



LEE A. JACOBUS

*Literature*

An Introduction to Critical Reading

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An Introduction to Critical Reading

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Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Acquisitions Editor: Maggie Barbieri  
Editorial/production supervisor: Mary P. Rottino  
Interior design: Eileen Burke  
Cover design: Carol Anson  
Cover art: Jenny Okun  
Manufacturing Buyer: Mary Ann Gloriande



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Simon & Schuster/A Viacom Company  
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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## **Acknowledgments—Continued on page 1901—**

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### **INTERPRETING LITERATURE**

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Printed in the United States of America  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**ISBN 0-13-282633-X**

PRENTICE-HALL INTERNATIONAL (UK) LIMITED, *London*  
PRENTICE-HALL OF AUSTRALIA PTY. LIMITED, *Sydney*  
PRENTICE-HALL CANADA INC., *Toronto*  
PRENTICE-HALL HISPANOAMERICANA, S.A., *Mexico*  
PRENTICE-HALL OF INDIA PRIVATE LIMITED, *New Delhi*  
PRENTICE-HALL OF JAPAN, INC., *Tokyo*  
SIMON & SCHUSTER ASIA PTE. LTD., *Singapore*  
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

# PREFACE

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*Literature: An Introduction to Critical Reading* reflects the ways in which literature is taught in classrooms around the world today. It assumes a wide range of possible critical approaches and avoids forcing literature into a limited or limiting perspective. You will find here opportunities to develop New Critical formalist strategies of reading, as well as feminist, psychoanalytic, historicist, economic, political, cultural, ethnic, response criticism, and other modes as well. The selections engage the interest of the modern student while offering a remarkable range of nationalities, historical periods, and authors: canonical, marginalized, and contemporary. The collection includes 48 short stories, 372 poems, and 19 plays.

## CLOSE READING

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The primary strategy used in this book is traditional close reading. However, it is used not as an end in itself. Close reading is preliminary to any discussion of a text. The primary goal of reading in this book is interpretation. Therefore, close reading begins the process and enlightened criticism completes it. In this sense, the book encourages us to consider what is truly important in any given work of literature, regardless of its genre. Instead of demanding that a given work be examined only for its treatment of character, its development of imagery, its attention to setting, or its elaboration of theme, I have chosen works that excite ideas first, then yield to an examination of its elements as appropriate. I emphasize elements rather than a given element because, while each genre has an individual chapter discussing the elements most appropriate to it, my concern is how the elements intersect, complement one another, and ultimately serve a higher literary purpose: to make a lasting statement. Interpretation cannot be limited to accounting for the separable elements of literature, but must move on to dealing with the purposes they serve.

## CRITICAL READING

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The first section of the book begins with a chapter titled *Interpreting Literature*. It gives a step-by-step approach to the practice of interpretation, using a short work of literature and employing a wide variety of strategies,

such as feminist, reader response, historicist, political, and formalist, demonstrating that many works of literature can be fruitfully examined from more than one critical standpoint. The chapter emphasizes critical reading by employing a technique of observation and questioning that helps open the work to interpretation. Each strategy of reading produces more and more insight into the work. Interpretation always implies a search for meaning, and the approach used in this book emphasizes the fact that meaning is negotiated by analysis and reflection.

## WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

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The second chapter, *Writing About Literature*, provides a process approach to close reading resulting in a written essay. Pre-writing techniques such as listing, brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting prove useful for the purposes of interpreting literature. Discussions of outlining, drafting, and revising result in the production of two sample essays written from different critical perspectives on a single work, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias." For those courses in which writing instruction is not paramount, this chapter will help students develop material for class discussion and for critical reading of texts.

Later chapters, *Interpreting Short Fiction*, *Interpreting Poetry*, and *Interpreting Drama* each examine a specimen text: William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," Robert Frost's "Birches," and Susan Glaspell's *Suppressed Desires*. In each case the chapters provide a model of close reading and a range of interpretations involving formalist, feminist, psychoanalytic, reader response, and other methods. And each chapter attends to the special concerns and demands of the genre and its elements. In each chapter interpretation results in a short written essay, usually combining two or more critical strategies.

These chapters follow the pattern of Chapter 2, *Writing About Literature* and end with a sample essay. Again, if your emphasis is not on writing, these chapters will serve as models of interpretation and discussion. The step-by-step illustration of critical method will be of value regardless of the use to which you put the chapter.

