Understand Classical Literature

Imaginative Literature

Imaginative literature begins with a writer's need to convey a personal vision to readers. Consider, for example, how William Wordsworth uses language in these lines from his poem "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" (p. 0000):

This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

Wordsworth does not try to present a picture of London that is topographically or sociologically accurate. Instead, by comparing the city at dawn to a person wearing a beautiful garment, he creates a striking picture that has its own kind of truth. By using a vivid, original comparison, the poet is able to suggest the oneness of the city, nature, and himself — an idea that is not easily communicated.

Even when writers use factual material — historical documents, newspaper stories, or personal experience, for example — their primary purpose is to present their unique view of experience, one that has significance beyond the moment. (As the poet Ezra Pound said, "Literature is the news that stays news.") To convey their views of experience, writers of imaginative literature often manipulate facts — changing dates, creating new characters, and inventing dialogue. For example, when Herman Melville wrote his nineteenth-century novella Benito Cereno, he drew many of his facts from an account of an actual slave revolt. In his story, he reproduces court records and uses plot details from this primary source, but he leaves out some incidents, and he adds material of his own. The result is an original work of literature that serves the author's purpose. Wanting to do more than retell the original story, Melville used the factual material as "a skeleton of actual reality" on which he built a story that attacks the institution of slavery and examines the nature of truth.

Imaginative literature is more likely than other types of writing to include words chosen not only because they communicate the writer's ideas, but also because they are memorable. Using vivid imagery and evocative comparisons,
writers of imaginative literature often stretch language to its limits. By relying on the multiple connotations of words and images, a work of imaginative literature encourages readers to see the possibilities of language and to move beyond the factual details of an event.

Even though imaginative literature can be divided into types called genres—fiction, poetry, and drama—the nature of literary genres varies from culture to culture. In fact, some literary forms that Western readers take for granted are alien to other literary traditions. The sonnet, though fairly common in the West, is not a conventional literary form in Chinese or Arabic poetry. Similarly, the most popular theatrical entertainment in Japan since the mid-seventeenth century, the Kabuki play, has no exact counterpart in the West. (In a Kabuki play, which includes stories, scenes, dances, music, acrobatics, and elaborate costumes and stage settings, all of the actors are men, some of whom play the parts of females. Many Kabuki plays have little plot and seem to be primarily concerned with spectacle. One feature of this form of drama is a walkway that extends from the stage through the audience to the back of the theater.)

Conventions of narrative organization and character development can also vary considerably from culture to culture, especially in literature derived from oral traditions. For example, narrative organization in some Native American stories (and, even more commonly, in some African stories) can be very different from what contemporary Western readers are accustomed to. Events may be arranged spatially instead of chronologically: first a story presents all the events that happened in one place, then it presents everything that happened in another location, and so on. Character development is also much less important in some traditional African and Native American stories than it is in modern short fiction. In fact, a character’s name, description, and personality can change dramatically (and without warning) during the course of a story.

Despite such differences, the imaginative literature of all cultures can have similar effects on readers: memorable characters, vivid descriptions, imaginative use of language, and compelling plots can fascinate and delight. Literature can take readers where they have never been before and, in so doing, can create a sense of wonder and adventure.

At another level, however, readers can find more than just pleasure or escape in literature. Beyond transporting readers out of their lives and times, literature can enable readers to see their lives and times more clearly. Whether a work of imaginative literature depicts a young girl as she experiences the disillusionment of adulthood for the first time, as in David Michael Kaplan’s “Doe Season” (p. 000), or examines the effect of discrimination on a black African who is looking for an apartment, as in Wole Soyinka’s “Telephone Conversation” (p. 0), it can help readers to understand their own experiences and the experiences of others. In this sense, literature offers readers increased insight and awareness. As the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda said, works of imaginative literature fulfill “the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny.”
The theme of a work of literature is its central or dominant idea. This idea is seldom stated explicitly. Instead, it is conveyed through the selection and arrangement of details; through the emphasis of certain words, events, or images; and through the actions and reactions of characters.

