

The

SEAGULL READER

LITERATURE

★ Edited by **Joseph Kelly** ★

THE SEAGULL READER



College of Charleston

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INTRODUCTION



What Is Literature?

I've asked my students this question at the start of each semester for nearly twenty years. Some students (often the kind who are headed toward the humanities) answer with a sort of reverence for the "greats" like Shakespeare and Hemingway. But they are few. More answer with a sort of bored indifference, but because I'm an English teacher and they don't want to hurt my feelings, they bow to the enthusiasm of the few. They accept the notion that "Literature"—with a capital *L*—is good for you in much the same way that they accept that spinach is good for you, but it's not something they'd read except for school. A third group faces "Literature" almost angrily, the way someone who's been dragged to an art museum against his will might regard a sixteenth-century portrait of the Spanish royal family.

This book is going to try to prove to you that none of those answers is right. Literature is not the kind of thing we need to reverence. It doesn't do us much good to think of the "greats" as geniuses who were different from you and me, and it doesn't help to put literature on a pedestal, as if it were some rare, untouchable object. And even those students most hostile to English probably take some of their greatest pleasures from literature—whether they realize it or

not. Of all things, literature should not be regarded as a chore or a duty or an obligation. It should be fun.

The problem is that our society tends to spell *literature* with a capital *L*. You might be surprised to learn that the belief that “Literature” is a special, high-brow, hard-to-understand or fancy type of writing is not that old. In fact, it’s a belief that’s not much older than English departments, which have been in universities for little more than a century. Certainly these two phenomena are related: the rise of English departments in colleges and the growing belief that “Literature” is some special kind of writing that doesn’t have much to do with our everyday reading habits.

It’s well beyond the scope of this introduction to figure out exactly who’s to blame for this state of affairs, although I ought to admit that English teachers and the editors of literature anthologies are near the top of the list. The Romantic poets, like Lord Byron and William Wordsworth, must take some responsibility also. Wordsworth’s Romantic manifesto elevated poets to an almost superhuman status, and Lord Byron, cashing in on this new notion of the writer, was poetry’s first superstar. Some professors have tried to define “Literature” as a type of writing that is fundamentally different from normal, everyday discourse because it uses more figures of speech, like metaphors and symbols. But others (including me) would argue that there’s nothing special about literary language—that the figures of speech we find even in the most poetic writing are the same we use in our everyday conversations. Suffice it to say that whoever’s to blame, our culture has mystified “Literature” so that today it seems to be something you deal with only in English classes.

I want to persuade you that *literature* should be spelled with a little *l*. You swim in literature every day. You consume it every time you turn on the television. Every time you go to a movie and whenever you listen to a song on the radio, you’re “reading” literature. You couldn’t escape literary culture if you wanted to. It’s as much a part of our nature as eating and dreaming.

But what exactly *is* “literature”? Just about the only consensus is that the term refers to imaginative writing. Admittedly, that’s a broad definition. But any attempt to narrow it will exclude pieces of

writing that most of us would consider literary, and we'd start spelling the word with a capital *L* again. So we're stuck with a broad category.

Such an indiscriminating definition raises a tough question: if literature is all around us, if we consume it all the time in our ordinary lives, how can a book like this one that you're reading right now claim it is more important to read a poem by William Wordsworth than the lyrics to a song by Eminem? I'm presenting you with another anthology of literature, and while it includes the usual sonnets by Shakespeare, there's not a single song by Nirvana. How come? I must have used some standard that separates the early American poet Anne Bradstreet from the contemporary American singer Alanis Morissette. Even if I think *literature* should be spelled with a lowercase *l*, I must have some idea about value, or I wouldn't think that certain works ought to be read in an English class year after year while others needn't be. You should legitimately demand to know how I decided which pieces of literature should go in this anthology.

The best criterion I've ever come across is one of the simplest: *good* literature is writing that you like to read more than once. That distinguishes it from everything you read just to get the information it contains. News articles, for example, become stale after you've read them once. You use up whatever pleasure or utility they give you the first time you read them. The words of a news article are like the shell of nut. Once you've eaten the kernel—the information contained in the article—there's nothing left to do with the words but throw them away. The same is true of many (though certainly not all) “dime novels,” the kind of reading you might take to the beach. We often call these books page-turners because their plots are so exciting we can hardly put them down: we want to see what happens next. But once you've read such a book, there's hardly any incentive to reread it. You already know what's going to happen. The words are used up. You give the book away; you leave it at the beach house; you toss it in the garbage.