## ENJOYING LITERATURE

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The ultimate goal of readers of literature is to enjoy what they read. Like most instructors, I believe it is important to understand what is read in order to enjoy it. Some works of literature are enjoyable because they provide a special delight. Chapter 3, *Enjoying Short Fiction*, Chapter 6, *Enjoying Poetry*, and Chapter 9, *Enjoying Drama*, all focus on literary works that provide delight to most readers for a large number of reasons, from humor to wordplay and pleasant sounds. Enjoyment is an important goal for all of us in regard to literature, and each genre has its special pleasures. The samples in these chapters are chosen for their immediacy and appeal.



## **THE ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE**

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Historically, introduction to literature courses have emphasized the elements: setting, character, plot, point of view, irony, tone, attitude, figurative language, form, and theme, among others. In this book a single chapter introduces these elements for each genre in a way that is both thorough and efficient. Students will find appropriate opportunity to discuss and observe these elements in action as well as to consider how they intersect and cooperate. These chapters: 4. Elements of Short Fiction, 7. Elements of Poetry, and 10. Elements of Drama provide a large number of sample texts which use specific elements effectively, but the book is not designed around the elements. The elements must be understood in order to establish a useful discourse about literature, but they serve a larger function in grounding the student in preparation for interpreting literary works in each of the major genres.

## **EXPANDING THE CANON**

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Debates regarding the canon of literary works have encouraged modern readers to look beyond the immediate horizons of “authorized” writers and to consider works that may be unfamiliar, innovative, challenging, and responsive to the needs of a wide variety of audiences. Some fresh faces are apparent in the section on short fiction: Bharati Mukherjee, Becky Birtha, Scott Bradfield, Sandra Cisneros, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Louise Erdrich, Alice Munro, and Tim O’Brien. They appear alongside more traditional writers such as Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Ralph Ellison, Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Katherine Mansfield, and Eudora Welty.

Among the poets who may be new discoveries to many readers are Carol Rumens, Andrew Hudgins, Walter McDonald, Judith Rodriguez, Peter Meinke, Gerald Costanzo, William Carpenter, Patricia Goedicke, Philip Dacey, Marilyn Wanick, Margaret Gibson, Agha Shalid Ali, Lynda Hull, Henri Coulette, Judith Rodriguez, Juanita Casey, Marilyn Chin, Mazisi Kunene, Lorna Goodison, Mekeel McBride, Alurista, Fily-Dabo Sissoko, and many more. In the poetry album you will find a sampling of Chicano and Chicana poets, Native American poets, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, and African poets in translation. In addition you will find a generous sampling of Imagist poets and of individual poets such as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, and William Butler Yeats. In the section on drama, you will find classic plays such as Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Molière’s *The Misanthrope*, Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, Ibsen’s *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, and Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*. But you will also find contemporary playwrights’ work, such as Woody Allen’s *Death Knocks*, Tina Howe’s *Teeth*, Athol Fugard’s *MASTER HAROLD . . . and the boys*, John Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation*, Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, August

Wilson's *Fences*, and Paula Vogel's moving AIDS play on the death of her brother, *The Baltimore Waltz*.

## **CRITICAL WINDOWS**

Throughout each of the albums of stories, poems, and plays, critical windows establish specific concerns that should interest a reader in each of the genres. Their purpose is to clarify important critical issues, point the way to authors concerned with the issues, and focus the discussion of the issues. *Fiction and the Canon* introduces the issues surrounding canon formation and the debate that currently involves the attention of readers. *Fiction and the Reader* discusses response criticism and its role in reading intelligently. *Fiction and Politics* raises issues regarding works that have a political valence, while *Freud and Fiction*, *Feminist Fiction*, *Fiction and Culture*, and *History and Fiction* all cite specific works that profit from consideration of their contexts. Each of these windows precedes a story that it will specially illuminate. And each window contains a brief bibliography to help and encourage students to do further reading.

Special critical windows in the poetry section range from *Chicano Poetry*, *Poems in Translation: African Poets*, and *Poetry and Feminism* to *Romantic Poetry*, *Modernism and Its Practitioners*, *The Long Poem*, *Poetic School: The Imagists*, and *Background: Yeats and Byzantium*. In the section on drama you will find such windows as *Types, Stereotypes, and Archetypes*; *Politics, Ethnicity, and Drama*; *Feminist Drama*; and *Freud, Oedipus, and Drama*. Each of these windows offers opportunities for exploration of critical issues that concern today's readers.

