previously ignored or denigrated racial and ethnic backgrounds. Though their subjects vary widely—from the African American experience in the United States to those of Indians living under British colonial rule—scholars interested in racial, ethnic, and postcolonial studies share a conviction that literature is not politically neutral. Instead, they argue that literature both reflects and shapes the values of the cultures that produce it and that literary critics have a duty to analyze and often critique the cultural values embedded in the texts we study.



Figure 10.2.1: Illustration by Edward Winsor Kemble for Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

Think, for instance, of the frequent debates that have arisen over Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (you can read *Huck Finn* Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1912; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1995), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>. in its entirety at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Twa2Huc.html>). For years, literary critics, scholars, students, and parents have debated whether the novel, written by a white American man, should be considered racist (and, if so, whether it should be taught in schools). These debates center on three major issues: (1) the novel's depiction of Jim, the runaway slave who is simultaneously the novel's moral center and a frequent object of ridicule; (2) the novel's frequent use of a racial epithet to describe its African American characters; and (3) the heavy dialect through which the speech of black Americans is presented in the book. Schools have frequently debated banning Twain's novel, often in response to the concerns of parents or students. See Gregory Roberts, "'Huck Finn' a Masterpiece—Or an Insult," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 25, 2003, [\[1\]](#). There is no easy solution to these debates. As literary critic Stephen Railton put it nearly thirty years ago: "Is *Huck Finn* racist? Yes and no; no and yes." Stephen Railton, "Jim and Mark Twain: What Do Dey Stan' For?" *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/1987/summerrailton-jim-mark/>. However you feel about this novel, however, these debates illustrate the importance of literary critics considering issues of race, ethnicity, and culture as they read and interpret literature.

Though it has happened more slowly than many cultural critics would like, the literary canon has shifted in the past decades to reflect a wider sense of who writes literature and what we should learn from it. The fact that we study American literature at all reflects an earlier shift away from a strict focus on English writing. Moreover, students in American literature classrooms today

study more writers of color than did students even twenty years ago. Some African American writers are now studied so frequently they could be called canonical, including Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Charles Chesnut, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. American literature classes often cover writing by Native American writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie, and by Hispanic, Chicano/a, or Latino/a American writers such as George Santayana, Isabel Allende, and Gary Soto. Moreover, British literature classrooms now routinely include works by authors from former British colonies, such as Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Jean Rhys (Dominica), Salman Rushdie (India), and Anita Desai (India). Finally, courses in world literature regularly teach minority and/or postcolonial writers who compose in languages other than English.

We recognize that these are incomplete lists. Indeed, even separating authors into these distinct categories can be problematic, as many writers span geographic regions, ethnic identities, or racial backgrounds. Nevertheless, these names can help get us started thinking about the diverse voices that literature classrooms now include. Of course, scholars working in these fields would point out that there is much work yet to be done to build a truly representative curriculum. Though minority and non-Western writers are now studied regularly, they still occupy relatively small places in most literature classrooms and curricula.

Your Process

1. What minority or non-Western writers have been part of your literary education to this point? Jot down a few examples.
2. Now think about how those writers shaped your understanding of our literary inheritance. How did reading those writers change your ideas about literature, culture, or history? How would your literary education have been different with a textbook of thirty years ago that largely excluded nonwhite voices?
3. How does your cultural background shape your response to these questions?

Scholars working in these fields often seek to challenge **Eurocentrism**, which is a worldview that considers European societies (and those closely related to them, such as white American society) as the model to which other societies should aspire. Taking a slightly different focus, the critic Edward Said coined the term **Orientalism**, which refers to a set of false assumptions and stereotypes that Western cultures maintain about societies other than themselves. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994). These **Others** are sometimes portrayed as excessively bad (demonic others) and sometimes as excessively beautiful (exotic others), but neither view actually builds a true picture of non-Western societies or people. In other words, literary critics are wary of texts in which a foreign society is portrayed as ideal, just as they are when a foreign society is portrayed as deprived.

Looking at literature through the lens of social and cultural identity often requires that critics read beyond the surface meanings of texts and think about the ethnic, cultural, and social implications of the words on the page. For instance, let's consider Phillis Wheatley's "On being brought from Africa to America," which was published in her 1773 collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*:

On Being Brought from Africa to America.

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,

Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

"Their colour is a diabolic die."

Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,

May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Denver: W. H. Lawrence, 1887), 17.

Wheatley was a slave, brought to Boston on the slave ship *Phillis* in 1761 and owned by John and Susanna Wheatley, who gave her an education, which was uncommon for slaves at the time. On the surface, Wheatley's poem seems to praise the system of slavery that brought her to America, noting that it was "mercy" that "brought [her] from [her] *Pagan* land." With that latter phrase she

seems to disown her heritage as simply pagan, a “benighted” contrast to the Christian education she has received in the United States. We might even accuse Wheatley of **mimicry**, or attempting to imitate the language and (as you can see in the following engraving) dress of the ruling class.



Figure 10.2.2: Portrait by Scipio Moorehead as a frontispiece to Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects...* (1773).

However, scholars of African American literature might urge us to read the poem as a subtle critique of the American slave system. In her article “A Slave’s Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol,” Sondra O’Neale begins by insisting that “any evaluation of Phillis Wheatley must consider her status as a slave.” O’Neale notes that a slave who wanted to write during this time period “first had to acquire the requisite language skills.” Then “appropriate whites had to authenticate the writer’s mental and moral capacity, and then the slave’s master had to agree that the slave could publish the work. Moreover, the slave’s offering was carefully censored to ensure that it was in no way incendiary.” Sondra O’Neale, “A Slave’s Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol,” *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 144–45. In other words, Wheatley could not write a bald condemnation of slavery; her owners held absolute sway over both her writing and her person, and to be published, she had to write within the constraints imposed on her by whites invested in keeping the slave system intact.

For O’Neale, Wheatley “challenged eighteenth-century evangelicals in their cherished religious arena by redeploing the same language and doctrine that whites had used to define the African, thereby undercutting conventional colonial assumptions about race and skin color.” Sondra O’Neale, “A Slave’s Subtle War: Phillis Wheatley’s Use of Biblical Myth and Symbol,” *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 145. In the poem, Wheatley refers to “Negros, black as Cain.” In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many religious and political commentators taught that African people descended from the biblical Cain, who was cursed by God after murdering his brother, Abel. In the King James Bible, it says “the LORD set a mark upon Cain” to identify him to other people, and many white commentators argued that this mark was a dark skin tone. Gen. 4:15 (King James Version). By associating black people with Cain, whites implied that blacks were inferior people both physically and morally—marked as “other” than whites, whom they considered normal.

Wheatley’s poem reappropriates these ideas into a critique of Christians who refuse to acknowledge the brotherhood of African people: “Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*.” First, the terms “Christian,” “Negroes,” and “black as Cain” are presented in a close sequence, as Wheatley conflates her presumably white readers (“*Christians*”) with herself and her people (“*Negros*, black as *Cain*”). In the next line she insists that black Americans “May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train,” where they would, presumably, stand shoulder-to-shoulder with white Christians. Wheatley notes, “Some view our sable race with scornful eye,” and say “Their colour is a diabolic die,” but she refuses this mischaracterization of her people. They are not “diabolic”—a “demonic other”—but instead equal in potential to white Americans. Though she cannot directly condemn slavery, Wheatley’s poem

simultaneously evokes and calls into the question prejudiced ideas about African Americans. By writing such refined poetry, Wheatley embodies the mental equality of blacks and whites, and in these final lines she insists on that equality. If her readers grant this last concession, however—if they agree that blacks and whites can indeed join the same “angelic train”—then the systems of denigration and oppression they support will be exposed as resting on false pretenses. In other words, we can read Wheatley’s mimicry as subversive. She is an African American writer working within the strict limitations of the slave system to write and distribute poetry that subtly undermines that very system.

Your Process

Read the following Wheatley poem, “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England.” As you read, consider what underlying messages Wheatley might seek to convey, as in the poem we discussed previously. Jot down your ideas.