Good literature is not like that. Literary writing is more than a vehicle that transports information to a reader. Whether it's for the emotion it stirs in you, or for that powerful sensation that makes

you think you're experiencing the events yourself, or for the fresh perspective it gives you on your own world, or merely for the delight in the sounds of the words, we return to good literature and take pleasure in it a second time. Good literature is the kind of writing that gets better with every reading. Even the fifth time through, you see something you didn't see when you read it the fourth time, and you delight in it just as much the tenth time round as you did the first time. Maybe you delight in it more. For example, think about how you come back again and again to the lyrics of a good song. They never grow stale. They get better and better the more you think about them. That's good literature.

In my junior year of high school, my English class read *Moby-Dick*. It was a tough slog. There was a popular clownish guy in the class, a defensive lineman on the football team, and even though our football team was terrible, he still commanded a lot of attention—not only from other students but also from Mrs. Baker, the teacher. He mocked Nathaniel Hawthorne. He scorned Stephen Crane. Even Mark Twain—funny, irreverent Twain—he trashed.

One gray day in October not long before Homecoming, Mrs. Baker was reciting her dreary list of things that Captain Ahab's white whale represents—purity, God, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, male sexuality—when this lineman exploded with a single comment: “Boring!”

“Why's it boring?” Mrs. Baker asked.

“If he was trying to talk about that stuff,” the football player said, “why didn't he just say it? What's the deal with all this symbolism? Isn't the whale just a whale?” (I'm not sure if these were his exact words, but they're close.)

The class laughed.

Mrs. Baker, a tiny woman in her forties, was a mouse facing a falcon. She asked mildly, “If he didn't want us to interpret his symbols, why do you think Melville wrote the book?”

“To make money?”

The class laughed again. Mrs. Baker smiled indulgently.

I, the future English teacher who had that reverent feeling for the “greats,” got a sick feeling in my heart. But it wasn't because I disagreed with the football player. It was because I agreed with him. I

secretly thought *Moby-Dick* was boring. The lineman voiced my own fainthearted suspicion: *Moby-Dick* wasn't nearly as interesting as a book by a writer like Tom Clancy.

I was forced to read *Moby-Dick* again in college, and I liked it better the second time around. I reread it in graduate school, and it improved again. I haven't read it from cover to cover a fourth time, but I dip into it now and again, and it never bores me. Not too long ago I took a second look at *The Hunt for Red October*, Tom Clancy's first best seller. I couldn't get past the fifth page. I've read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* a dozen times, and it delights me more each year. But I got so bored in my second reading of Stephen King's *The Shining* that I couldn't finish it: I knew everything that was going to happen, and that ruined the pleasure. If the pleasure of a text *diminishes* with each fresh reading, then I think it should be left out of an anthology.

Good literature, then, is not a different *kind* of writing. It uses the same techniques that we find in the most ephemeral writing. Even the anecdote I told about the football player uses the techniques of literature: metaphor, symbolism, personification, alliteration, conflict, and so on. Good literature is just writing that is *better written* than most of what we encounter in the marketplace. I know that criteria is mighty vague. People will disagree on what is better and worse writing. But it's a definition that's elastic enough to cover popular genres—for example, I've included song lyrics by Bruce Springsteen in this volume. I'm sure there are dozens of popular song writers today who are writing good literature. Even many English teachers recognize that hip-hop can be good free verse. (Maybe Eminem does belong in an English class; maybe I've excluded him because of my own prejudice.) There's no reason to exclude even something as undervalued in our society as the script of a television sitcom episode. I wasn't so bold as to include a script of *The Simpsons*, but I've seen many an episode that I think would be worthy. I've seen some episodes of *The Simpsons* half a dozen times, and they still delight me even though I know all of the jokes ahead of time. No matter our personal tastes, if we agree that good literature is writing we like to reread, I think the definition will serve.

How Do You Read Literature?

