

Responding to Literary Experiences

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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Develop a framework for responding to what you read.
- Describe how the use of persona affects your response to literature.
- Analyze the themes and concepts presented in this chapter's literary selections.
- Discuss what literature contributes to your life.
- Recognize figures of speech, including similes and metaphors.

*“I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.”*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

2.1 Writing About What You Read

In our opening chapter, we observed that enjoying literature begins with the depth of *connection* you make with the imaginary world that a piece of literature creates. The purpose of this chapter is to look at a range of literary experiences and to describe what is involved in *responding* to them in meaningful ways. Responding is a *personal* activity that allows you to *reflect* on your experiences and to gain valuable insights about the human condition; responding can also be a *structured* analytical process that requires use of literary tools and techniques. Responding requires active mental engagement: exploring ideas, forming conclusions, and, ultimately, critiquing what you have read as objectively as possible.

Because this book is an introduction to literature, it offers a broad range of reading experiences. Some selections may be familiar, some will introduce you to surprising insights, and others will engage you in human encounters and life complexities that don't have obvious solutions. The readings will pull you beyond the scope of popular literature, beyond conventional romances with happy endings, and beyond detective stories where impossible cases are always solved at the last moment, allowing the forces of good to succeed. Does exploring more challenging literature mean that you should never read popular literature, sometimes called "commercial literature"? No, this approach readily acknowledges the pleasure and delightful escape that such reading offers, but it also takes you beyond the popular literature horizon, where broader ventures and more challenging explorations await.

The level of intellectual demands on the reader will vary because writers have very different purposes when they write. When the events in a story are presented simply and developed in a straightforward manner without extensive detail, the writer's intentions are likely to be obvious and easy to understand. But when a writer's primary purpose is hidden or buried in symbols—when, for example, the author sets out to interpret a puzzling phenomenon or human condition—the reader will likely need to make careful intellectual inquiry to understand the author's intent.

Framework for Responding to What You Read

As stated previously, reading creates imaginative experiences. It connects you to new experiences that become meaningful when you allow them to influence your thoughts and feelings. To make your responses active and engaging, you should ask: Is my reading experience echoing things that have happened in my life? Is it connecting me to things I've never considered before? Am I surprised by (or content with) the way it makes me feel? Does it make me think about a concept or issue that is important to me or to humanity at large?

Also as you read, consider how the writer develops the situations, characters, and emotions that stand out for you. Analyze them. Then, draw conclusions about what you have read; develop your interpretation, focusing on how your reading experience relates to your life, ideas, and values—not just your values, but others' also. Your responses can be organized into three steps: *connecting*, *considering*, and *concluding*. These steps provide a simple but effective response framework that you will use throughout this book. See Table 2.1 for explanations of each step.

At first glance, this matrix may suggest that reading should produce neat linear responses in an intellectual inquiry process that is orderly, almost mechanical. But certainly that is not what

happens when you read literature. Life itself is not that way! When you read a piece of literature imaginatively and with mental vigor, you are stepping inside it, projecting your perspective across its landscape. Although the author may provide signposts to follow as you discover what the literary piece intends, you make your own path. Often, it's a winding one; progress can be slow. Maybe you miss important details that explain the behavior of an important character, or you limit the capabilities of a character to the boundaries of your own experience. Or, you might miss important connections between what is happening and why it's happening, requiring you to do some rereading. Stop-and-go reading like this can be frustrating, but it also creates learning opportunities. Expect to do this kind of reading in an introduction to literature course—because the truest satisfaction in reading comes from exploring, moving from insight to insight.

Table 2.1 Reader's response framework: Connecting, considering, and concluding

Connecting (Imaginative reading)	Involves allowing feelings, curiosity, aspirations, desire to escape, and associations with past or present experiences to motivate you to read.	<i>Individual link</i> and imaginative "entry" into a piece of literature.
Considering (Analysis)	Involves focusing on basic literary elements, artistic skills, aesthetic features, ideas, observations, contexts, and dilemmas that you discover as you read and want to explore in some depth.	<i>Personal inquiry</i> , as you analyze and think about the content and unique structure of the literary work.
Concluding (Interpretation)	Involves finding your own explanations, making sense of what you are reading, and determining the value of its implications.	

The matrix in Table 2.1 provides a starting point in the exploratory process. It will help you discover insights, appreciate literary techniques, and find significance in your reading. Throughout this book, many reading selections include a follow-up Response and Reflection section containing questions based on the matrix. These questions—asking you to connect, consider, and conclude—are designed to call attention to details and ideas that will deepen your response.

A Sample Response

Knowing that you will be expected to write about what you read introduces an obligation. It requires you to read not just for pleasure, but also with specific purpose. When *reading for pleasure*, you can allow yourself to be caught up in experiencing a story, poem, or play—simply enjoying the suspenseful moments and identifying with imagined settings. But *reading literature with a purpose* requires you to have something to say about what you've read. It can't be just a sweeping general statement, such as "That was a great story; it really held my attention." Your written statement needs to include specific and thoughtful observations that can be supported by details in the piece of literature you have read. The framework of *connecting*, *considering*, and *concluding* can be used in developing your written responses, as illustrated in *Responding to Reading: Sample Short-Answer Written Response*.