Although one central theme may dominate a literary work, most works explore a number of different themes or ideas. For example, the central theme of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* might be the idea that an individual’s innate sense of right and wrong is superior to society’s artificial and sometimes unnatural values. The main character, Huck, gains a growing awareness of this idea by witnessing feuds, duels, and all manner of human folly. As a result, he makes a decision to help his friend Jim escape from slavery despite the fact that society, as well as his own conscience, condemns this action. However, *Huckleberry Finn* also examines other themes. Throughout his novel Twain criticizes many of the ideas that prevailed in the pre–Civil War South, such as the racism and religious hypocrisy that pervaded the towns along the Mississippi.

A literary work can explore any theme, but certain themes have recurred so frequently over the years that they have become conventions. One theme frequently explored in literature, a character’s loss of innocence, appears in the biblical story of Adam and Eve and later finds its way into such works as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1835 short story “Young Goodman Brown” (p. 000) and James Joyce’s 1914 short story “Araby” (p. 000). Another conventional theme — the conflict between an individual’s values and the values of society — is examined in the ancient Greek play *Antigone* by Sophocles (p. 0000). Almost two thousand years later, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen deals with the same theme in *A Doll House* (p. 0000).

Other conventional themes examined in literary works include the individual’s quest for spiritual enlightenment, the *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) theme, the making of the artist, the nostalgia for a vanished past, the disillusionment of adulthood, the pain of love, the struggle of women for equality, the conflict between parents and children, the clash between civilization and the wilderness, the evils of unchecked ambition, the inevitability of fate, the impact of the past on the present, the conflict between human beings and machines, and the tension between the ideal and the actual realms of experience.

Nearly every culture explores similar themes, but writers from different cultures may develop these themes differently. A culture’s history, a particular region’s geography, or a country’s social structure can suggest unique ways of developing conventional themes. In addition, the assumptions, concerns, values, ideals, and beliefs of a particular country or society — or of a particular group within that society — can help to determine the themes writers choose to explore and the manner in which they do so.

In American literature, for instance, familiar themes include the loss of innocence, rites of passage, childhood epiphanies, and the ability (or inability) to form relationships. American writers of color, in addition to exploring these themes, may also express their frustration with racism or celebrate their cultural identities.
Even when they explore conventional themes, writers of color in America may choose to do so in the context of their own experience. For example, the theme of loss of innocence may be presented as a first encounter with racial prejudice; a conflict between the individual and society may be presented as a conflict between a minority view and the values of the dominant group; and the theme of failure or aborted relationships may be explored in a work about cultural misunderstandings.

Finally, modern works of literature sometimes treat conventional themes in new ways. For example, in 1984 George Orwell explores the negative consequences of unchecked power by creating a nightmare world in which the government controls and dehumanizes a population. Even though Orwell's novel is set in an imaginary future (it was written in 1948), its theme echoes ideas frequently examined in the plays of both Sophocles and Shakespeare.

The Literary Canon

Originally the term \textit{canon} referred to the authoritative or accepted list of books that made up the Christian Bible. Recently, the term \textit{literary canon} has come to denote a group of works generally agreed upon by writers, teachers, and critics to be worth reading and studying. Over the years, as standards have changed, the definition of “good” literature has also changed, and the literary canon has been modified accordingly. For example, at various times, critics have characterized Shakespeare's plays as mundane, immoral, commonplace, and brilliant. The eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson said of Shakespeare that “in his comick scenes he is seldom very successful” and in tragedy “his performance seems constantly to be worse, as his labor is more.” Many people find it difficult to believe that a writer whose name today is synonymous with great literature could ever have been judged so harshly. Like all aesthetic works, however, the plays of Shakespeare affect individuals in different periods of history or in different societies in different ways.

Lately, educators and literary scholars have charged that the traditional literary canon, like a restricted club, arbitrarily admits some authors and excludes all others. This fact is borne out, they say, by an examination of the literature curriculum that until recently was standard at many North American universities. This curriculum typically began with Homer, Plato, Dante, and Chaucer, progressed to Shakespeare, Milton, the eighteenth-century novel, the Romantics, and the Victorians, and ended with some of the “classics” of modern British and American literature. Most of the authors of these works are white and male, and their writing for the most part reflects Western values.