While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write,
The muses promise to assist my pen;
'Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.
Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
The blissful news by messengers from heav'n,
How Jesus' blood for your redemption flows.
See him with hands out-stretcht upon the cross;
Immense compassion in his bosom glows;
He hears revilers, nor resents their scorn:
What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
When the whole human race by sin had fall'n,
He deign'd to die that they might rise again,
And share with him in the sublimest skies,
Life without death, and glory without end.
Improve your privileges while they stay,
Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
By you be shun'd, nor once remit your guard;
Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.
Ye blooming plants of human race divine,
An Ethiop tells you 'tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,

And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

Wheatley is an interesting example because her work speaks to the concerns of scholars interested in the African American literary tradition and scholars interested in issues of conquest and colonialism. Wheatley wrote, after all, when Massachusetts was a British colony, and she came to Massachusetts after being forcibly seized from her home in either Senegal or Gambia, in West Africa. Next we'll look at another text that can help us understand the concerns of postcolonial critics. Nearly 150 years after Wheatley was captured, Joseph Conrad published one of the most famous works ever written about the African continent, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1993), etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/ConDark.html.

Your Process

1. As we've suggested throughout this text, these process papers will make more sense if you are familiar with the literary work under discussion. For this section, you should read Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, which you can find in full as an e-text provided by the University of Virginia (etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/ConDark.html).
2. As you read, pay particular attention to the way that Conrad portrays relationships between European and African characters in the text.

Though *Heart of Darkness* was written, in part, as a critique of Belgian colonialism and commerce in the Congo, many postcolonialist critics have pointed out that the novella perpetuates attitudes of racism and Eurocentrism through its portrayal of Africans.

Most famously, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe wrote in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" that the novella "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality." Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor, 2012). Achebe notes that few Africans are allowed to speak in Conrad's text. Through most of the novella, he notes, the African characters simply make noises—grunts and babble and sounds. Only two African characters speak: one to express cannibal propensities and another to announce the death of the white enigma, Mr. Kurtz. Achebe insists, despite the stylistic merits of Conrad's work (which he admits are considerable), that "the real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot." Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor, 2012). In other words, Achebe insists that the text's aesthetic qualities cannot and should not redeem its cultural and racial attitudes. Such a commitment to the political and social implications of literature characterizes much ethnic criticism.

If that attitude seems extreme, consider the following excerpt from a 2003 article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*. It's written by Caryl Phillips, who initially met with Achebe to defend Joseph Conrad's writing against Achebe's critiques, but their conversation took another turn:

"I am an African. What interests me is what I learn in Conrad about myself. To use me as a symbol may be bright or clever, but if it reduces my humanity by the smallest fraction I don't like it."

"Conrad does present Africans as having 'rudimentary' souls."

Achebe draws himself upright.

"Yes, you will notice that the European traders have 'tainted' souls, Marlow has a 'pure' soul, but I am to accept that mine is 'rudimentary'?" He shakes his head. "Towards the end of the 19th century, there was a very short-lived period of ambivalence about the certainty of this colonising mission, and *Heart of Darkness* falls into this period. But you cannot compromise my humanity in order that you explore your own ambiguity. I cannot accept that. My humanity is not to be debated, nor is it to be used simply to illustrate European problems."

The realisation hits me with force. I am not an African. Were I an African I suspect I would feel the same way as my host. But I was raised in Europe, and although I have learned to reject the stereotypically reductive images of Africa and Africans, I am undeniably

interested in the break-up of a European mind and the health of European civilisation. I feel momentarily ashamed that I might have become caught up with this theme and subsequently overlooked how offensive this novel might be to a man such as Chinua Achebe and to millions of other Africans. Achebe is right; to the African reader the price of Conrad's eloquent denunciation of colonisation is the recycling of racist notions of the "dark" continent and her people. Those of us who are not from Africa may be prepared to pay this price, but this price is far too high for Achebe. However lofty Conrad's mission, he has, in keeping with times past and present, compromised African humanity in order to examine the European psyche. Caryl Phillips, "Out of Africa," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003...s.chinuaachebe>.

Phillips begins to understand that he shares, to some degree, Conrad's Eurocentric perspective and thus has not to this point understood Achebe's African perspective. When Phillips begins to see how Conrad's focus on the novella's European characters leads him to disregard its African characters, Phillips also begins to accept Achebe's postcolonial critique of the novel.

Your Process

1. Listen to Chinua Achebe's 2009 interview with NPR about *Heart of Darkness* (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/s...ryId=113835207>). Robert Siegel, "Chinua Achebe: 'Heart of Darkness' Is Inappropriate," *All Things Considered*, NPR, audio, October 15, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/s...ryId=113835207>. Can you understand why Achebe, as an African, takes such umbrage at the portrayal of Africans in this canonical novel? Should such concerns shape what we read in literature classrooms?
2. You can read Caryl Phillips's full article about his discussion with Achebe at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003...s.chinuaachebe>. How does Phillips's epiphany square with your own thoughts about Achebe and Conrad?
3. To learn more about postcolonial writers and critics, visit the Postcolonial Web (<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/misc/authors.html>) or read Deepika Bahri's "Introduction to Postcolonial Studies" (<http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Intro.html>). George P. Landlow, "Home Page," The Postcolonial Web, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/>; Deepika Bahri, "Introduction to Postcolonial Studies," Dept. of Postcolonial Studies, Emory University, <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Intro.html>.

To sum up, when you want to read with an eye toward racial, ethnic, or postcolonial issues, you should consider the following questions:

1. How does this work represent different groups of people? Does it valorize one particular culture at the expense of another? Are characters from particular groups portrayed positively or negatively? Does the work employ stereotypes or broad generalizations?
2. How does this work present political power and/or domination? Are there clear lines drawn between conquerors and conquered people in the work? Does the work seem to argue that these lines are appropriate, or does it challenge the divisions between colonizer and colonized?
3. What is the historical or cultural context of the work? Is the story set during a time of conflict or peace? Is the story set in a location where one culture colonized another? Does the story unfold before the colonial period, during the colonial period, or after the colonial period?
4. Can you discern any particular political agendas at work in the text? That is, does the novel, story, poem, play, or essay seem to make an argument about racial relations, ethnic identity, or political oppression?

The theories we outline in this chapter share many concerns but can be applied in many different ways. To that end, we provided three sample papers in this chapter. Each uses a slightly different lens to investigate a given literary text. Please review all the papers since they will prepare you for the chapter's conclusion, which will synthesize the insights of all three papers.

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10.3: Strategies for Starting Your Cultural Identity Paper

This chapter summarizes a range of different ideas about literature that all center on the identity of authors, their characters, and (in part) their readers. In each paper we find a close consideration of the way different groups interact: how they perceive and represent each other, how they talk to and about each other, and how they exert power against each other. Whether discussing the effects of colonialism in nineteenth-century Africa, the perils of assimilation for Native Americans in the early twentieth-century United States, or the economic parallels between slavery and whaling in nineteenth-century America, each paper takes seriously the cultural and political realities that underlie the creation of literature, and each sees literature as a force that can shape those cultural and political realities. When reading literary works, you should be attentive to issues of identity, power, assimilation, and/or prejudice.

If you follow these steps, you'll be well on your way to writing a compelling paper on racial, ethnic, or cultural themes:

1. Consider the racial, ethnic, or cultural background of the author. Do the characters in the work come from a similar background? Does the author come from a colonized or minority population? Conversely, does the author come from an imperial or majority population? Does the work seem intended to address issues particular to the author's background?
2. Consider the history of the work's setting and/or composition. What were the major political realities of the day? Were there major conflicts, settlements, or economic realities that would have shaped the author's or his or her contemporary readers' worldviews? Are the settings in the work familiar to the author's experience, or are they "other" or exotic settings? How might the politics of the day shape the work's themes, images, settings, or characters?
3. Research the reactions of previous critics to the work. Have they noticed particular attitudes toward race, ethnicity, or culture in the text? Do you agree with their assessment, or do you see ideas they have missed? Can you extend, modify, or correct their arguments?
4. Consider the possible readers of the work. How do you think members of the groups represented in the work would feel about the way their race, ethnicity, or culture is represented? If you come from a group depicted in the work you've chosen, how does that depiction make you feel?

In short, you want to ask how the work you are studying represents the identities of the groups it depicts. If you can begin to answer these questions, you'll be well on your way to a cultural analysis of a literary text. Remember that you can write a cultural analysis in many modes: you can celebrate a work's progressive representation of race or you can critique a work's problematic complicity in negative social attitudes. Either way, you can write a compelling argument about race, culture, and ethnicity in literature.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: Writing about Readers - Applying Reader-Response Theory

Learning Objectives

- Understand the theory of reader response, which focuses on the reader's reading experience.
- Apply the reader-response methodology to works of literature.
- Engage in the writing process of a peer writer, including peer review.
- Review and evaluate a variety of reader-response papers by peer writers.
- Draft and revise a reader-response paper on a literary work.