The albums are presented alphabetically by author. A good many of the poets are represented generously, either by offering a number of their poems, or, in many cases, by offering a poem that is somewhat longer than usual for anthologies of this kind. Longer poems give students useful experience in part because they can see an idea develop and flower, and the pleasure of reading the poem grows in the imagination. Poems such as Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage," Ann Sexton's "Red Riding Hood," and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," and Dolores Kendrick's "Leah: In Freedom" are extraordinary performances.

## **Authors in Depth**

In the case of each genre, one author is developed in depth, offering a range of that author's work for examination along with a commentary that can be used to develop a detailed understanding of that author. Eudora Welty has three stories and several commentaries by Welty herself and critics who have thought carefully about her work. The same is true for Sylvia Plath, who has twelve poems and three passages from journals and letters, that shed light on her as a writer. Henrik Ibsen's work is also presented in depth, with *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*. The plays are followed by commentaries by Ibsen,

Bernard Shaw, and Janet Achurch, who played the role of Nora. In the case of each of these writers, the materials presented are sufficient to sustain an original interpretation of their work. They also help students understand the dimensions of a writer's life, which is not possible when reading only one or two examples from a life's work.

## **INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL**

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An extensive instructor's manual of more than 500 pages distills my own philosophy of teaching literature. It offers a range of important resources, such as sample syllabi, video and audio recordings of writers in the collection, and detailed treatments of all the works in the text. Each story, poem, and play has questions for close reading appropriate for in-class discussion, or which can be given to students to use on their own. A second set of questions for critical interpretation helps engage the student in interpretive consideration of the work. These questions can be used for directing class discussion or for assignments in writing. They are open-ended questions designed to stimulate discussion, not close it down.

Every work in each album has a commentary on the author and the value for the classroom of the story, poem, or play. In addition, every piece in the albums has a sample of interpretations from the most appropriate critical approaches, such as formalist, psychoanalytic, feminist, cultural, and others. I was assisted in the preparation of the manual by four experienced Teaching Assistants working toward their doctorates at the University of Connecticut. They all have extensive experience teaching Introduction to Literature. My charge to them was to produce commentary and material that would be especially useful to Teaching Assistants, especially to those who might be teaching for the first time. With their early experiences close at hand, Catherine Nevil Parker, Julie Pfeiffer, Marianne Sadowski, and Mary Ann Reimann produced an unusually valuable guide to the use of this book. My own contributions to the manual supplement theirs in every section. They are based on my more than thirty years experience in the classroom teaching Introduction to Literature and related courses. I have aimed to anticipate problems in teaching specific works as well as to provide interesting and controversial readings of important works throughout the book. Further, I added to and developed their original commentaries in order to provide extensive material for the experienced teacher.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM**

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In addition to the Instructor's Manual, a separate volume of essays, *Teaching Literature: A Collection of Essays on Theory and Practice*, on the subject of teaching Introduction to Literature is available to teachers using of this book.



This volume includes up-to-date essays written by a wide range of contemporary teachers recording their views on the role theory has in today's classroom. Among the essays are: Stephen Booth, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time and All Others*; Jo Keroes, *Half Someone Else's: Theories, Stories, and the Conversation of Literature*; Steven Mailloux, *The Institutional Rhetoric of Literary Criticism*; Steven Lynn, *A Passage Into Critical Theory*; Robert Scholes, *Is There a Fish in this Text?*; Richard Marius, *Reflections on the Freshman English Course*; William R. Schroeder, *A Teachable Theory of Interpretation*; Edward Hirsch, from *Validity in Interpretation*; Nan Johnson, *Reader Response and the Pathos Principle*; Jane Tompkins, *The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response*; Deanne Bogdan, *From the Inside Out: On First Teaching Women's Literature and Feminist Criticism*.