Missing from the literature courses in North American universities for many years were South American, African, and Asian writers. Students of American literature were not encouraged to consider the perspectives of women or of Latinos, Native Americans, or other ethnic or racial groups. During the past four decades, however, most universities have expanded the traditional canon by including more works by women, people of color, and writers from a variety of cultures. These additional works, studied alongside those representing the
traditional canon, have opened up the curriculum and redefined the standards by which literature is judged.

One example of a literary work that challenges the traditional canon is “All about Suicide” by Luisa Valenzuela, an Argentinean writer. This brief, shocking story is part of a large and growing genre of literature from around the world that purposely violates our standard literary expectations to make its point — in this case, a point about the political realities of Argentina in the 1960s.

**LUISA VALENZUELA (1938— )**

**All about Suicide (1967)**

*Translated by Helen Lane*

Ismael grabbed the gun and slowly rubbed it across his face. Then he pulled the trigger and there was a shot. Bang. One more person dead in the city. It’s getting to be a vice. First he grabbed the revolver that was in a desk drawer, rubbed it gently across his face, put it to his temple, and pulled the trigger. Without saying a word. Bang. Dead.

Let’s recapitulate: the office is grand, fit for a minister. The desk is ministerial too, and covered with a glass that must have reflected the scene, the shock. Ismael knew where the gun was, he’d hidden it there himself. So he didn’t lose any time, all he had to do was open the right-hand drawer and stick his hand in. Then he got a good hold on it and rubbed it over his face with a certain pleasure before putting it to his temple and pulling the trigger. It was something almost sensual and quite unexpected. He hadn’t even had time to think about it. A trivial gesture, and the gun had fired.

There’s something missing: Ismael in the bar with a glass in his hand thinking over his future act and its possible consequences.

We must go back farther if we want to get at the truth: Ismael in the cradle crying because his diapers are dirty and nobody is changing him.

Not that far.

Ismael in the first grade fighting with a classmate who’ll one day become a minister, his friend, a traitor.

No, Ismael in the ministry without being able to tell what he knew, forced to be silent. Ismael in the bar with the glass (his third) in his hand, and the irrevocable decision: better death.

Ismael pushing the revolving door at the entrance to the building, pushing the swinging door leading to the office section, saying good morning to the guard, opening the door of his office. Once in his office, seven steps to his desk. Terror, the act of opening the drawer, taking out the revolver, and rubbing it across his face, almost a single gesture and very quick. The act of putting it to his temple and pulling the trigger — another act, immediately following the previous one. Bang. Dead. And Ismael coming out of his office (the other man’s office, the minister’s) almost relieved, even though he can predict what awaits him.

* * *
The Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka is another writer whose works are not part of the traditional Western canon. The subject of the following poem may not seem “relevant” to European audiences, and the language (“pillar-box,” “omnibus”) may not be clear to Americans. Still, as a reading of the poem demonstrates, Soyinka’s work makes a compelling plea for individual rights and self-determination—a theme that transcends the boundaries of time and place.

WOLE SOYINKA (1934–)

Telephone Conversation (1962)
The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. “Madam,” I warned
“I hate a wasted journey—I am—African.”
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
Lip-stick coated, long gold-rolled
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, foully.
“How dark?” . . . I had not misheard . . .
“Are you light
Or very dark?” Button B. Button A. Stench
Of rancid breath of public-hide-and-speak.
Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shamed
By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis—
“Are you dark? Or very light?” Revelation came.
“You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?”
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light,
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose, “West African sepia”—and as an afterthought,
“Down in my passport.” Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
Hard on the mouthpiece. “What’s that?” conceding
“Don’t know what that is.” “Like brunette.”
“That’s dark, isn’t it?” “Not altogether.
Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused—
Foolishly madam—by sitting down, has turned
My bottom raven black—One moment madam!”—sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunder clap
About my ears—“Madam,” I pleaded, “Wouldn’t you rather
See for yourself?”

*   *   *

Certainly canon revision is not without problems—for example, the possibility of including a work more for political or sociological reasons than for literary merit. Nevertheless, if the debate about the literary canon has accomplished anything, it has revealed that the canon is not fixed and that many works formerly excluded—African-American slave narratives and eighteenth-century women’s diaries, for example—have merit and deserve to be read.

