What is Literary Studies?

*Literary Ways of Approaching Texts*
“What Is Literary Studies?”
Lecture Preview

I. Why study literature?

II. What do we read? What “literature” do we study?

III. What are the skills of literary studies? How do we “study” literature?
I. Why study literature?
“The world of literature is human in shape ... where the primary realities are not atoms or electrons but bodies, and the primary forces not energy or gravitation but love and death and passion and joy.”—Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination*

Frye’s assertion offers many answers to the question, “Why study literature?” Literary studies is a discipline—like the sciences—but the world it illuminates is that of the universal human condition and what it means to be human. Stories represent an important medium for commenting on who we as individuals are, are not, and can be.

Literature (like the other arts) is also the imaginative realm of culture. A culture conveys its beliefs, values, and ideals through its stories. They comment on what an entire culture is, is not, and can be. Members of a culture understand themselves, their roles, and their world by understanding its stories.
By reading literature, you join a community that includes the author, the author’s contemporaries, the text’s characters, other readers and literary scholars, and now you.

By reading literature, you paradoxically develop *connectedness to* and *independence within* this community:

- You become an active member of this community by developing **literary citizenship**.
- You become connected by developing **empathy**.
- You become independent by developing **interpretive independence**.
The purpose of art and literature is not simply to confirm existing beliefs, but rather to examine them, interrogate them, and stretch them to and perhaps beyond their imaginative limits. By reading literature, you engage in these activities and expand your imagination, knowledge, and experience in the process.
In “The Transition to College Reading,” Robert Scholes applies an important term to this process when he writes, “All good citizens must be rhetoricians to the extent that they can imagine themselves in the place of another and understand views different from their own.”

Those in the community of literary studies claim that “literary citizenship” is a significant, meaningful life goal.
“Does man love Art? Man visits Art, but squirms. Art hurts. Art urges voyages—and it is easier to stay at home ....”
--Gwendolyn Brooks

Cultivating this literary citizenship is not easy. As you read, you will experience events, beliefs, and situations that are uncomfortable, that are outside your comfort zone and personally held values. Indeed, poet Heather McHugh claims that “poetry’s function is not to give us what we want.”
These challenges are the essence of your education: by exposing you to and engaging you with other worlds and ideas, resulting in new, developing, and more fully-realized ideas, literature is one of the most direct and accessible media for personal growth.

A commitment to literature, to exposing yourself to new and different ideas, is a commitment to the complex, diverse, and ever-changing world in which we live.

Warning about the effect of a diminished literary citizenship in *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom asserts, “The failure to read good books both enfeebles the vision and strengthens our most fatal tendency—the belief that here and now is all there is.”
“Reading makes immigrants of us all—it takes us away from home, but more important, it finds homes for us everywhere.”—Hazel Rochman

Reading literature is thus one of the most direct avenues you have to humanity and the concerns of the many different people who live in this world. Literature has been vital for many centuries because it provides this avenue of expression and connection.
Empathy

By traveling this avenue to humanity beyond yourself, you cultivate empathy, or the proverbial ability to walk in others’ shoes, live in others’ skin, and see through others’ eyes. Harvard Professor of Psychology Steven Pinker has studied the impact of what he calls the “moral technology” of fiction:

Much of the world has seen an end to slavery, to genocide for convenience, to torture as a routine form of criminal punishment, to capital punishment for property crimes, to human sacrifice, to rape as the spoils of war, to the ownership of women. We are getting less cruel, and the question is how. Exposure to a wider range of stories has helped people empathize with groups that they might otherwise have considered “subhuman.”
Just as writers do when they imagine their stories, you as reader become the characters, and you experience the world from the perspective of their beliefs, values, joys, and pains. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou recalls the liberating power of empathetic reading when she was a child:

To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter worm-wood for a cup of mead with *Beowulf* or a hot cup of tea and milk with *Oliver Twist*. 
Furthermore, the ability to read actively, deliberately, interpretively is perhaps the most vital skill you can possess in our culture. Think about the world you live in and the number of messages that reach out to you every day. Even on a short drive, you will likely encounter hundreds of messages: traffic signs, gas prices, billboards, radio ads, and bumper stickers.
While some of these messages aren’t as multilayered or important as others, they directly connect to your ability to interpret other, more significant messages: political speeches and commentary, editorials, cultural commentary, the U.S. Constitution, and how people interpret the Constitution.