[11.1: Reader-Response Theory- An Overview](#)

[11.2: Focus on Reader-Response Strategies](#)

[11.3: Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

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11.1: Reader-Response Theory- An Overview

Let's begin with the famous opening from Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816): "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her." Jane Austen, *Emma* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2011).

Oh, that Emma Woodhouse. "Handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition," certainly, but also vain, proud, and a mischievous-matchmaker in those things related to love. Not much of a character to base a novel on, the reader might muse. Austen was nervous about her creation of Emma, for as she wrote in a letter: "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." Yet Austen does exactly this: in *Emma*, she creates a character that taxes the reader's patience, one the author recognizes that readers may not like.

Austen's comments on Emma point to the fact that readers identify with characters in a novel. And we can extrapolate further: readers like or dislike what they read; readers are moved to joy, anger, sadness, and so on by a literary work; and readers read literature from a personal level. For an author, this "reader response" is of utmost importance, as Austen most certainly realizes. If readers do not like Emma, do not empathize with her on some emotional level, then they will dislike the novel.

CLASS PROCESS

1. List the literary works that you were told were great or important but that you actually disliked. Your instructor should also share his or her dislikes. This should lead to a lively discussion.

You will see that "likes" and "dislikes" are important markers in reader-response theory. Here's an example: in *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (1984), the author, Fay Weldon, writes to her niece Alice, trying to convince her of the importance of Austen. "You tell me in passing," writes Weldon, "that you are doing a college course in English Literature, and are obliged to read Jane Austen; that you find her boring, petty and irrelevant and, that as the world is in crisis, and the future catastrophic, you cannot imagine what purpose there can be in your reading her." Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011), 11. Weldon responds, "*Emma* opens with a paragraph which sends shivers of pleasure down my spine: it glitters with sheer competence: with the animation of the writer who has discovered power: who is at ease in the pathways of the City of Invention. Here is Emma, exciting envy in the heart of the reader and also, one suspects, the writer—and now, she declares, Emma will be undone; and I, the writer, and you, the reader, will share in this experience." Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011), 96. Weldon, of course, is responding to Austen on a very personal level—on the gut level we should say—which can make one have "shivers of pleasure" or "exciting envy" or "share in this [reading] experience." What Weldon does to Austen and *Emma* is perform a reader-response interpretation.

Reader-response literary criticism recognizes the simple fact that readers respond to literature on an emotional level and that such responses are important to the understanding of the work. Long ago, even Aristotle recognized how important an audience's reaction is to tragedy, for a key to tragedy is **catharsis**, the purging of the audience's emotions. If you recall from Chapter 1, the concept of the *affective fallacy* was central to the New Critical methodology—a reader was never to confuse the interpretation of the literary work with the "feeling" she or he had while reading. These New Critics warned the reader that affective responses lead only to subjectivity; thus New Critics suggested that the reader pay close attention to the intricacies of the text under observation for meaning, for the text as a well-wrought urn contains meaning.

Reader-response critics, on the other hand, embrace the affective fallacy (what reader-response critic Stanley Fish has called the "**affective fallacy fallacy**"), for they believe that a reader's affective response is importance to criticism. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Instead of focusing on literature as a well-wrought urn, reader-response critics focus on the reader, who "completes" or "activates" the text as he or she reads. In a sense, the reader becomes the most important element in the reading process, supplanting even the author.

When you think about it, reader-response criticism makes perfect sense. How many times have you become so immersed in a work that you are oblivious to the world around you? If you like fantasy literature, you might still recall the first time you read the Harry Potter series—you were transported out of your Muggle world into the magical Hogwarts, where Harry and his friends battle the dark forces of the one we should not name. How many of you stood in line to get your copy of the latest Harry Potter novel at midnight? Or camped out at the theater to be one of the first to see the final installment of *The Deathly Hallows*? There may even

be a few of you who are not Potter fans, but be warned—don't share those thoughts too readily! A case point: one of the editors of this textbook, John Pennington, found this out quite clearly. He teaches a general-education course called Science Fiction and Fantasy, which attracts die-hard fans of these popular forms of fiction. When the first volume of the Harry Potter series came out, he was approached by a student, who told him that this was the best fantasy literature since J. R. R. Tolkien, maybe even better. Quite a claim, and one that came from a very intelligent student who clearly was excited about *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*! However, Pennington found that he did not enjoy the novel as much as his student had. So he read the next volume, and the next, and...you get the picture. To put it bluntly, he wasn't that impressed with the Harry Potter series. He eventually published an article in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, a critical journal that focuses on children's literature. In that article, he critiques the Harry Potter series as ineffective—shall we say, “failed”—fantasy literature. John Pennington, “From Elfland to Hogwarts, or the Aesthetic Trouble with Harry Potter,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26, no. 1 (2002): 78–97, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/toc/uni26.1.html.

Over the years, he has received emails from students who are doing research papers on Harry Potter. To demonstrate that literature is often read with passion, read the following e-mail to John Pennington, which he received from a student who was doing such a research paper:

Hello, Professor Pennington. My name is Emily. I'm a senior English major at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, TX.

For my honors thesis, I have been doing research on fantasy literature (I'm making a comparison of magical and fantastic creatures in American and British literature) and in my search, I stumbled across your piece “From Elfland to Hogwarts, or the Aesthetic Trouble with Harry Potter.” I won't lie to you, I am an avid Harry Potter fan. I am the president of the St. Mary's Harry Potter club, called Dumbledore's Army.

Mary's Harry Potter club, called Dumbledore's Army. I was just wondering if your feelings about certain aspects of the Harry Potter series have changed now that all the books have been released? I definitely agreed with some of your opinions and arguments (even as a little girl reading the books I made the connection between Tolkien/Rowling and Lewis/Rowling), but there are also instances in which I feel you were being too harsh. For instance, you said that while Voldemort was clearly the representation of the archetype for evil, there was none for good. I disagree. I don't believe that the figure for good needs to be a person or being at all. Instead, in the case of the Harry Potter, the symbol of the good archetype is love. Although, arguably, good and love could be seen as synonyms in some cases (through the right analytic lens), I think that love's manifestations in the Harry Potter series are what truly combats Voldemort (rather than Harry's attempts at battle—another aspect I, and indeed Harry, agree with you on: all he had was luck) and therefore become the figure of good.

I did find your piece helpful for my research and I do plan to read more of your published works in the future.

One other question: Do you often get e-mails from people who are disgruntled by your criticism of the Potter series? I would imagine the answer is yes.

Thank you for your time.

—Emily Bryant-Mundschau

One should not do battle with Dumbledore's Army! In a follow-up email, where John admitted to Emily that his critical views of Harry Potter had not really changed, he also added that he was a little disappointed that Rowling had indicated in an interview about her first novel for adults—*The Casual Vacancy* (2012)—that she didn't see herself as a role model for children. Emily responded: “If it hadn't been for getting a copy of *The Sorcerer's Stone* in the 3rd grade, I may not be an English major now. I think a lot of the English majors of my generation are proof that she is a role model for children. Also, I think she must be intentionally ignoring the fact that there is a Harry Potter amusement park...how could kids not adore her?” Emily and John, interestingly, were acting as both critic and fan (or nonfan in John's case). In other words, readers are to a degree torn between the role of being an objective critic and a subjective fan, a tension that reader-response theory can help explain. Some publishers, in fact, concentrate on critical works on Harry Potter, creating a critical industry that extolls the virtues of the Harry Potter series. Winged Lion/Zossima Press is just one example, and the titles highlight how scholarly investigation becomes fused with personal enthusiasm for the books.



Book covers courtesy of Winged Lion/Zossima Press.

But there's a flip side to the "positive" reading experience, too. How many times have you become so irritated by a work—or by a piece of criticism!—that you failed to finish it or dreaded every second while you were between the pages? Some may never develop a "taste" for Henry James, for example. And as much as you might admire *Moby-Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville, you must admit that the so-called cetological center does tax a reader's patience.

📌 Your Process

1. List your three favorite works of literature and write a short paragraph for each explaining why you like them so much.
2. Now do the same for your three least favorite works. Why do you dislike them?
3. Do you notice any patterns in the works you like and dislike? Why do you suppose you feel the way you do about these works?
4. Are there any works that you disliked upon initial reading but grew to like later? Or works you initially loved but now find tiring? Explain.
5. Choose either one of the likes or dislikes and consider using the work as the text for your reader-response paper. The following are some key guiding questions you can ask after reading the overview of the types of reader-response theory: Why do I like or dislike this work so much? How do I read this work in a way that might explain my attitude toward the work? Does the work touch on—or challenge—my identity theme? Does my reading connect to an interpretive community? Does my gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or another aspect of my identity have anything to do with my response?