Interpreting Literature

When you interpret a literary work, you explore its possible meanings. One commonly held idea about reading a literary work is that its meaning lies buried somewhere within it, waiting to be unearthed. This reasoning suggests that a clever reader has only to discover the author’s intent to find out what a story or poem means, and that the one actual meaning of a work is hidden between the lines, unaffected by a reader’s experiences or interpretations. More recently, however, a different model of the reading process—one that takes into consideration the reader as well as the work he or she is interpreting—has emerged.

Many contemporary critics see the reading process as interactive. In other words, meaning is created through the reader’s interaction with a text. Thus, the meaning of a particular work comes alive in the imagination of an individual reader, and no reader can determine a work’s meaning without considering his or her own reaction to the text. Meaning, therefore, is created partly by what is supplied by a work and partly by what is supplied by the reader.

The most obvious thing a work supplies is facts, the information that enables a reader to follow the plot of a story, the action of a play, or the development of a poem. The work itself will provide factual details about the setting; the characters’ names, ages, and appearances; the sequence of events; and the emotions and attitudes of a poem’s speaker, a story’s narrator, or the characters in a play or story. This factual information cannot be ignored: if a play’s stage directions identify its setting as nineteenth-century Norway or the forest of Arden, that is where the play is set.

In addition to facts, a work also conveys the social, political, class, and gender attitudes of the writer. Thus, a work may have an overt feminist or working-class bias or a subtle political agenda; it may confirm or challenge contemporary attitudes; it may communicate a writer’s nostalgia for a vanished past or outrage at a corrupt present; it may take an elitist, distant view of characters and events or present a sympathetic perspective. A reader’s understanding of these attitudes will contribute to his or her interpretation of the work.

Finally, a work also includes assumptions about literary conventions. A poet, for example, may have definite ideas about whether a poem should be rhymed or unrhymed or about whether a particular subject is appropriate or inappropriate.
for poetic treatment. Therefore, a knowledge of the literary conventions of a particular period or the preferences of a particular writer can provide a starting point for your interpretation of literature.

As a reader, you bring to a work your own personal perspectives. Your experiences, your beliefs, your ideas about the issues discussed in the work, and your assumptions about literature color your interpretations. In fact, nearly every literary work has somewhat different meanings to different people, depending on their age, gender, nationality, political and religious beliefs, ethnic background, social and economic class, education, knowledge, and personal experiences. Depending on your religious beliefs, for instance, you can react to a passage from the Old Testament as literal truth, symbolic truth, or fiction. Depending on your race, where you live, your biases, and the nature of your experience, a story about racial discrimination can strike you as accurate and realistic, exaggerated and unrealistic, or understated and restrained.

In a sense, then, the process of determining meaning is like a conversation, one in which both you and the text have a voice. Sometimes, by clearly dictating the terms of the discussion, the text determines the direction of the conversation; at other times, by using your knowledge and experience to interpret the text, you dominate. Thus, because every reading of a literary work is actually an interpretation, it is a mistake to look for a single “correct” reading.

The 1923 poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (p. 0000), by the American poet Robert Frost, illustrates how a single work can have more than one interpretation. Readers may interpret the poem as being about the inevitability of death; as suggesting that the poet is tired or world weary; or as making a comment about duty and the need to persevere or about the conflicting pulls of life and art. Beyond these possibilities, readers’ own associations of snow with quiet and sadness could lead them to define the mood of the poem as sorrowful or melancholy. Information about Robert Frost’s life or his ideas about poetry could add to readers’ understanding of the poem, and they might even develop ideas about the poem that are quite different from the poet’s. In fact, on several occasions, Frost himself gave strikingly different — even contradictory — interpretations of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” sometimes insisting that the poem had no hidden meaning and at other times saying that it required a good deal of explication. (Literary critics also disagree about its meaning.) When reading a work of literature, then, keep in mind that the meaning of the text is not fixed. Your best strategy is to open yourself up to the text’s many possibilities and explore the full range of your responses.

