

Journeys through
American
Literature



Myra Shulman

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by
Myra Shulman

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Preface

Journeys through American Literature is an advanced-level, content-based textbook that contains selections from the masterpieces of American literature. It is intended for students of English as a second or foreign language who want to read literary works written in the English language, but it can also be used by American students who need a general introduction to American literature.

In this text, selections were limited to works written originally in English whose theme is a journey, either metaphorical or literal. Of course, the journey or quest is one of the most common metaphors in literature and has served as the framework for innumerable works, both ancient (*Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*) and modern (James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*). The readings were chosen on the basis of literary merit, reasonable length, and interesting, yet accessible, content. I have organized the book's chapters chronologically to give readers the experience of moving through the historical periods of American literature, from the early nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century.

The selections are a balanced combination of fiction and nonfiction, poetry and prose. Altogether, they offer a wide variety of authors, content, styles, forms, and traditions. My choices include brief whole works (poems and short stories) as well as excerpts from longer works (novels, autobiographies, and long poems). In choosing to include excerpts, I am giving readers a glimpse of an author's style and content, with the hope that they will become enthusiastic enough to read the work in its entirety. Similarly, I hope students will be motivated to read other poems, short stories, and essays by those authors whose writing they especially enjoy and can identify with. Indeed, the intent of this text is to encourage readers to delve further into the great works of American literature.

An overview of each literary period and genre and biographical sketches of the authors introduce the readings and describe the literary period or tradition to which the author belongs. I have also outlined the major themes and general characteristics of an author's style to facilitate comprehension of the selection. Preceding the biographical sketches are quotations from that author and well-known writers or other figures. These quotations serve to broaden the context of the readings and stimulate discussion.

Prereading tasks (skimming, scanning, questioning) prepare students for the literary world they are about to enter and allow them to call on their existing knowledge of the theme and subject, thus enhancing comprehension. The postreading exercises were influenced by Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, in which reading is seen as the interaction among reader, writer, and text, and the personal response is considered the central element in reading literature. Rosenblatt says: "The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involv-

ing the mind and emotions of some particular reader.”¹ Accordingly, the reader’s response comes first, before analyzing the text or the author’s intent. Therefore, these exercises begin with discussion questions, followed by analysis of style and language, writing assignments, group work, and a chapter synthesis.

This book implements the theory that reading and writing are interrelated skills that should not be separated, so students are given opportunities to write before and after completing the readings. (Various writing strategies are presented in the appendixes.) Many of the writing assignments and group work activities ask readers to compare their responses to various selections, as this offers opportunities to develop not only critical analysis and judgment but also literary appreciation. My purpose is to help readers formulate and express their own preferences and opinions. Because the power of beautifully written poetry, short stories, and novels can evoke strong emotional responses in readers, students are generally eager to discuss or write about works of literature. These essays and classroom discussions allow students to sharpen their critical-thinking skills while they are improving their communicative competence. But more importantly, they lead to the discovery that there is not one correct interpretation; there are many interpretations.

Journeys through American Literature is unique because it combines the reading of literature, the analysis of literary styles and techniques, and the acquisition of language skills. It is a learner-centered text with an integrated-skills approach to teaching English as a second language (ESL). Students use their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills as they undertake the tasks in each chapter, and the teacher should function more as a facilitator and equal participant than as a traditional teacher lecturing to the class. The text, while encouraging independence and self-reliance, also emphasizes group work. Most activities can be done with students working in teams or with partners in an atmosphere of collaborative learning. As the students work in groups and share their responses, a community among readers is developed, which is a positive factor in a cross-cultural ESL classroom.

The goals of *Journeys through American Literature* are the following:

1. to increase students’ understanding and enjoyment of literature;
2. to provide examples of great works of American literature;
3. to encourage critical analysis of ideas, structure, and style in literary texts;
4. to strengthen logical thinking in written and oral expression;
5. to improve reading comprehension and vocabulary; and
6. to broaden cross-cultural perspectives.