CLASS PROCESS

1. List your favorite literary works that you read primarily as a fan.
2. Does this fan favorite hold up to critical scrutiny? Why or why not?
3. How do you negotiate this tension between being a fan and a critic?

4. Have your instructor list these fan favorites on the board.
5. Discuss the tension between fan and critic using these examples.
6. Choose either one of the likes or dislikes you listed and consider using the work as the text for your reader-response essay. The following are some key guiding questions you can ask after reading the overview of the types of reader-response theory: Why do I like or dislike this work so much? How do I read this work in a way that may explain my attitude toward the work? Does the work touch on—or challenge—my identity theme? Does my reading connect to an interpretive community? Does my gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or another aspect of my identity have anything to do with my response?

Now that we have acknowledged the fact that personal responses are an important component to the reading process—and to all literary discussion—we can begin learning about the variety of reader responses. As a New Critic, you remember, you scrutinized the text carefully; as a reader-response critic you will discover how your personal likes and dislikes shape your interpretation of a work.

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11.2: Focus on Reader-Response Strategies

Reader-response strategies can be categorized, according to Richard Beach in *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* (1993), into five types: **textual**, **experiential**, **psychological**, **social**, and **cultural**. Richard Beach, *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993). Let's review those categories.

Textual Reader-Response Strategies

Performing a close reading of a text teaches you to look “closely” at the way a text operates and to glean some meaning from the workings of the text. In other words, your interpretation is primarily directed by the text. Textual reader-response approaches admit to the fact that the text does influence the way readers read and construct meaning. Thus the reader and text interact in the process of formulating a meaning of the text. Imagine a text as a painting in an art gallery: your interpretation of the painting will be based on whether you like it or not, but this reaction will be directed by the painting itself. Or consider a literary text as a musical composition; as a listener, you are moved by the music, but you must relate the music to some experience to make it work emotionally on you. Another metaphor: a text is like an unfinished sculpture; the reader must bring the finished form to the work. Thus to textual reader-response critics, the text directs interpretation as the reader directs the text to interpretation.

Literature as Transaction: Gap Filling and Ghost Chapters

A pioneer in reader-response criticism is Louise Rosenblatt, whose *Literature as Exploration* (5th ed., 1995) provided an alternative theory to the persistent New Critical approaches that gained such popularity. Rosenblatt contends that literature must become personal for it to have its full impact on the reader; Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 5th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995). In fact, New Criticism's affective fallacy prevents the reader from engaging the text on any personal level. Rosenblatt's approach, like the New Critical reading methods, provides a classroom strategy; however, whereas the New Critics centered on the literary text, Rosenblatt centers on the reader.

Rosenblatt believes readers transact with the text by bringing in their past life experiences to help interpret the text. Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 5th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995). Reading literature becomes an event—the reader activates the work through reading. Rosenblatt argues that any literary text allows for an **efferent reading**, which is what the reader believes should be retained after the reading; the **aesthetic reading**, on the other hand, is what the reader experiences while reading. Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 5th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995). The aesthetic reading accounts for the changes in a reader's attitude toward a literary work. Rosenblatt's theory provides for a process of reading that leads to discussion and interpretation: a reader transacts with a literary text during the reading process, focusing on the aesthetic response while reading. After reading, then, the reader reflects on the aesthetic response and compares it to the textual evidence and other interpretations. In a way, literary interpretation is more focused on the transaction—the process of reading—than on an interpretation of a particular work.

Another important reader-response theorist is Wolfgang Iser, who complements Rosenblatt. Iser believes that a literary work has meaning once a reader engages in the text. Wolfgang Iser, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Text*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979). According to Iser, every literary work is balanced by two poles, the **artistic** and the **esthetic poles**, roughly corresponding to Rosenblatt's efferent and aesthetic readings. For Iser, the artistic pole is that created by the author; the esthetic pole is that realized or completed by the reader. Wolfgang Iser, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Text*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979). Since a literary work is caught between these two poles, its meaning resides in the gap between these poles; the primary quality of a text is its indeterminacy. A textual critic, Iser recognizes that the text—the artistic pole—guides the reader who resides in the esthetic pole. He distinguishes between the **implied reader**, one the text creates for itself, and the **actual reader**, the reader who brings “things” to the text. Wolfgang Iser, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Text*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979). Consequently, there exists a gap between the implied and actual reader, and between the artistic and esthetic poles. The reader, then, must perform gap filling to concretize the text. Umberto Eco, another reader-response critic, takes gap filling even further, arguing that readers write ghost chapters for texts as a way to understand the transaction that happens between the text and reader. Umberto Eco, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.” in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. ed by Jane P. Tompkins. (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) pgs. 50–69.

As you can see, Iser's textual reader-response criticism is based on his contention that the reader concretizes the text—gives it meaning—while the text necessarily guides this concretization. Consequently, a literary text operates by indeterminacy; it has gaps that the reader attempts to fill.

Transaction: The Rhetoric of Fiction

Another pioneer in reader-response criticism is Wayne Booth, who in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961; revised edition 1983) analyzes the way literature engages us through its language, or rhetoric. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Booth shows readers how authors manipulate them into seeing things they have never seen before. Booth's most important contributions to reader-response criticism (and literary criticism in general) are his concepts of the implied author (or narrator) and the unreliable narrator, and how these force us to confront reading as an ethical act.

The **implied author**—the narrative voice the author creates in a work—is the most important artistic effect: in a sense, the implied author directs the reader's reaction to the literary work, guiding—or sometimes forcing—the reader to react on an emotional level since the implied author brings his or her ethical principles to the text. By directing the reader's interpretation, the implied author limits the reader's response while forcing the reader to react to the implied author.

For example, Booth contends that the implied author in *Emma* recognizes that the reader must be able to empathize and like Emma; if not, the novel will fail. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Thus Austen creates an implied author—the narrator—who controls our perception of Emma by creating a character the reader can empathize with, laugh at when appropriate, and condemn when needed. Since the implied author becomes like a friend and guide, we as readers can rely on the narrative voice to guide us.

Booth recognizes that while a text's implied author may be reliable, the work may still have an **unreliable narrator**. The narrator in Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" seems perfectly reliable and in control until we realize that his proposal to alleviate the poverty of the Ireland is to raise babies as edible delicacies! Jonathan Swift, "Modest Proposal" (London: 1729; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 2004), etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/SwiMode.html. Or think of the first-person narrators of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) or J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (London: Little, Brown, 1951). An unreliable narrator requires the author and reader to engage in a special bond whereby they acknowledge that the narrator cannot be trusted; in a way, then, the reader and author engage in a transaction by recognizing the limited view of the unreliable implied author. The unreliable narrator, ultimately, forces the reader to respond on some moral plane.

By appealing to the moral qualities of the reader, Booth provides a framework for an **ethics of reading** that he defines in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988). Using Rosenblatt's distinction between the efferent and aesthetic reading, Booth argues that the reader must carry over the efferent reading into the aesthetic, for the efferent reading requires us to compare our personal experience and moral beliefs with the narrative. Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Since a literary work takes us over for the duration of the reading experience, an ethics of reading will require the reader to eventually judge the ethical dimension to a work. **Nonce beliefs** are the beliefs the narrator and reader embrace only during the reading. **Fixed norms** are the beliefs on which the entire literary work depends for effect but also are applicable to the real world. As an example, Booth uses Aesop's fables, for a talking animal relates to our nonce beliefs—the talking animal is acknowledged as essential to the narrative—when the fixed norms will entail the moral that concludes the fable. Thus the nonce and fixed beliefs require a transaction between reader and work. Booth suggests that an ethics of reading becomes a two-stage process: (1) the reader must surrender fully to the reading experience and then (2) the reader must contemplate the reading experience from an ethical perspective (which depends on the reader's own moral stance). Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). In other words, we should keep company with the literary work and maintain an open mind until we conclude that the work might be harmful to us—or be in conflict with our moral beliefs. As you can see, Booth's ethics of reading is determined by the reader's moral makeup, which is dependent on a specific time and reading experience. It is open to change.

Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (1898) is a good example of this. "Kate Chopin 'The Storm,'" The Kate Chopin International Society, <http://www.katechopin.org/the-storm.shtml>. In the story, a married woman has a passionate affair one afternoon with an acquaintance who by chance comes to her house to escape a storm. Their relationship is set up in an earlier story, "At the Cadian Ball" (1892), Chopin presents the affair as a natural impulse; the ending of the story tells us that both parties are happy and

content. Kate Chopin, “At the ‘Cadian Ball,” in *The Awakening, and Selected Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Penguin, 1984). While in the company of “The Storm,” you will respond to the story itself as it occupies you, yet after your reading you will complete the reading by bringing your ethics into play: do you reject the story because it does not condemn adultery? Do you embrace the story because of its honest depiction of sexual passion?

Booth’s brand of textual reader-response criticism is a valuable tool for readers since he provides a textual model of reading—the implied author who is reliable and unreliable—that embraces the ethical dimension of the reader, who must transact with the literary work.

Textual reader-response criticism, as exemplified by Rosenblatt, Booth, and Iser, is a powerful literary critical tool to use when analyzing texts. Using some conventions of New Criticism, these critics are able to show how text and reader can simultaneously be active during the reading process.

Your Process

1. Read the following fable by Aesop:

THE HARE AND THE TORTOISE

The Hare was once boasting of his speed before the other animals. “I have never yet been beaten,” said he, “when I put forth my full speed. I challenge any one here to race with me.”

The Tortoise said quietly, “I accept your challenge.”

“That is a good joke,” said the Hare; “I could dance round you all the way.”

“Keep your boasting till you’ve beaten,” answered the Tortoise. “Shall we race?”

So a course was fixed and a start was made. The Hare darted almost out of sight at once, but soon stopped and, to show his contempt for the Tortoise, lay down to have a nap. The Tortoise plodded on and plodded on, and when the Hare awoke from his nap, he saw the Tortoise just near the winning-post and could not run up in time to save the race. Then said the Tortoise: “Plodding wins the race.” Aesop, “The Hare and the Tortoise,” *Aesop’s Fables*, <http://www.aesops-fables.org.uk/aesop-fable-the-hare-and-the-tortoise.htm>.

2. Use Booth’s notions of fixed and nonce beliefs to examine how you will respond to the moral of the fable. Does plodding win the race in your value system?
3. Are there gaps in the narrative that you filled in to make sense of the narrative? What were they? Can you apply Rosenblatt’s and Iser’s notions of how readers complete the text?

Experiential Reader Response

Experiential reader-response critics like Stanley Fish are unlike the textual reader-response critics in one very important aspect—they emphasize the reader’s reading process over the literary work. Fish calls this kind of reader response **affective stylistics**, reminding us of the “affect” that literature has on us and of the New Critical affective fallacy that rejected any emotional response a reader might have to a literary work. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). To Fish, then, affective stylistics is the experience the reader has while reading, which he defines as a three-fold process:

1. Readers surrender themselves to the text, letting the text wash over them; in fact, at this stage, readers should not be concerned with trying to understand what the work is about.
2. Readers next concentrate on their reading responses while reading, seeing how each word, each sentence, each paragraph elicits a response.
3. Finally, readers should describe the reading experience by structuring their reading responses, which may be in conflict with the common interpretation of a work. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Fish’s thesis is seductive, for when we read, we are constantly reacting to our reading, connecting it to our personal lives, to other literary works we have read, and to our reading experience at that particular reading moment. Sometimes we will love to read;

other times we dread it. In *Surprised by Sin*, Fish examines how the reader is affected by a reading of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), that epic poem that describes the fall of Adam and Eve. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667; University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1993), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/MilPL67.html>. Fish argues that the reading experience of *Paradise Lost* mirrors the actual Fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

As intriguing as Fish's affective stylistics may be, the reality is that readers often agree on meaning; that is, they tend to see similar things in the same text. A textual reader-response critic would argue that the text—through its transaction with the reader—leads to such common interpretation, but Fish is interested in another possibility—that we are trained to find similar meanings. He calls this idea **interpretive communities**. To Fish, then, a reader of an interpretive community brings a meaning to the text because he or she is trained to. Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). A student in a modernist poetry class, for example, would interpret Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" in terms of modernism and the poetic movements in modernism and be at ease making claims about the poem's meaning. Literary theory, which you are learning as you work your way through this text, also demonstrates the interpretive community. If you are intrigued by Freudian psychoanalytic criticism, you will find Freudian meanings in the works that you are reading; likewise, a feminist critic will find gender issues when reading. Another way to understand interpretive communities is to note that the American legal system has embraced the idea of interpretive communities in jury selection: for example, if a defense attorney who is representing a college student in an underage drinking case can get members on the jury who agree that the drinking age should be lowered to nineteen, then the jury may have already interpreted the evidence in light of their beliefs and will find the student not guilty.

Experiential reader response acknowledges that reading is a subjective process and attempts to understand how to analyze such subjective responses.

Sonnet 127

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:
For since each hand hath put on Nature's power,
Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem:
Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.

Your Process

1. Read the Sonnet 127 from Shakespeare. William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 127," in *Sonnets* (1609; University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1992), etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/ShasSonQ.html. As you read, jot down what is going on in your mind. Do you try to make sense of the poem while reading? Do you become frustrated while reading? Do certain words evoke feelings?
2. Have you read other sonnets by Shakespeare? If so, what do you remember about them? Did you bring your knowledge of the sonnets to the reading of this one? Did you read the poem coming from a particular interpretive community?

3. How did your interpretive community shape your interpretation of the poem? What ideas from your community did you bring in interpreting the poem?

Psychological Reader Response

When we read, we are continually connecting the text to our lives, almost as if the literary work is speaking to us personally. Psychological reader response helps us better understand this phenomenon.

Subjective Analysis

Often called **subjective criticism**, this form of reader-response criticism is championed by David Bleich, who believes that a reader's response becomes the text itself, ripe for analysis (or psychoanalysis). To Bleich, a literary text comprises a real entity—the text, the words on the page, which is a concrete object—and our interpretation of the concrete text, which can be seen as a symbolic object. We “resymbolize” the text through our perceptions and beliefs. Meaning, then, is negotiated: our reading response (highly personal) is often brought to a larger body (communal) to discuss the meaning of a piece of literature. The classroom is a perfect example: you are assigned to read something, you read it and develop a personal interpretation, and then you share that interpretation with the class; ultimately, the class creates a more communal interpretation. In subjective criticism, knowledge is seen as socially constructed from the interaction of all readers; thus, interpretation is seen as personal, yet communal, the common element being that reading is subjective. The transaction that happens in subjective criticism is between the personal reader-oriented response statement and the more public-oriented response statement, which reflects the themes in the text.

Subjective criticism focuses on the negotiation for meaning—your view is not wrong if it is based on some objective reading of the text.

Identity Analysis

Norman Holland's approach to reader response follows in the footsteps of subjective criticism. According to Holland, people deal with texts the same way they deal with life. Holland would say that we gravitate toward particular literary works because they speak to our inner—our psychological—needs. In other words, each reader has an identity that we can analyze, which will open up the literary text to personal interpretation based on a reader's identity. Thus we use the term “**identity analysis**” to describe the form of psychological reader-response criticism that suggests that we are drawn to literary works that speak to our psychological needs—conversely, we are repelled or troubled by works that do not meet our needs.

These identity needs are often repressed in the unconscious and are in need of an outlet, which is provided by reading. When reading, then, we can engage our repressed desires or needs. Why do we read fantasy literature? Romance literature? Thrillers? Self-help books? Science fiction? Reading becomes a personal way to cope with life.

This coping process is interpretation, for literature exposes more about the reader than about the text itself. Holland believes that each reader has an “**identity theme**,” a pattern of defense that he or she brings to a text. In turn, we gravitate to texts that tend to reinforce our identity themes and our needs. The contrary is also true: we will avoid texts that challenge our identity or threaten our psychological needs. When we read a text, we see ourselves reflected back at us. Holland calls this transactional process **DEFT**: we read in **d**efense (a coping strategy that aligns with our expectations) that leads to **f**antasy (our ability to find gratification) and finally to **t**ransformation (that leads to a total unifying effect for the reader).

Your Process

1. List the literary works that you have read multiple times.
2. Why do you return to these works?
3. Do they reflect issues that connect to your life? Can you venture to define your identity theme?
4. Are there literary works you dislike? Why? Do these dislikes have anything to do with your identity theme?