Although no single reading of a literary work is “correct,” some readings are more defensible than others. Like a scientific theory, a literary interpretation must have a basis in fact, and the text supplies the facts against which your interpretation should be judged. For example, after you read Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (p. 000), a 1948 short story in which a randomly chosen victim is stoned to death by her neighbors, it would be reasonable for you to conclude that the ceremonial aspects of the lottery suggest a pagan ritual. Your understanding of what a pagan ritual is, combined with your observation that a number of details in the text suggest ancient fertility rites, might lead you to this conclusion. Another possibility is that “The Lottery” provides a commentary on mob psychology. The way
characters reinforce one another’s violent tendencies lends support to this interpretation. However, the interpretation that the ritual of the lottery is a thinly veiled attack on the death penalty would be difficult to support. Certainly a character in the story is killed, but she is not accused of a crime, nor is she tried or convicted; in fact, the killing is random and seemingly without motivation. Still, although seeing “The Lottery” as a comment on the death penalty may be far-fetched, this interpretation is a reasonable starting point. A second, closer reading of the story will allow you to explore other, more plausible, interpretations.

As you read, do not be afraid to take chances and develop unusual or creative interpretations. A safe reading of a work is likely to result in a dull paper that simply states the obvious, but an aggressive or strong reading of a work — one that challenges generally held assumptions — can lead to interesting and intellectually challenging conclusions. Even if your reading differs from established critics’ interpretations, you should not automatically assume it has no merit. Your own special knowledge of the material discussed in the text — a regional practice, an ethnic custom, an attitude toward gender — may give you a unique perspective from which to view the work. Whatever interpretation you make, be sure that you support it with specific references to the text. If your interpretation is based on your own experiences, explain those experiences and relate them clearly to the work you are discussing. As long as you can make a reasonable case, you may provide your fellow students and your instructor with new insight into the work.

Remember, however, that some interpretations are not reasonable. You may contribute ideas based on your own perspectives, but you cannot ignore or contradict evidence in the text to suit your own biases. As you read and reread a text, continue to question and reexamine your judgments. The conversation between you and the text should be a dialogue, not a monologue or a shouting match.

Evaluating Literature

When you evaluate a work of literature, you do more than interpret it; you make a judgment about it. You reach conclusions not simply about whether the work is good or bad, but also about how effectively the work presents itself to you, the reader. To evaluate a work, you analyze it, breaking it apart and considering its individual elements. As you evaluate a work of literature, remember that different works are designed to fulfill different needs — entertainment, education, or enlightenment, for example. Before you begin to evaluate a work, be sure you understand its purpose; then, follow these guidelines:

• Begin your evaluation by considering how various literary elements function within a work. Fiction may be divided into chapters and use flashbacks and foreshadowing; plays may be divided into scenes and acts and include dialogue and special staging techniques; poems may be arranged in regularly ordered groups of lines and use poetic devices such as
rhyme and meter. Understanding the choices writers make about these and other literary elements can help you form judgments about a work. For example, why does Alberto Alvaro Ríos use a first-person narrator (I and we) in his story “The Secret Lion” (p. 00)? Would the story have been different had it been told in the third person (he, she, it, they) by a narrator who was not a character in the story? How does unusual staging contribute to the effect Milcha Sanchez-Scott achieves in his play The Cuban Swimmer (p. 0000)? How would a more realistic setting change the play? Naturally, you cannot focus on every aspect of a particular story, poem, or play. But you can and should focus on those aspects that play a major role in determining your responses to a work. For this reason, the unusual stanzaic form in E. E. Cummings’s poem “Buffalo Bill’s” (p. 0000) or the very specific stage directions in Arthur Miller’s play Death of a Salesman (p. 0000) should be of special interest to you.

As you read, then, you should ask questions. Do the characters in a short story seem real, or do they seem like cardboard cutouts? Are the images in a poem original and thought provoking, or are they clichéd? Are the stage directions of a play sketchy or very detailed? The answers to these questions will help you to shape your evaluation.

As you continue your evaluation, decide whether the literary elements of a work interact to achieve a common goal. Well-crafted literary works are aesthetically pleasing, fitting together in a way that conceals the craft of the writer. Good writers are like master cabinetmakers; their skill often disguises the actual work that has gone into the process of creation. Consider the following stanza from the 1862 poem “Echo” by Christina Rossetti.