One of the challenging tasks in reading these works is understanding the vocabulary. Literary works tend to contain a large number of unfamiliar words and creative structures, and readers may be slowed down by their inability to guess the meaning of a word or phrase from the context. Therefore, each selection is followed by an extensive glossary with definitions of difficult or unusual words, including archaic forms (“hath”), regionalisms, and slang. The definitions that are given are specific to the context. The glossaries are based on definitions from *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition, copyright © 1986.

1. Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938).

On Books and Reading

“If thou wouldst profit by thy reading, read humbly, simply, honestly, and not desiring to win a character for learning.”

Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, c. 1420

“He hath never fed of the dainties that are bred of a book; he hath not eat paper, as it were; he hath not drunk ink: his intellect is not replenished; he is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts.”
Shakespeare, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, c. 1595

“There’s no book so bad that something good may not be found in it.”

Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 1615

“When I am reading a book, whether wise or silly, it seems to me to be alive and talking to me.”

Jonathan Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, 1706

“No entertainment is so cheap as reading, nor any pleasure so lasting.”

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, letter, 1753

“I hate books, for they only teach people to talk about what they do not understand.”

J. J. Rousseau, *Émile*, 1762

“I cannot live without books.”

Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Adams, June 10, 1815

“Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.”

H. D. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 1849

“There are books which take rank in your life with parents and lovers and passionate experiences.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Books,” *Society and Solitude*, 1870

“If you cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use reading it at all.”

Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, 1889

“All books are either dreams or swords, You can cut, or you can drug, with words.”

Amy Lowell, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, 1914

“The greatest gift is a passion for reading.”

Elizabeth Hardwick, *The Writer’s Chapbook*, 1989

“When I was about eight, I decided that the most wonderful thing, next to a human being, was a book.”

Margaret Walker, *I Dream a World*, 1989

“A book is like a garden carried in the pocket.”

Arab proverb

“Books and friends, few and good.”

Spanish proverb

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Works are arranged chronologically, and chapters may have contrastive pieces from different periods. Bold print indicates the main readings in the chapter; regular print indicates contrastive readings.

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Chapter 1

Prelude to the Journey: Understanding Literature

Chapter 1 is an explanatory chapter intended to encourage the enjoyment of reading literature as well as interest in reading critically. Therefore, I have presented two reading selections in this chapter, a poem and short story, with examples of exercises that appear in the following chapters, answers to the exercises, and an analysis of the major characteristics of each selection. These models should provide help in completing the exercises and activities in this book.

Before reading the poem and short story in this chapter, discuss the quotations and read the biographical sketches of the authors. Then do the preview activities in order to get an overview of the form, content, and style of each selection.

Robert Frost “Acquainted with the Night”

“Is not the night mournful, sad, and melancholy?”
Rabelais, *Gargantua*, I, 1535

“Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow’d night.”
Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III, c. 1596

“Of all exercises walking is the best.”
Thomas Jefferson, letter to T. M. Randolph, Jr., 1786

“Walking is also an ambulation of mind.”
Gretel Erlich, *Montana Spaces*, 1988

“Walking makes for a long life.”
Hindu proverb

Robert Frost (1874–1963) is one of the great American poets of the twentieth century. He is considered a poet of New England, where he lived for most of his life. Frost’s poetry is written in a simple, conversational style that often uses traditional rhyme and meter but re-creates the natural rhythms of spoken English.

Frost won the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry four times. During the 1960s in the John F. Kennedy administration, he served as an unofficial poet laureate and as a cultural ambassador to Russia. Frost has written many beautiful poems about the world of nature, country life, and moral values, including “The Road Not Taken,” “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” “Mending Wall,” “The Gift Outright,” “Design,” “Birches,” and “Fire and Ice.”

Preview

Skimming: Skimming involves looking over the reading to gain a general impression.

1. Read the title and first line of the poem.
2. Skim the poem to get an idea of its form and length.

Questioning: Questioning encourages you to think about a central idea in the reading and to draw on your personal experience. Answer the following question and discuss your answers.
Do you enjoy going for long walks at night?

Scanning: Scanning involves quickly looking over the reading to find specific information. Scan to answer the following question to get an idea of the poem’s content and style.
What did the poet see against the sky?