Social Reader Response

Often referred to as “reception theory,” social reader response is interested in how a literary work is received over time. In fact, the status of a literary work is dependent on the reader's reception of the work. Hans Robert Jauss, a key figure in “reception theory,” argues that the history of the reader is as important as the history of the literary work; in fact, the reader's evolving interpretation is

at the heart of the changing literary status. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic Reception*. Tans. Timothy Baht. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). To Jauss, every literary work continually evolves as the reader's reception modifies according to the reader's needs.

A classic example from nineteenth-century American literature is *Moby-Dick* (1851), now considered one of the greatest—if not the greatest—American novel ever written. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (1952; University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1993), <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Mel2Mob.html>. Andrew Delbanco titles the first chapter of his book *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now* (1997) “Melville’s Sacramental Style,” which brings an almost religious fervor to the importance of Melville generally and *Moby-Dick* specifically. Andrew Delbanco, *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1997). But this has not always been the case. Contemporary reviews of *Moby-Dick* were mixed, but many were quite unfavorable; these tainted Melville’s reputation and made it difficult for him to continue as a successful author. Melville.org has compiled a collection of contemporary reviews, one of which we reprint here:

Thrice unlucky Herman Melville!...

This is an odd book, professing to be a novel; wantonly eccentric; outrageously bombastic; in places charmingly and vividly descriptive. The author has read up laboriously to make a show of cetological [sic] learning... Herman Melville is wise in this sort of wisdom. He uses it as stuffing to fill out his skeleton story. Bad stuffing it makes, serving only to try the patience of his readers, and to tempt them to wish both him and his whales at the bottom of an unfathomable sea...

The story of this novel scarcely deserves the name... Mr. Melville cannot do without savages so he makes half of his *dramatis personae* wild Indians, Malays, and other untamed humanities... What the author’s original intention in spinning his preposterous yarn was, it is impossible to guess; evidently, when we compare the first and third volumes, it was never carried out...

Having said so much that may be interpreted as a censure, it is right that we should add a word of praise where deserved. There are sketches of scenes at sea, of whaling adventures, storms, and ship-life, equal to any we have ever met with...

Mr. Herman Melville has earned a deservedly high reputation for his performances in descriptive fiction. He has gathered his own materials, and travelled along fresh and untrodden literary paths, exhibiting powers of no common order, and great originality. The more careful, therefore, should he be to maintain the fame he so rapidly acquired, and not waste his strength on such purposeless and unequal doings as these rambling volumes about spermaceti whales. [ellipses in original] “Contemporary Criticism and Reviews,” *The Life and Works of Herman Melville*, <http://www.melville.org/hmmoby.htm#Contemporary>.

—*London Literary Gazette*, December 6, 1851

Many critics felt that *Moby-Dick* was a falling off of Melville’s talent, and that view remained for the rest of Melville’s life.

Why the change in reputation? Critics started reassessing *Moby-Dick*, scholars tell us, in 1919, and by 1930 the novel was frequently taught in college classrooms, thus cementing its critical reputation. In 1941 F. O. Matthiessen, in *American Renaissance*, placed Melville as a central writer in the nineteenth century. F. O. Matthieson, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941). In addition, the rise of literary theory that focused on race, class, and gender led to new revisionist readings of Melville; more recently, queer theory has argued that *Moby-Dick* is a central text in gay and lesbian literature.

Another example is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). Hurston was a popular author in America, but contemporary writers like Richard Wright and Langston Hughes were critical of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because it seemed far away from the “protest fiction” other African American writers (mainly men) were publishing. Here is an excerpt from Richard Wright:

Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction... [ellipses in original]

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie who, at sixteen, married a grubbing farmer at the anxious instigation of her slave-born grandmother. The romantic Janie, in the highly-charged language of Miss Hurston, longed to be a pear tree in blossom and have a “dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace.” Restless, she fled from her farmer husband and married Jody, an up-and-coming Negro business man who, in the end, proved to be no better than her first husband. After twenty years of clerking for her self-made Jody, Janie found herself a frustrated

widow of forty with a small fortune on her hands. Tea Cake, “from in and through Georgia,” drifted along and, despite his youth, Janie took him. For more than two years they lived happily; but Tea Cake was bitten by a mad dog and was infected with rabies. One night in a canine rage Tea Cake tried to murder Janie, thereby forcing her to shoot the only man she had ever loved.

Miss Hurston can write, but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that’s as far as it goes.

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. “Their Eyes Are Watching Their Eyes Were Watching God,” University of Virginia, <http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam854/summer/hurston.html>.

Thanks to these unfavorable reviews, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* became a forgotten text, and it remained so until Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple* and many other works, wrote an essay in *Ms. Magazine*, “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” that recounts her search for Hurston’s grave in Eatonville, Florida. Walker eventually bought a grave marker for Hurston’s grave, which reflects the beginning of Hurston’s reputation as a great American novelist. Alice Walker, “Finding Zora,” *Ms. Magazine*, March 1975, 74–75. Now *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Hurston are featured in Delbanco’s study on the American classics.

CLASS PROJECT: RECEPTION REVIEW

1. Choose a popular literary text. *The New York Times Best Seller List* is a great place to start.
2. Find three reviews of that work. You can find reviews by using a search engine—Google, for example—and if your library has *Book Review Digest* or *Book Review Index*, these are important databases.
3. Write a short paper that briefly summarizes each review and then comment on the reviews. Do the reviewers agree on the book in their reviews? If not, explore the differences.

Cultural Reader Response

Cultural reader response acknowledges that readers will bring their personal background to the reading of a text. What is that background? A variety of markers, including gender, race, sexual orientation, even political affiliation compose someone’s background. In other words, as readers we may interpret a literary work in light of where we are situated in society.

For example, gender is key to the way that readers respond to a literary work. See Amy Ferdinandt’s response to James Thurber’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” later in the chapter. Do men and women read differently? Some may say, “Yes.” An important text to highlight women’s reading experiences is Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984). Jane Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). Radway examines why women readers gravitate to the romance novel. Radway’s ideas, for example, could be applied to Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, a romance series about a young woman, Bella Swan, who falls in love with a vampire, Edward Cullen, but who is also attracted to a werewolf, Jacob Black. Stephenie Meyer, *The Twilight Saga Collection* (London: Little, Brown, 2009). The target audience for *Twilight* is adolescent girls, and it is unusual for boys to read *Twilight*. Why? *Harry Potter*, on the other hand, appeals to both male and female readers, as does Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games Trilogy* (New York: Scholastic, 2010). Another useful text to look at is *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts* (1986), edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart, eds., *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

Another example to highlight culture and reading can be seen in Alan Gribben’s NewSouth edition of *Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* (2011). This controversial edition replaces the “n-word” in *Huckleberry Finn* with the word *slave*; in *Tom Sawyer*, Gribben eliminates any derogatory language that refers to Native Americans and replaces Twain’s use of “half-breed” to, as Gribben writes, “‘half-blood,’ which is less disrespectful and has even taken on a degree of panache since J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005).” Mark Twain, *Mark Twain’s Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn: The NewSouth Edition*, ed. Alan Gribben (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth, 2011); J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Scholastic, 2005). Gribben acknowledges that Twain’s language can be seen as derogatory toward ethnic groups, which might preclude them from reading the texts. Mark Twain, *Mark Twain’s Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn: The NewSouth Edition*, ed. Alan Gribben (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth, 2011). Critics argue that changing one word for another, as in

Huckleberry Finn, doesn't address the complexity of race issues in Twain. For a fascinating discussion of race regarding Twain, see the Bedford's Case Study in Critical Controversy edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (second ed., 2004), edited by Gerald Graff and James Phelan. In the unit on race, the editors provide a variety of interpretations of Twain's use of the "n-word," which highlights the complexity of race in reading. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*, 2nd ed., ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan (Boston: Bedford, 2003).

As you can see, cultural reader response takes seriously how a literary work might evoke a particular response from a reader based on his or her gender, race, class status, sexual orientation, and so forth, and how a reader might bring a reading strategy based on his or her identity.

Your Process

1. Write a journal or blog entry that explores your cultural position as a reader.
2. Does your gender, race, religion, politics, sexual orientation, and/or another cultural marker partly determine what you read and how you read literary works? Give at least two concrete examples.