One goal in your life should be “interpretive independence”—the ability to determine for yourself what a message fully means, without needing someone else to interpret it for you.
“He that loves reading,” according to William Godwin, “has everything within his reach. He has but to desire, and he may possess himself of every species of wisdom to judge and power to perform.”

Literature is the classroom for interpretive independence. There is no better training for how to read the world than in reading the literature that reflects, describes, and makes meaning out of that very world.
II. What do we read?
What “literature” do we study?
An important issue in literary studies is *what* we read. The collected body of literary works that we traditionally read is often referred to as “the literary canon.”

The word “canon” is Greek in origin, referring to “a measuring rod.” This root of the word is effective because it applies to how we determine or measure what’s “worth” reading.
A few definitions of “canon”

• An approved or traditional collection of works.

• Literature students typically use the word *canon* to refer to those works in anthologies that have come to be considered standard or traditionally included in the classroom and published textbooks.

• In this sense, "the canon" denotes the entire body of literature traditionally thought to be suitable for admiration and study.
Your relationship with the canon

It’s important to understand that the literary canon—as the works selected for reading and study—is a major source of debate in literary studies. Think about it this way: by definition, it’s an exclusive list with great power. Decades, even centuries of scholarly debate help determine the location of its ever-changing boundaries.

In many respects, people involved in literary studies—on any level—are obligated to question the existing canon, as well as to seek out works that should be read and studied but thus far have been ignored.
For example, one of the most studied novels today is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston’s inclusion in the literary canon is a very recent development, and twenty years ago you would have had a hard time even finding a copy of this book. Hurston’s book is now widely read because people involved in literary studies—in this case, Alice Walker—passionately argued for its inclusion.

The same process of re-examining the canon and neglected literary texts led to the inclusion of Kate Chopin, author of *The Awakening*, “The Story of an Hour,” and other stories. In 1969, around the time when Walker argued for the value of Hurston’s novel, a literary scholar named Per Seyersted wrote about the literary qualities of Chopin’s works. Now, Chopin is also widely studied.
These are just a few of many examples illustrating that the canon does not have fixed boundaries, that literary scholars and literary scholars-in-training are constantly examining new and old texts.

As students of literary studies, then, you should realize that every literary text you read is a choice and that people who study and care about literature have debated that the work should be read. You can test and examine these choices.
Generally, the criteria applied to literary texts to determine their “canonicity” include

• aesthetic value, or the effective use of a variety of literary elements (figurative language and other conventions), as well as a broader, less tangible sense of “pleasurable” reading

• significance to and “representative-ness” of the specifics of when and where it was written

• universal relevance, or how effectively it also captures common human experiences and emotions.
Therefore, when reading literature through the lens of literary studies, you learn from and about

- the text itself
- its biographical, historical, cultural, literary, and critical contexts,
- yourself
- your own larger culture and times in its consideration of this text.
III. What are the skills of literary studies? How do we “study” literature?
First and foremost, literary studies is a way, a method, a discipline of actively and deeply reading literary texts. When talking about literary works, the text is the basis for whatever interpretations, or “readings,” that a reader produces. For example, if I read *The Wizard of Oz* and claim that the Wicked Witch of the West really wasn’t so bad, then I need to have a basis for this statement. What gave me this idea? Where did it come from? What would I say if someone said, “Prove it!”
Thus, the primary source of evidence in literary studies is the text itself. This is why, in any literature course, the ability to do “close reading” is the most important skill. This is pure common sense: because literature is a written document, you have to be able to read and understand it. Interpretation is reading.