That definition serves particularly well because it means that everyone already knows how to read good literature. In reading any poem or play or story in this book, you use exactly the same skills and techniques that you use already in your everyday life. The introduction to each section of this book will discuss the vocabulary of literary analysis that is appropriate to the genre. But you'll find nothing new here, nothing that you don't know in your bones. If you've ever puzzled over the lyrics of a favorite song or argued with friends as you left a movie theater, you're already a well-practiced interpreter of literature. Interpreting literature is a skill you picked up as naturally as you learned to speak English.

In fact, literature is like a language, and you might think of the **genres** represented here—poems, stories, and plays—as three dialects of that language. Just like the English language, literature has a grammar. You can understand English even if you don't consciously know grammatical conventions, because you've internalized them. And certainly one can speak and write well without consciously thinking about grammar. You can function perfectly well in English without ever learning the difference between a noun and a verb. You can internalize the conventions without ever studying them. In short, you do not need to know grammar to be competent in a language. But your understanding deepens when you know the conventions—what we often refer to as the rules of grammar—and can see them at work. And if you've studied the conventions of English, if you know a noun from a verb and an object from a subject, you'll have an easier time understanding complicated sentences and intricate paragraphs.

Likewise, you can read and understand a work of literature without consciously knowing literary conventions. The moment you click on a television program, you'll know whether or not it's a sitcom. You might not be conscious of the conventions you're "reading" (maybe the style of music, maybe the laugh track, maybe the set), but you do a fine job of interpreting them anyway. Similarly, you can already "read" the conventions that pertain to the genres in

this book. They might be less practiced than your highly honed skill of interpreting television programs, but just growing up in our culture has taught you how to read poems and stories and plays. The introductions to the sections of this book try to make you more *conscious* of those conventions you've already internalized. They'll remind you of the vocabulary and techniques of literary analysis appropriate to each genre—what are often called the skills of **close reading**. But remember: **close reading** is nothing different from what you do already when you read; you'll just get better at it as you master the skills.

It might be useful to think of the three genre introductions as supplying you with tools. Certainly everyone knows what a saw does, but if you're taught how to handle one—how to use the grain of the wood to your advantage, when to ease up on the pressure and when to apply it—you'll saw better than the novice. The master carpenter will build a better cabinet than the weekend amateur. By learning the tools of analysis, you'll interpret with more skill and greater precision.

And **interpretation** is the final purpose of reading literature. That term is a little more complex than we typically think. We tend to equate our interpretation of a text with a summary of its meaning. That's a fine equation—so long as we remember that “meaning” is itself a complex thing. We cannot reduce meaning to a simple formula the way we reduce a fable to a “moral,” like “Slow and steady wins the race” or “Beware the flatterer.” True, the meaning of a work might include unequivocal aphorisms (“War is bad” or “Love is more important than money”), but invariably literary meaning is more expansive. It's more difficult to pin down. It includes your emotional experience while reading the text, and rarely does it lay itself out like a pithy, brief truism. When we talk of *meaning* in literature, we use that term the way we do when we talk about the *meaning* of a friendship, or the *meaning* of some historical event, or the *meaning* of life itself. Interpreting meaning, then, is not like decoding a cipher. It is much more an art than a science. A rich and expansive imagination is as important as the tools I'll lay out in this book. Be a *creative* reader.

I'll end with a caution: Your interpretation, though it's founded on your own imagination and constructed by your own handling of

the tools of analysis, can be wrong. Don't fall into the mistaken belief that because interpretations are personal, everyone's is equally valid. It is true that interpretations are matters of opinion, but there are two types of opinion. There are opinions such as "I like rainy days." No one can dispute my authority on an opinion like that. But an interpretation of literature is not that manner of opinion. It is like the other type, which includes statements like these: "We need a Republican in the White House" and "Only a Democrat can salvage our foreign policy."

Those opinions deal in what rhetoricians call probable truths, as opposed to the kind of "absolute" truths mathematicians deal in. You can prove absolutely that the sum of the squares of the legs of a right triangle equals the square of the hypotenuse. But no one can prove absolutely that we need a Republican in the White House. It is the responsibility of someone who voices such an opinion (which is an *interpretation* of the current political situation) to persuade others that she is *probably* right. Some opinions are good, some are bad. Generally, we think poorly defended opinions are probably wrong. This book should help you to better defend your own interpretations.

Once you've voiced your interpretation of a text, it is your responsibility to show others how you came to that opinion. You need to be able to persuade them that you're probably right. And to accomplish that task, you'll find that the skills of close reading are particularly useful.



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