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11.3: Suggestions for Further Reading

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

12: Writing about History and Culture from a New Historical Perspective

Learning Objectives

- Examine methods that scholars use to write about literature as a historical text.
- Apply New Historical theory to works of literature.
- Research and synthesize primary and secondary sources for a historical research paper.
- Review and evaluate the research and writing process of a peer writer.
- Draft and revise a historical critique of a literary work.

[12.1: Literary Snapshot- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland](#)

[12.2: New Historical Criticism- An Overview](#)

[12.3: Strategies for Starting Your New Historical Paper](#)

[12.4: Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

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12.1: Literary Snapshot- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Lewis Carroll, as we found out in previous chapters, is most famous for two books: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). These books follow the adventures of a seven-year-old, Alice, who tumbles down a rabbit hole (*Wonderland*) and enters a magic mirror (*Looking-Glass*), entering a nonsensical world of the imagination. If you have not already read these classic books—or wish to reread them—you can access them at the following links:

<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>

etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/mo...c/CarGlas.html

Once Alice tumbles down the rabbit-hole in *Wonderland*, she encounters a topsy-turvy world that is disconnected from the real Victorian world she is from. She forgets the lessons she learns in her world quickly and drinks from a bottle that is marked “DRINK ME,” which shuts her “up like a telescope.” Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 1, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>. Undaunted, she then eats from a cake in a box marked “EAT ME,” which as you can guess, makes her quite large—nine feet tall, to be exact—which is so large that when she gets upset over her predicament and starts to cry, she creates an enormous pool of tears. As she starts swimming, having now shrunk to about two feet in height, she finds herself paddling with an odd menagerie of animals—a mouse, a duck, a lory, an eaglet, and even an extinct dodo bird.

Needless to say, the animals don't like being so wet. How to dry off? Let's listen in on the plans:

They were indeed a queer-looking party that assembled on the bank—the birds with draggled feathers, the animals with their fur clinging close to them, and all dripping wet, cross, and uncomfortable.

The first question of course was, how to get dry again: they had a consultation about this, and after a few minutes it seemed quite natural to Alice to find herself talking familiarly with them, as if she had known them all her life. Indeed, she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, “I am older than you, and must know better”; and this Alice would not allow without knowing how old it was, and, as the Lory positively refused to tell its age, there was no more to be said.

At last the Mouse, who seemed to be a person of authority among them, called out, “Sit down, all of you, and listen to me! *I'll* soon make you dry enough!” They all sat down at once, in a large ring, with the Mouse in the middle. Alice kept her eyes anxiously fixed on it, for she felt sure she would catch a bad cold if she did not get dry very soon.

“Ahem!” said the Mouse with an important air, “are you all ready? This is the driest thing I know. Silence all round, if you please! ‘William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria—’”

“Ugh!” said the Lory, with a shiver.

“I beg your pardon!” said the Mouse, frowning, but very politely: “Did you speak?”

“Not I!” said the Lory hastily.

“I thought you did,” said the Mouse. “—I proceed. ‘Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria, declared for him: and even Stigand, the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable—’”

“Found *what*?” said the Duck.

“Found *it*,” the Mouse replied rather crossly: “of course you know what ‘*it*’ means.”

“I know what ‘*it*’ means well enough, when *I* find a thing,” said the Duck: “it’s generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?”

The Mouse did not notice this question, but hurriedly went on, “—found it advisable to go with Edgar Atheling to meet William and offer him the crown. William’s conduct at first was moderate. But the insolence of his Normans—’ How are you getting on now, my dear?” it continued, turning to Alice as it spoke.

“As wet as ever,” said Alice in a melancholy tone: “it doesn’t seem to dry me at all.” Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. With Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927; University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center, 1998), chap. 3, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/CarAlic.html>.

The mouse believes that by telling a “dry” tale, he will dry off his companions. And what better dry tale to tell than one involving a history lesson, one about William the Conqueror (of the eleventh century). Carroll, of course, is having fun with the perception that history is boring, particularly when history becomes a series of factual dates that require memorization. In fact, much of *Wonderland*—as well as the sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*—finds Carroll satirizing various Victorian social issues, including the notion of the child (and gender roles), the purpose of literature for children, the debate over Darwinian evolution, the discussion over linguistic development, the controversy over religious debate (Lewis Carroll, whose real name was Charles Dodgson, was a professor and clergyman at Oxford University), and the most productive educational methods. And we are only scratching the surface here.

In other words, if we read *Wonderland* as a historical text that illuminates the age in which Carroll wrote, then history is certainly not dry, nor is literature dry, for the two speak in dialogue with one another. Just as Alice tumbles down the rabbit hole, you will be asked in this unit to enter the wonderland that is called New Historical criticism. Instead of being dry, we hope that we whet your appetite for writing about literature focusing on history and culture.

Your Process

1. Has your experience studying history been similar to Alice’s? Or have you enjoyed studying history? Jot down your thoughts about studying history.
2. Have you ever read a work of literature that made you think about a particular historical event or period? Describe this work and its connection to that historical moment.

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12.2: New Historical Criticism- An Overview

Early scholars of literature thought of history as a progression: events and ideas built on each other in a linear and causal way. History, consequently, could be understood objectively, as a series of dates, people, facts, and events. Once known, history became a static entity. We can see this in the previous example from *Wonderland*. The Mouse notes that the “driest thing” he knows is that “William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria—” I think we would all agree to moan “Ugh!” In other words, the Mouse sees history as a list of great dead people that must be remembered and recited, a list that refers only to the so-called great events of history: battles, rebellions, and the rise and fall of leaders. Corresponding to this view, literature was thought to directly or indirectly mirror historical reality. Scholars believed that history shaped literature, but literature didn’t shape history.

While this view of history as a static amalgamation of facts is still considered important, other scholars in the movement called **New Historicism** see the relationship between history and literature quite differently. Today, most literary scholars think of history as a dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, artistic, religious, political, and social forces. They don’t necessarily concentrate solely on kings and nobles, or battles and coronations. In addition, they also focus on the smaller details of history, including the plight of the common person, popular songs and art, periodicals and advertisements—and, of course, literature. New Historical scholarship, it follows, is **interdisciplinary**, drawing on materials from a number of academic fields that were once thought to be separate or distinct from one another: history, religious studies, political science, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and even the natural sciences. In fact, New Historicism is also called **cultural materialism** since a text—whether it’s a piece of literature, a religious tract, a political polemic, or a scientific discovery—is seen as an artifact of history, a material entity that reflects larger cultural issues.

Your Process

1. How have you learned to connect literature and history? Jot down two or three examples from previous classes.

Sometimes it’s obvious the way history can help us understand a piece of literature. When reading William Butler Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916” (which you can read online at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172061>), for instance, readers immediately wonder how the date named in the poem’s title shapes the poem’s meaning. “Easter 1916 by William Butler Yeats,” The Atlantic Online, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/poetry/soundings/easter.htm>. Curious readers might quickly look up that Easter date and discover that leaders of the Irish independence movement staged a short-lived revolt against British rule during Easter week in 1916. The rebellion was quickly ended by British forces, and the rebel leaders were tried and executed. Those curious readers might then understand the allusions that Yeats makes to each of the executed Irish leaders in his poem and gain a better sense of what Yeats hopes to convey about Ireland’s past and future through his poem’s symbols and language. Many writers, like Yeats, use their art to directly address social, political, military, or economic debates in their cultures. These writers enter into the social **discourse** of their time, this discourse being formed by the cultural conditions that define the age. Furthermore, this discourse reflects the **ideology** of the society at the time, which is the collective ideas—including political, economic, and religious ideas—that guide the way a culture views and talks about itself. This cultural ideology, in turn, reflects the **power structures** that control—or attempt to control—the discourse of a society and often control the way literature is published, read, and interpreted. Literature, then, as a societal discourse comments on and is influenced by the other cultural discourses, which reflect or resist the ideology that is based on the power structures of society.

Let’s turn to another example to illuminate these issues. One of the most influential books in American history was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which Stowe wrote to protest slavery in the South before the Civil War. “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* & American Culture,” University of Virginia, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html>. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was an instant bestseller that did much to popularize the abolitionist movement in the northern United States. Legend has it that when Abraham Lincoln met Stowe during the Civil War, he greeted her, by saying “So you’re the little woman that wrote the book that started this great war.” In the case of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, then, it’s clear that understanding the histories of slavery, abolitionism, and antebellum regional tensions can help us make sense of Stowe’s novel.