When making any claims about a literary work, your primary evidence is the text itself, its specific passages, lines, images, etc.
What is close reading?

In *A Practical Introduction to Literary Study*, James Brown and Scott Yarbrough define close reading as “Carefully and analytically considering every component of a text from a variety of angles. Particular attention is paid to the form and structure of the piece as well as any use of internal symbols and figurative language.” Close reading is engaging with the written text, its specific language, and its “subtext” (what’s “below” the text, including denotative and connotative meanings and associations) in ways we rarely do when reading for entertainment.

When people read “literarily,” they actively engage or interact with the text through a specific set of questions, interests, strategies, and concerns about what they are reading.
For example, imagine two different people looking at a restaurant menu. One person is a marathon runner who needs to load up on carbohydrates for tomorrow’s race. The other is a nutritionist who is analyzing the menu for a client. Because these individuals have different goals and reasons for analyzing the menu, they arrive at specific interpretations unique to their individual positions.

Similarly, those who read for entertainment read differently from literary scholars, or literary scholars-in-training.

When we read something purely for entertainment, our primary concern is simply “what” is being said. When we read through the lens of literary studies, we add “how” to the equation. We are concerned with both what is said and how it is said.
What do we mean, "How it is said"?

Imagine you’re beginning the latest Stephen King novel after months of gearing up to be frightened again by the master of horror. You sit down one night with your new book and can’t put it down, so you read the book, cover-to-cover, in one evening.
In the book, several metaphors and similes appear, such as the following:

- He slithered into the room and hissed at all who were present.
- He shed his skin, as if he were a snake.
- Their appetites were so large they felt as if they could unhinge their jaws and swallow any meal whole, without chewing, and without worrying about having to lay helpless while they slowly digested their food.
- Like the serpent, his business was temptation. Like Eve, her business was to be curious.
If you’re reading this horror novel purely for entertainment, you read these metaphors and similes and enjoy them because they add the “scary” or “creepy” element you’d anticipated. You appreciate what is being said.

Reading with literary eyes, however, broadens and awakens your reading mind to ask more questions, including “How?”
In this case, that means you recognize that King is using metaphors and similes to tell his story: they are one literary tool at his disposal. You also notice that many of his metaphors and similes connect to snakes and snake imagery, and this interests you. This then leads you to ask,

- How do snakes and snake images contribute thematically to this novel?
- What is it about snakes that’s important?

Because you are now concerned with how the text works, you are concerned with its literary qualities.
Beyond metaphor and simile, there are countless other literary elements you could address when doing a literary analysis.

This more active, questioning mode of reading is what you will dedicate much of your time to—learning various methods for interpreting how something works as a piece of literature.
In addition to recognizing and making meaning from the text’s words and phrases, some important moments of close reading occur when we wrestle with the language that’s complex, ambiguous, puzzling, or just plain confusing.

In fact, these moments are often the most interesting and, frankly, exciting for literary scholars.
This raises one of the most common misconceptions about literary studies. Our goal is not to “solve” the text but to “unpack” it.

“Solving a text” suggests that the text is a problem, and the reader’s job is to find its answer. The text is reduced from multiple parts to a singular solution. There’s a sense of closure as the unknown becomes known, and any mystery is cleared up.

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2+2=4 \quad e=mc^2 \quad \text{If } 2a+8=32, \text{ then } a=12.
\]
“Unpacking a text,” on the other hand, suggests opening up a package, taking out the different pieces, and exploring the contents. Unpacking a text turns it into a variety of parts to be dealt with. There’s a sense of anticipation, delight, and wonder in the process.
To fully answer these first two fundamental questions required in literary analysis, readers must support those answers with evidence—as in any discipline. They are also the first of many questions readers should ask of a literary text to engage with and understand it more fully.
What is the relationship of the text to the context in which it was produced? How does understanding these wider issues beyond the text illuminate and enhance the text?