Come to me in the silence of the night;
Come to me in the speaking silence of a dream;
Come with soft round cheeks and eyes as bright
As sunlight on a stream;
Come back in tears,
O memory, hope, love of finished years.

Throughout this stanza Rossetti repeats words (“Come to me . . . / Come with soft . . . / Come back . . .”) and initial consonants (“speaking silence”; “sunlight on a stream”) to create an almost hypnotic mood. The rhyme scheme (night/bright, dream/stream, and tears/years) reinforces the mood by creating a musical undercurrent that extends throughout the poem. Thus, this stanza is effective because its repeated words and sounds work together to create a single lyrical effect.

The chorus in Antigone by Sophocles (p. 0000) also illustrates how the elements of a well-crafted work of literature function together. In ancient Greece, plays were performed by masked male actors who played both male and female roles. A chorus of fifteen men remained in a central circle called the orchestra and commented on and reacted to the action taking place around them. The chorus expresses the judgment of the community and acts as a moral guide for the audience. Once modern audiences grow accustomed to the presence of the chorus, it becomes an integral part of
the play. It neither distracts the audience nor intrudes on the action. In
fact, eliminating the chorus would diminish the impact of the play.

• **Next, consider whether a work reinforces or calls into question your ideas about the world.** The 1985 short story “Gryphon” by Charles Baxter (p. 000) may lead readers to question their assumptions. It presents a boy in a rural town whose ailing teacher is temporarily replaced by an eccentric substitute. In her idiosyncratic way, the substitute introduces the boy to a whole new range of intellectual possibilities. Because we, like the children in the story, have learned to expect substitute teachers to be dull and conventional, the story challenges our basic assumptions about substitute teachers and, by extension, about education itself.

  Works of *popular fiction*—those aimed at a mass audience—usually do little more than reassure readers that what they believe is correct. Catering to people’s prejudices, or to their desires (for wealth or success, for example), or to their fears, these works serve as escapes from life. More serious fiction, however, often goes against the grain, challenging cherished beliefs and leading readers to reexamine long-held assumptions. For instance, in the 1957 short story “Big Black Good Man” (p. 000) Richard Wright’s protagonist, a night porter at a hotel, struggles with his consuming yet irrational fear of a “big black” sailor and with his inability to see beyond the sailor’s size and color. Only at the end of the story do many readers see that they, like the night porter, have stereotyped and dehumanized the sailor.

• **Now, consider whether a work is intellectually challenging.** The extended comparison between a draftsman’s compass and two people in love in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” by the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne (p. 000) illustrates how effectively an image can communicate complex ideas to a reader. Compressed into this comparison are ideas about the perfection of love, the pain of enforced separation, and the difference between sexual and spiritual love. As intellectually challenging as the extended comparison is, it is nonetheless accessible to the careful reader. After all, many people have used a compass to draw a circle and, therefore, are able to understand the relationship between the two points of the compass and the two lovers.

  A fine line exists, however, between works that are intellectually challenging and those that are simply obscure. An **intellectually challenging** work requires effort from readers to unlock ideas that enrich and expand their understanding of themselves and the world. Although complex, the work gives readers a sense that they have gained something by putting forth the effort to interpret it. An **obscure** work exists solely to display a writer’s erudition or intellectual idiosyncrasies. Allusions to other works and events are so numerous and confusing that the work may seem more like a private code than an effort to enlighten readers. Consider the following excerpt from “Canto LXXVI” by the twentieth-century American poet Ezra Pound.

> Le Paradis n’est pas artificiel
> States of mind are inexplicable to us.
This passage contains lines in French, Greek, and Italian; a reference to Eurus, the ancient Greek personification of the east wind; and the initials L. P. (Loomis Pound?). It demands a lot from readers; the question is whether the reward is worth the effort.

No hard and fast rule exists for determining whether a work is intellectually challenging or simply obscure. Just as a poem has no fixed meaning, it also has no fixed value. Some readers would say that the passage from "Canto LXXVI" is good, even great, poetry. Others would argue that those lines do not yield enough pleasure and insight to justify the work needed to analyze them. As a reader, you must draw your own conclusions and justify them in a clear and reasonable way. Do not assume that because a work is difficult, it is obscure. (Nor should you assume that all difficult works are great literature or that all accessible literature is trivial.) Some of the most beautiful and inspiring literary works demand a great deal of effort. Most readers would agree, however, that the time spent exploring such works yields tremendous rewards.