Acquainted with the Night 1928

Robert Frost

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Glossary

acquainted
beat
luminary
proclaimed
unearthly
watchman

“Acquainted with the Night”

having personal knowledge
regular route
shining with light
declared publicly, officially
not earthly, supernatural
guard

Discussion

1. What feelings does the poet experience as he is walking in the night?
2. How does the setting reflect the poet’s mood?
3. What implied conflict is found in the poem?
4. What is the theme of the poem?
5. Do you feel that you are “acquainted with the night”? Please explain.
6. Have you ever written poetry? Could you write a poem like this one?
7. Do you enjoy reading poetry? Who are your favorite poets?
8. How do you like “Acquainted with the Night”? Write a few sentences explaining your response to this poem, and share your reaction with the class.

Comprehension

1. What is the poet describing?
2. What has the poet seen during his walks?
3. Why does the poet drop his eyes when he sees the watchman?
4. What does the poet hear during his walks?
5. What does the clock tell him about the time when he is walking?
6. Why does the poet feel he has become “acquainted with the night”?

Style and Language

Understanding the style and tone of an author is essential to understanding what the author has written. Therefore, this activity helps you analyze the style, tone, and language of this poem. Circle the letter next to the correct answer(s). More than one answer may be correct. Be prepared to justify your choices by giving specific examples from the reading selection.

1. Style refers to the author’s manner of writing. The style of “Acquainted with the Night” can be characterized as
 - a. personal.
 - b. impersonal.
 - c. formal.
 - d. informal.

2. Tone reveals the author's attitude toward his or her subject and audience and helps create the mood of the poem or story. The tone of "Acquainted with the Night" can be described as
- melancholy.
 - angry.
 - calm.
 - humorous.

What specific words and phrases create this tone?

3. Analysis of an author's language centers on sentence structure, word choice, and figures of speech. Frost's language contains
- short, conversational expressions.
 - lengthy, formal statements.
 - metaphors¹ and similes.²
 - personifications.³

Give examples from the poem of this language.

4. Choose the best paraphrase of the following lines: "One luminary clock against the sky / Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right."
- The poet was taking a long walk at an unusual hour.
 - The clock showed the time without judging whether it was early or late.
 - The clock showed that it was very late to be walking.
 - The clock was making the poet feel confused.
5. The rhyme scheme is the pattern of similar sounds that are usually at the ends of lines in a poem. The rhyme scheme of "Acquainted with the Night" is
- aba bcb cdc ded aa.
 - abb bcc cdd dee bb.

Writing Assignments

- Write a two-sentence summary of Frost's poem "Acquainted with the Night."
- Write a poem about taking a long walk at night. (For suggestions on how to write poetry, see Appendix F, "Writing a Poem.")
- Read "On the Eve" by Denise Levertov (1923–), a contemporary poet who was born in England and emigrated to the United States in 1948. Then write an essay comparing and contrasting "On the Eve" with "Acquainted with the Night" by Robert Frost. In your essay, discuss the form (structure), content (subject), and style of these poems. Use the following thesis: Although "On the Eve" and "Acquainted with the Night" are both informal and conversational in style, they differ in their form and content.

1. figures of speech comparing unlike ideas or objects
2. figures of speech comparing unlike ideas or objects, using *like* or *as*
3. figures of speech describing nonhuman things as humans

On the Eve 1964

Denise Levertov

The moon was white
in the stillness. Daylight
changed without moving,
a hint of sundown
stained the sky. We walked
the short grass,
the dry ground of the hill,
beholding
the tinted west. We talked
of change in our lives. The moon
tuned its whiteness a tone higher.

Group Work

Working with a partner or in a small group, read the following poem by Denise Levertov. Then compare the form (structure), content (subject), and style (manner of writing) of Levertov's "Arrived" with Frost's "Acquainted with the Night." What are their similarities? What are their differences? Write a brief summary of your discussion, and include a one-sentence statement of the main idea of each poem.

Arrived 1964

Denise Levertov

Away from home,
the reality of home
evades me. Chairs,
sofa, table, a cup—
I can enumerate objects
one by one, but they're inventory,
not Gestalt.¹ This house
I've stayed in often before,
the open suitcase,
my friends who live here,
that's what's real.
And that face
so vivid to me these past three months
evades me too: the shape

1. integrated patterns