Beyond the text are other relevant concepts and resources that help you develop, support, and prove an interpretation of a work of literature:

- biography,
- history,
- culture,
- other literary works,
- literary criticism and commentary, and
- personal experience.
Knowledge of an author’s life and background can enrich your reading of a work. For example, the fact that Thomas Malory was in prison when he wrote *The Death of Arthur* may allow readers to better understand the characters’ quests and undying idealism. The fact that Sylvia Plath committed suicide might help readers to better understand the poems about death in her book *Ariel*. Knowing that Mark Twain spent his childhood in a Mississippi River town and also that he grew up to be a steamboat pilot helps to contextualize some of the action in *Huckleberry Finn*.
Use caution when using biographical information. Certainly, there are the exceptions of authors who write primarily autobiographical works, but these cases are rare. Remember, literature is primarily the work of the imagination, and often its goal is to defy or escape or transform reality, not replicate it.

Thus, there are two important cautions to consider when thinking of the author.
1. Don’t confuse the author with a speaker, narrator, character, or persona.

For example, J.D. Salinger wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*, but he is not the narrator, Holden Caulfield, who is telling his story from a mental hospital.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote “The Cask of Amontillado,” but he is not the narrator, Montresor, who plots and carries out a plan to kill a rival.

2. Be wary of trying to figure out what the author “meant to say.” This is such a common error in reading literary texts that there’s a name for it: “intentional fallacy.”
Limiting an interpretation to what the author may or may not have “intended” is full of problems:

- First, it denies the reader any individual response to a text and suggests that there’s only one correct meaning of that text (“what the author meant”).

- It also makes assumptions that are dangerously close to trying to read the mind of the writer.

- Finally, most writers admit that they know the least about what their own texts mean…. 
In “How to Peel a Poem,” Donald Hall summed up his conversation with other contemporary poets with the following observation: “Believe the poem, not the poet. What might ultimately be good about a poem is something that I was not consciously aware of. Still, I did it. Something in me did it. One writes in a largely intuitive and sensual manner and then leaves it alone.”

More broadly, novelist D. H. Lawrence warns readers, scholars, and critics to “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.”
History

Knowledge of historical events, like biography, can significantly contribute to your understanding of a text.

For example, knowing the basic history of the Russian Revolution may help you interpret George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, which is an allegory for the conflict.

If you have historical knowledge about slavery in America, abolitionism, and the Underground Railroad, then Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* will be a richer text for you, and you’ll be able to interpret it more effectively than readers who lack this background.
Caution!

Also, simply knowing historical background is not a substitute for literary interpretation. As Toni Morrison observes, “History is what happened. Literature is what what happened means.” Thus, literature is far more than a retelling of historical events.

Conversely, not knowing some history doesn’t excuse you from interpreting a text. You may not have much knowledge of World War I, but you can still read and offer plenty of interpretations of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *A Farewell to Arms*. 
Knowledge of culture can also help you more fully interpret literary works. While history usually focuses on specific events, culture often involves a general knowledge of the traditions, rituals, beliefs, conventions, and values of a people.

For example, if you know how important horses were to the plains Indians, especially on a symbolic level, then you’ll understand how in James Welch’s *Fools Crow*, the main character’s stealing horses from a rival tribe is a rite of passage into manhood.
Literature, as a field of study, is an enormous, expansive landscape, and it grows every day with the publication of more works. Being familiar with a variety of literary works also leads to richer, more multilayered reading. As a new student of literature, one skill you’ll acquire is the ability to synthesize (connect, intersect) separate literary works.

Because the greatest writers are often the greatest readers, they often allude to or invoke other works of literature in their own work. In Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, for instance, the narrator illustrates this concept with an epiphany:

Now, I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. In the light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors.
Through his narrator, Eco is recognizing the relationships between texts—what we call “intertextuality.” One work of literature can help you to interpret another.

For example, parody and satire demand attention to intertextuality. How can someone poke fun at another work of literature without somehow pointing to it?