- **Consider whether a work gives you pleasure.** One of the primary reasons why literature endures is that it gives readers enjoyment. As subjective as this assessment is, it is a starting point for critical judgment. When readers ask themselves what they liked about a work, why they liked it, or what they learned, they begin the process of evaluation. Although this process is largely uncritical, it can lead to an involvement with the work and to a critical response. When you encounter great literature, with all its complexities, you may lose sight of the idea of literature as a source of pleasure. But literature should touch you on a deep emotional or intellectual level, and if it does not—despite its technical perfection—it fails to achieve one of its primary aims.

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**The Function of Literary Criticism**

Sometimes your personal reactions and knowledge cannot give you enough insight into a literary work. For example, archaic language, references to mythology, historical allusions, and textual inconsistencies can make reading a work difficult. Similarly, an intellectual or philosophical movement such as Darwinism, Marxism, naturalism, structuralism, or feminism may influence a work, and if this is the case,
you need some knowledge of the movement before you can interpret the work. In
addition, you may not have the background to appreciate the technical or histor-
ical dimensions of a work. To increase your understanding, you may choose to read
literary criticism—books and journal articles written by experts who describe, an-
alyze, interpret, or evaluate a work of literature (see the appendix, “Using Literary
Criticism in Your Writing”). Reading literary criticism enables you to expand your
knowledge of a particular work and to participate in the ongoing critical discus-
sions about literature. In a sense, you become part of a community of scholars who
share their ideas and who are connected to one another through their writing.

Literary criticism is written by experts, but this does not mean you must always
agree with it. You have to evaluate literary criticism just as you would any new opin-
ion that you encounter. Not all criticism is sound, timely, or responsible (and not
all literary criticism is pertinent to your assignment or useful for your purposes).
Some critical comments will strike you as plausible; others will seem unfounded
or biased. Quite often, two critics will reach strikingly different conclusions about
the quality or significance of the same work or writer or will interpret a character,
a symbol, or even the entire work quite differently.

The Fiction Casebook that begins on page 000 includes articles in which crit-
ics disagree in just this fashion. In “In Fairyland, without a Map: Connie’s Explo-
rating Inward in Joyce Carol Oates’s ‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You
Been?’” Gretchen Schulz and R. J. R. Rockwood examine the parallels between a
character, Arnold Friend, and a real-life psychopathic killer. They see Arnold in
mythological terms and conclude that he is the “exact transpositional counter-
part of the real-life Pied Piper of Tucson.” In Mike Tierce and John Michael
Crafton’s “Connie’s Tambourine Man: A New Reading of Arnold Friend,” how-
ever, the authors explicitly reject this suggestion as well as other critical inter-
pretations, concluding instead that “The key question . . . is who is this musical
messiah, and the key to the answer is the dedication ‘For Bob Dylan.’”

Although critics may disagree, even conflicting ideas can help you reach your
own conclusions about a work. It is up to you to sort out the various opinions and
decide which have merit and which do not.

✔ Checklist Evaluating Literary Criticism

- What is the main point of the book or article you are reading?
- Does the critic supply enough examples to support his or her conclusions?
- Does the critic acknowledge and refute the most obvious arguments against his or her position?
- Does the critic ignore any information in the text that might call his or her conclusions into question?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does the critic present historical information? Biographical information? Literary information? How does this information shed light on the work or works being discussed?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the critic hold any beliefs that might interfere with his or her critical judgment?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the critic slant the facts, or does he or she approach the text critically and objectively?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the critic support conclusions with references to other sources? Does the critic provide documentation and a list of works cited?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do other critics mention the book or article you are reading? Do they agree or disagree with its conclusions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the critic identified with a particular critical school of thought—deconstruction or Marxism, for example? What perspective does this school of thought provide?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the critic well known and respected?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the critic take into consideration the most important critical books and articles on his or her subject? Are there works that should have been mentioned but were not? Do these omissions cast doubt on the critic's conclusions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is the critical work's publication date of any significance?</td>
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</tbody>
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