These teachers discuss teaching from a practical point of view and aim to help all of us who hope to make the study of literature a significant experience for our students. The essays explore current practice, demonstrating the ways in which literature is being taught across the country now that so many interpretive avenues are available.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The people who contributed to this book are so numerous that I am bound to omit some who have made important contributions. First, I must thank Sharon Jacobus who first mentioned this project to Prentice-Hall. Then, I must mention Kate Morgan, my first enthusiastic editor, and Phil Miller, who saw the need for this book. Tony English has been both friend and supporter of the project. Joyce Perkins, my development editor, was its champion and persistent enthusiast, and the stalwart throughout. Alison Reeves guided me expertly through a number of problematic challenges. Marlane Miriello brought considerable grace and insight into the book in its last stages of development and helped me improve it substantially. Finally, my editor and in some ways soulmate, Maggie Barbieri, has shown me the best in college publishing: seriousness, honor, insight, and fun.

My indebtedness to my students is very great. Not only do I owe a great deal to the legion of students in my Introduction to Literature courses, but also to the graduate students who spent time responding to the issues raised in this book. I especially owe a debt of gratitude to Nevil, Julie, Marianne, and Mary Ann, whose excitement at the prospect of finally having a book they could teach from and be true to their understanding of how we interpret literature was inspiring to me at every turn. James Anderson deserves special mention for help in editing the essays on teaching literature. Amy Page helped with numerous details along the way, including the index and glossary.

But in addition to students who contributed to the book, I must thank many colleagues. Regina Barreca was helpful in more ways than I can count, and perhaps most importantly in my inclusion of some of her suggestions for

stories and poems. Michael Meyer was extraordinarily generous in his suggestions for the book and for his subtle analysis of the questions of canon formation. Brenda Murphy and George Monteiro gave me support and fellowship. Annie Charters stimulated me with good conversation. Tom Recchio's positive response to the project was especially encouraging. Sylvan Barnet, extraordinary teacher and scholar, saved me some grief. As always, many colleagues listened to my ideas and gave me good advice: A. Harris Fairbanks, Lynn Bloom, Tom Recchio, Margaret Gibson, Donna Hollenberg, Robert Hazenfratz, Margaret Higonnet, and Samuel Pickering are some of them. I also profited from comments by many friends at other universities.

Special mention goes to Jenny Okun, whose photograph provided the cover for this book. Her work is original, inspired, and moving. She once welcomed a group of my students to her London studio for a memorable discussion of the art of photography.

In the end, of course, I owe an immense debt to Joanna Jacobus, who has seen a number of large projects to completion with me, and whose enthusiasm for this one buoyed me throughout.

*Lee A. Jacobus*

# Brief Contents

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CONTENTS	ix
PREFACE	xxvii
INTRODUCTION	1
What Is Literature?	3
1    Interpreting Literature	5
2    Writing about Literature	23
SHORT FICTION	53
3    Enjoying Short Fiction	55
4    Elements of Short Fiction	68
5    Interpreting Short Fiction	152
An Album of Short Fiction	167
Eudora Welty in Depth	512
POETRY	547
6    Enjoying Poetry	549
7    Elements of Poetry	560
8    Interpreting Poetry	644
An Album of Poems	663
Sylvia Plath in Depth	1005
DRAMA	1049
9    Enjoying Drama	1051
10   Elements of Drama	1113
11   Interpreting Drama	1168
An Album of Plays	1195
Henrik Ibsen in Depth	1766

# CONTENTS

---

Preface	xxvii
INTRODUCTION	1
What Is Literature?	3
<i>I</i> Interpreting Literature	5
What Is Interpretation?	5
The Importance of Interpretation	5
Close Reading	6
Robert Frost, "Fire and Ice"	7
The Process of Interpretation	8
Interpretation and the author's intention	9
Interpretation and the search for meaning	10
Interpretive Strategies	10
Text-based Interpretations	10
The Formalist Approach: New Criticism	11
Psychoanalytic Criticism	11
Reader-based Interpretation	13
Reader Response Criticism	13
Context-based Interpretations	14
Feminist Criticism	14
Political-Economic Criticism	15
Cultural Criticism	16
Historicism and New Historicism	17
Combining Interpretive Strategies	18
Using Interpretive Strategies	18
Nikki Giovanni, "Master Charge Blues"	18
A Formalist Interpretation: New Criticism	19
A Psychoanalytic Interpretation	20
A Reader Response Interpretation	20
A Feminist Interpretation	21

A Political-Economic Interpretation	21
A Cultural Interpretation	21
A Historical Interpretation	22
A Final Point	22