But history informs literature in less direct ways, as well. In fact, many literary scholars—in particular, New Historical scholars—would insist that every work of literature, whether it explicitly mentions a historical event or not, is shaped by the moment of its composition (and that works of literature shape their moment of composition in turn). The American history of the Vietnam war is a great example, for we continue to interpret and revise that history, and literature (including memoirs) is a key material product that influences that revision: think of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977); Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* (1977); Bobbie Anne Mason’s *In Country* (1985); Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990); Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992); and, most recently, Karl Marlantes’s *Matterhorn* (2010). Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Vintage, 1977); Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine, 1977); Bobbie Anne Mason, *In Country* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Mariner, 2009); Robert Olen Butler, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain: Stories* (New York: Holt, 1992); Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2010).

📌 Your Process

1. Pick something you’ve read or watched recently. It doesn’t matter what you choose: the Harry Potter series, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, even *Jersey Shore* or *American Idol*. Now reflect on what that book, movie, or television show tells you about your culture. What discourses or ideologies (values, priorities, concerns) does your cultural artifact reveal? Jot down your thoughts.

As you can see, authors influence their cultures and they, in turn, are influenced by the social, political, military, and economic concerns of their cultures. To review the connection between literature and history, let’s look at one final example, “London” (<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songsie.b.illbk.36&java=yes>), written by the poet William Blake in 1794.

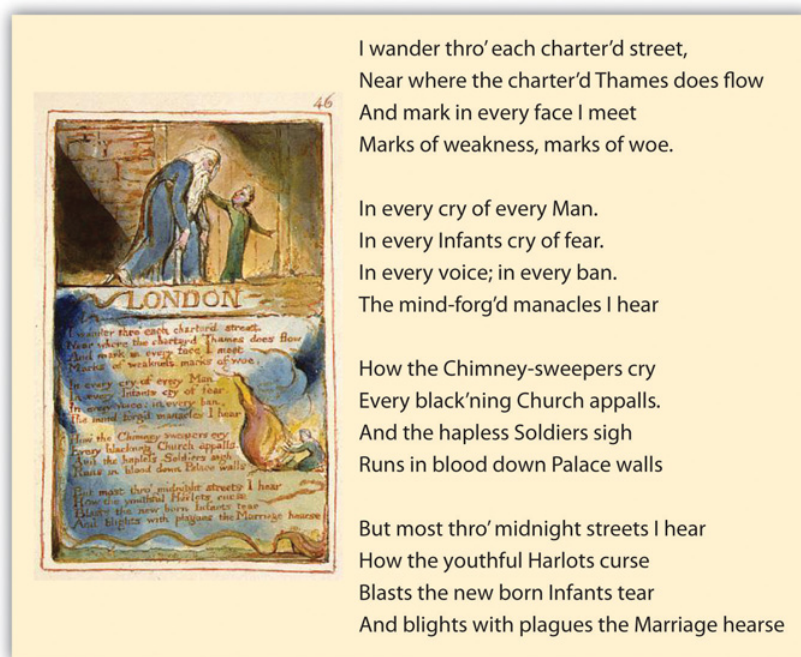


Illustration by William Blake for “London” from his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794).

Unlike Yeats or Stowe, Blake does not refer directly to specific events or people from the late eighteenth century. Yet this poem directly confronts many of the most pressing social issues of Blake’s day. The first stanza, for example, refers to the “charter’d streets” and “charter’d Thames.” If we look up the meaning of the word “charter,” we find that the word has several meanings. *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “charter,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charter>. “Charter” can refer to a deed or a contract. When Blake refers to “charter’d” streets, he might be alluding to the growing importance of London as a center of industry and commerce. A “charter” also defines boundaries and control. When Blake refers to “charter’d Thames,” then, he implies that nature—the Thames is the river that runs through London—has been constricted by modern society. If you look

through the rest of the poem, you can see many other historical issues that a scholar might be interested in exploring: the plight of child laborers (“the Chimney-sweepers cry”); the role of the Church (“Every black’ning Church”), the monarchy (“down Palace walls”), or the military (“the hapless Soldiers sigh”) in English society; or even the problem of sexually transmitted disease (“blights with plagues the Marriage hearse”). You will also notice that Blake provided an etching for this poem and the poems that compose *The Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *The Songs of Experience* (in which “London” was published), so Blake is also engaging in the artistic movement of his day and the very production of bookmaking itself. And we would be remiss if we did not mention that Blake wrote these poems during the French Revolution (1789–99), where he initially hoped that the revolution would bring freedom to all individuals but soon recognized the brutality of the movement. That’s a lot to ask of a sixteen-line poem! But each of these topics is ripe for further investigation that might lead to an engaging critical paper.

When scholars dig into one historical aspect of a literary work, we call that process **parallel reading**. Parallel reading involves examining the literary text in light of other contemporary texts: newspaper articles, religious pamphlets, economic reports, political documents, and so on. These different types of texts, considered equally, help scholars construct a richer understanding of history. Scholars learn not only what happened but also how people understood what happened. By reading historical and literary texts in parallel, scholars create, to use a phrase from anthropology, a **thick description** that centers the literary text as both a product and a contributor to its historical moment. A story might respond to a particular historical reality, for example, and then the story might help shape society’s attitude toward that reality, as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sparked a national movement to abolish slavery in the United States. To help us think through these ideas further, let’s look at a student’s research and writing process.

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12.3: Strategies for Starting Your New Historical Paper

We have just seen how Paige’s research and writing process led to a New Historical paper centered on Melville’s “Benito Cereno” and the American notion of Manifest Destiny. We also looked at Stefanie’s analysis of Emily Dickinson and the Civil War. In both cases, the writers’ processes were complex ones—developed as they got further and further into their projects. This complexity of research and writing is natural—all writers engage in this process. The difficulty of “doing” historical criticism, however, seems to be that you must have a base knowledge that most students in an introductory literature class don’t yet have. But let us assure you that students can write an involving New Historical paper if they are diligent about conducting research, which will eventually lead to a working topic that will lead to a critical claim.

While Paige’s and Stefanie’s researching and writing processes were recursive ones (see Chapter 1 for a review of recursive processes), we can chart a strategy that will help you as you undertake a writing project that uses New Historical theory. A general key is that you need to approach such an assignment by surrounding your topic; that is, you need to examine your author and work from a variety of perspectives, which includes a parallel reading of multiple texts that leads to a thick description of your subject. Be guided by the following general steps to get you started on an exciting New Historical paper:

1. Situate the author and his or her work in its specific historical time period. What were some of the key concerns of the day? A valuable way to do this is to examine the other historical and cultural texts that appeared around the time of the work’s publication: newspapers of the day, to get a feel for the key issues of the day, are a great starting point. Also examine the other social documents of the time period: religious and political pamphlets, economic discussions, and so forth. In addition, you’ll want to look at any biographies or autobiographies of your author, which will often engage in historical issues. This kind of research has been made much easier with the advent of digital archives, which will help you find primary sources related to your topic.
2. Focus on the author and his or her intentions. Examine the letters, the journals, and the interviews of the author to glean information. Authorial intention is a complex issue, but it is important to see what the writer was hoping to accomplish, regardless of whether he or she was successful.
3. Examine the work’s reception. How did the critics receive the work? Positively? Negatively? A mixture? Often a work’s reception will transform over time, which is called reception theory (see Chapter 6, which focuses on reader-response theory for a definition of this concept). You have learned about canon formation in this text, and it is valuable to explore how a work’s reception has transformed over time, not only the reception by academic scholars but the reception by popular readers too.
4. Connect the work you are analyzing to the other major works of literature that were written during this time. Do these works suggest some larger concerns that your writer is exploring? Make certain that your research is transnational—that is, don’t be limited by geography or nation. One example of such a timeline can be found at http://www.socsdteachers.org/tzenglish/literature_timeline.htm. “Literature Timeline,” Dept. of English, Tappan Zee High School, http://www.socsdteachers.org/tzenglish/literature_timeline.htm.
5. Consider the implications of the literary work on today’s culture and anticipate the effects it might have on the future. Why is reading and discussing your author and work important today? Why might your author and work be important to the future?

Once you have conducted your initial research using the following steps, you’ll be in a position to start making more concrete working claims about your project. Keep in mind that writing a paper on literature using New Historicism allows you to speculate more than when applying other literary theories. We don’t know for certain, for example, if Melville was aware that in “Benito Cereno” he was critiquing the notion of Manifest Destiny. But Paige makes a persuasive argument that opens up the story to further discussion.

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12.4: Suggestions for Further Reading

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