Also, Shakespeare’s famous sonnet “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” is a love poem that comments on more traditional love poems. Readers familiar with these traditional poems are better able to understand this poem in which the speaker appears to be making fun of the person he loves. (He is actually praising his love.)
Like botany, history, mathematics, and foreign languages, literary studies is a discipline pursued and studied by many. When people “study” something, they record and share their findings to advance current knowledge. Literature is no exception.

When interpreting works of literature, you may invoke interpretations forwarded by other readers over time as evidence and support. This isn’t simply substituting someone else’s ideas for your own; instead, sometimes the best way to shed light on your own ideas is to have them directly interact with the ideas of others, including experts like literary scholars.
Finally, reading is a personal process, and readers contribute to this interpretive process. For example, let’s say you’re assigned to interpret a poem about deer hunting. The poem has two sections: the first presents a very negative view of the hunters, while the second section portrays them positively. If you have personal experience with hunting, your experience is valid when arriving at your interpretation because you have intimate knowledge of the situation that is the subject of the author’s text.

Remember, writers want to reach an audience; they want to connect with readers. One way they achieve this is through shared experiences.
Caution!

Novice or beginning readers too often rely on personal experience for the basis of their reading. Remember, your main goal is to interpret the work and vision of another person. Toni Morrison’s description of why she loves reading captures this role of the personal: “I need that intimate, sustained surrender to the company of my own mind while it touches another's.”

Because of this tendency of novice readers foreground themselves rather than the text, Robert Scholes’s essay “The Transition to College Reading” proposes alternate language for what we call close reading: “What we actually mean by 'close' reading may be distant reading—reading as if the words belonged to a person at some distance from ourselves in thought or feeling. Perhaps they must be seen as the words of someone else before they can be seen as words at all—or, more particularly, as words that need to be read with close attention.”

Personal experience should be used to help clarify or lend more context to a certain point in the text, but as you read closely, you’re reading the text closely—not yourself. Thus, the primary source of evidence is always the text itself.
There are two “directions” in which you should guide your thinking while reading literary texts: vertically and horizontally.

**Vertical Thinking**
Close reading focuses your mind on the text itself and its specific language.

- specific language
- subtext (denotative & connotative meanings)
- parts of the piece
- literary elements

**Horizontal Thinking**
Contextual reading pushes your mind outside the text to its contexts.

- biographical context
- historical context
- cultural context
- literary context
- critical context
- personal context
Finally…

This way of reading—questioning the text; the contexts of biography, history, culture, other literary works, and commentary and criticism; and personal experience—contributes to a literacy that’s specific to literary studies. One of your goals as a reader and a student of literary studies is to cultivate this literacy.

Literacy implies understanding, and understanding is always the goal of reading, whether you’re reading a phone bill, an advertisement, a novel, or a poem.
You don’t merely accept messages as many do, sometimes without even thinking. You learn to engage, analyze, test, and interrogate them. You develop the power and the choice to accept or reject them.

This power represents your critical reading and thinking skills, through which you assume the role of active learner. The method and thought processes cultivated here will affect all other areas of your life.
The better you are at interpreting literature, the better you are at interpreting the world around you.
The greater your literary literacy, the more self-reliant you are in dealing with reading, language, and all forms of communication.
By accumulating the skills required for this literacy, you move toward literary citizenship, empathy, and interpretive independence, all of which change your relationships to and within in the larger world.
“I read because one life isn’t enough, and in the page of a book I can be anybody;

I read because the words that build the story become mine, to build my life;

I read not for happy endings but for new beginnings; I’m just beginning myself, and wouldn’t mind a map;

I read because I have friends who don’t, and young though they are, they’re beginning to run out of material;

I read because every journey begins at the library, and it’s time for me to start packing;

I read because one of these days I’m going to get out of this town, and I’m going to go everywhere and meet everybody, and I want to be ready.”

–Richard Peck