## **2 Writing about Literature**

**23**

The Importance of Writing about Literature	23
Developing Insights	23
Beginning with Close Reading	24
Percy Bysshe Shelly, "Ozymandias"	24
Taking Notes and Summarizing	25
Keeping a Response Journal	26
The Process of Writing an Interpretive Essay: Prewriting	27
Freewriting, Brainstorming, and Listing	27
Narrowing the Topic	30
Trying Out Interpretive Strategies	31
Formalist/New Critical	31
Reader Response	31
Psychoanalytic	31
Historicist	31
Developing a Thesis	32
Principles of Evidence	33
Backing Up Your Thesis with Details from the Text	33
Finding Patterns, Implications, Silent Gestures, Codes, and Subtleties	34
Using Outside Sources	35
Finding Available Resources	35
Gathering and Using Sources	37
The Writing Process Continued	38
Outlining	38
Drafting and Revising	39
Editing	40
The Interpretive Essay's Structure	41
The Mechanics of Quotation and Documentation	42
Quoting from a Literary Text	42
Incorporating Short Quotations	42
Setting Off Long Quotations	42
Documenting Quotations from a Literary Text	43
Compiling a Works Cited List	44
Citing Works in Your Essay in MLA Style	46
Details of Manuscript Preparation	47
Sample Essays	48
A Formalist/Historicist Interpretation Using Sources	48
A Reader Response Interpretation	50

## SHORT FICTION

		53
3	<b>Enjoying Short Fiction</b>	55
	What Is Short Fiction? 55	
	Interpreting a Story from <i>The Decameron</i> 56	
	Giovanni Boccaccio, "The Pot of Basil" 57	
	Analyzing the Story 59	
	Using Interpretive Strategies 60	
	Beginning with Close Reading 63	
	Suzanne Jacob, "Two Cents" 63	
	Meaning: Implied and Explicit 66	
	Aesop, "The Rooster and the Precious Gem" 66	
4	<b>Elements of Short Fiction</b>	68
	Why the Elements Are Important 68	
	The Elements of Fiction 68	
	Which Elements Are Important? 70	
	The Elements Working Together 70	
	Setting and Mood 70	
	Edgar Allan Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death" 71	
	Character and Psychology 77	
	Seán O'Faoláin, "Falling Rocks, Narrowing Road, Cul-de-Sac, Stop" 79	
	Style and Theme 100	
	Style: Formal, Informal, and Ornamented 100	
	Theme and Variations 101	
	John Cheever, "The Swimmer" 101	
	Plot and Narrative Structure 111	
	Katherine Anne Porter, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" 113	
	Point of View 121	
	Charles Baxter, "Gryphon" 124	
	Irony and Tone 136	
	James Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" 138	
	Seeing the Elements Work Together 143	
	Bharati Mukherjee, "Jasmine" 143	
5	<b>Interpreting Short Fiction</b>	152
	Beginning with Close Reading 152	
	William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily" 152	
	A Student Interpretation 161	
	Freewriting 161	
	Sample Essay: An Interpretation 163	
	Further Strategies for Interpretation 165	



## An Album of Short Fiction

- Isabel Allende, "Walimai" 168  
 Margaret Atwood, "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother" 172  
 Toni Cade Bambara, "The Lesson" 182  
 Ann Beattie, "The Cinderella Waltz" 188  
 Becky Birtha, "Johnnieruth" 200  
 Scott Bradfield, "The Dream of the Wolf" 204  
 Raymond Carver, "Night School" 221

### Window: Fiction and the Canon 225

- Anton Chekhov, "Concerning Love" 227  
 Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 233  
 Sandra Cisneros, "Never Marry a Mexican" 235  
 Stanley Elkin, "A Poetics for Bullies" 244

### Window: Fiction and the Reader 256

- Ralph Ellison, "Battle Royal" 257  
 Louise Erdrich, "Love Medicine" 271

### Window: Fiction and Politics 288

- Richard Ford, "Communist" 290

### Window: Psychology: Freud and Fiction 302

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 304  
 Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter" 315  
 Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" 335  
 James Joyce, "Araby" 338  
 James Joyce, "Counterparts" 343  
 Jamaica Kincaid, "Lucy" 350  
 Mary Lavin, "Happiness" 360  
 D. H. Lawrence, "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter" 371

### Window: Feminist Fiction 383

- Urula K. Le Guin, "Sur" 384  
 Doris Lessing, "To Room 19" 395  
 Katherine Mansfield, "The Garden-Party" 417

### Window: Fiction and Culture 428

- Gabriel Garcia Márquez, "Eyes of a Blue Dog" 429  
 Alice Munro, "The Moons of Jupiter" 434  
 Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" 445

### Window: History and Fiction 456

- Tim O'Brien, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" 458  
 Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" 471  
 William Trevor, "The Ballroom of Romance" 482  
 Alice Walker, "Everyday Use: For Your Grandmama" 495  
 Fay Weldon, "Weekend" 501

**Eudora Welty in Depth** **512**

- A Commentary on Welty's Career
- "A Worn Path" 512
- "Livvie" 518
- "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" 527
- Research Materials 534
  - Eudora Welty, "One Writer's Beginnings" 534
  - Eudora Welty, "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" 535
  - Ruth M. Vande Kieft, "Technique in 'Livvie'" 537
  - Ruth D. Weston, "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" 540
  - Peter Schmidt, "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" 542

**POETRY** **547**

**6 Enjoying Poetry** **549**

- Poetry and Performance 549
- How Poems Please Us 549
  - Lewis Carroll, "Jabberwocky" 551
- Words and Sounds
  - Edgar Allan Poe, "The Bells" 553
  - Edward Lear, "How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear" 557
  - Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Nephelidia" 558

**7 Elements of Poetry** **560**

- Language 563
  - T. S. Eliot, "Macavity: The Mystery Cat," from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* 564
  - Edith Sitwell, "Sir Beelzebub" 566
  - E. E. Cummings, "Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal" 567
  - Bessie Smith, "Empty Bed Blues" 569
- Imagery 571
  - Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro" 572
  - Carol Rumens, "An Easter Garland" 572
  - Henri Coulette, "Correspondence" 574
  - Andrew Hudgins, "Gauguin: The Yellow Christ" 575
  - Walter McDonald, "The Food Pickers of Saigon" 576
- Tone 578
  - James Stephens, "A Glass of Beer" 578
  - Judith Rodriguez, "Eskimo Occasion" 579
  - A. E. Housman, "Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff" 580
  - Ben Jonson, "On My First Son" 583
- Rhythms and Rhymes 584
  - Aphra Behn, "Song" 586

- A. E. Housman, "With Rue My Heart Is Laden" 588
- E. E. Cummings, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" 589
- Peter Meinke, "Miss Arbuckle" 591
- Howard Nemerov, "Because You Asked about the Line  
between Prose and Poetry" 592
- Stevie Smith, "Mother, among the Dustbins" 592
- Metaphor and Simile 594
  - William Shakespeare, Sonnet 73: "That time of year thou  
mayst in me behold" 595
  - Denise Levertov, "Canción" 596
  - E. E. Cummings, "she being Brand/-new" 597
  - Randall Jarrell, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" 599
  - Edwin Honig, "As a Great Prince" 599
- Other Figurative Language 600
  - William Wordsworth, "London, 1802" 602
  - Gerald Costanzo, "At Irony's Picnic" 603
- Symbol and Allegory 604
  - William Blake, "The Tiger" 604
  - E. E. Cummings, "1(a)" 606
  - Robert Frost, "Mending Wall" 607
  - Patrick Kavanagh, "To the Man after the Harrow" 609
  - William Carpenter, "Fire" 610
- Form 612
  - The Sonnet 613
    - Sir Philip Sidney, Sonnet 31: "With how sad steps, Oh Moon,  
thou climb'st the skies!" 614
    - Shakespeare, Sonnet 29: "When in disgrace with Fortune and  
men's eyes" 615
    - John Donne, Holy Sonnet 10: "Death, be not proud" 616
    - John Milton, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" 617
    - Peter Meinke, "The Poet, Trying the Surprise God" 618
  - The Ode 619
  - The Ballad 619
    - Anne Stevenson, "The Fiction-Makers" 620
  - The Villanelle 622
    - Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good  
Night" 622
- Ideas 623
  - Robert Herrick, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" 624
  - Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach" 625
  - Anne Sexton, "All My Pretty Ones" 627
  - Derek Walcott, "A Far Cry from Africa" 629
  - Ishmael Reed, "Beware : Do Not Read This Poem" 630
- The Elements Working Together 632
  - Patricia Goedicke, "Wise Owl" 632