RESPONDING TO READING

Sample Short-Answer Written Response

Question: Is Sammy presented in the story “A & P” as a person whose actions are solidly established, or as one “coming of age,” searching for answers about how to act in the adult world?

Connecting: Writer briefly summarizes important factors that contribute to the incident in the A & P store and the actions that occur.

Note: The last sentence is not part of the summary; it is the thesis statement—identifying the purpose of the written response.

Considering: Writer selects details and specific examples as evidence of the rationale and understanding that underlie Sammy’s actions.

Concluding: Writer repeats the “point” of the thesis statement—namely, that Sammy’s self-knowledge is increased.

Published in 1961, early in a decade of counterculture and social revolution in America, Updike’s story presents a glimpse into different generational responses to these significant movements. The story is set north of Boston where people are proud of their Puritan heritage, which dates back to colonial days and remains firmly established in their culture. Lengel, the store manager, feels compelled to uphold this Puritan ethic when he sees the girls in swimming suits shopping in his store. He is offended, both by what they are wearing and also by their casual attitude when pushing social norms. He confronts them, pointing out that store policy does not permit shoppers to be dressed in swimwear. Sammy, a 19-year-old, is part of the younger generation that supports social change. He sees the situation differently, demonstrating how adamantly he opposes Lengel’s approach by quitting his job on the spot. He takes a gallant stand not only to impress the girls, but also to advance the spirit of freedom, excitement, and change introduced by their presence. Unfortunately, rather than producing heroic, dramatic results, his protest brings only embarrassing personal consequences.

Sammy quit his job in a voice loud enough for the girls to hear, hoping they would see him “as their unsuspected hero” (as cited in Clugston, 2014). However, they did not acknowledge him as they left, and when he got to the store parking lot they were gone. Consequently, he experiences no external affirmation of his action, no applause for being a hero. But, Sammy gains new insight: he realizes “how hard the world was going to be” (as cited in Clugston, 2014). That is, he begins to understand that his quest for change—stimulated not just by the girls’ entrance but by stifling routines in his work environment—would be an arduous struggle requiring commitment and persistence over time; achievement of social change is not driven by spur-of-the-moment actions. He shows the strength of this awareness later when he disagrees with the idea that the A & P incident was a sad one. Sammy disagrees because he learned a lot from the experience. He may not have found answers to all the questions he has about becoming a man, but his self-knowledge and outlook are more realistically grounded than ever before.

2.2 How Use of Persona Affects Your Response to Literature

If there’s a nameplate on your desk at work, it’s possible for someone who passes by to get a sense of who you are just by looking at your desk, noticing how things are arranged, glancing at the design of your coffee cup, and so on. If these items could speak, the observer could learn a lot more about you, of course. A piece of literature is somewhat like that desk: The author’s name is on it, and you can discover things about the author when you read. But there’s a difference. Unlike inboxes and coffee cups, the characters in stories and poems and plays can speak. As they do, they may represent what the author thinks, or they may be “speaking for themselves”—representing views that are different from the author’s. In other words, it’s important to understand an author’s use of persona.

Persona in “The Road Not Taken”

In Latin, **persona** means “mask.” When it is used in literature, *persona* refers to the person who is the narrator in a story or the speaker in a poem. In other words, the main voice in a work of fiction or poetry is usually not the author’s voice, although it may reflect the author’s views. The main voice comes from the person the author created to narrate or speak. In most cases, this speaker is a character in the story or the poem, but sometimes a persona can be an outside voice, a speaker who is looking at the action but is not part of it.

Look carefully at the student’s analysis in the box following Robert Frost’s famous poem “The Road Not Taken.” The analysis identifies the persona (speaker) as a person who is approaching decision making thoughtfully, but this person is not necessarily Robert Frost.

Also note Frost’s use of **symbol** in the poem. A symbol is an object, person, or action that conveys two meanings: its literal meaning and something it stands for. In “The Road Not Taken,” Frost presents the literal image of two roads. But he suggests that they stand for something other than what their literal meaning conveys: They represent (symbolize) life’s pathways on which our day-by-day experiences unfold.

Robert Frost (1874–1963)

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco. At age 11, he moved with his family to New England. He attended both Dartmouth College and Harvard but did not graduate. After an unsuccessful attempt at farming, he and his wife moved to England in 1912. There, with encouragement from poet Ezra Pound, he published his first two collections of poems, *A Boy’s Will* and *North of Boston*. He returned to the United States in 1915 as a popular poet and was even more celebrated in the years that followed, winning the Pulitzer Prize for his works four times. He was sought after as an artist in residence at universities in New England and wrote candidly about the poetic process. His lyrical style and masterful use of ordinary language and rural settings made his poetry delightful. Building on delight, he engaged in ironic inquiry to give expression to complex ideas and questions that define the human spirit.



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The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost (1916)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

5

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

10

And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference. 20

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SAMPLE RESPONSE AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions are reflective of those you will encounter throughout the remainder of this textbook. The sample answers provided are examples of how you might respond to these questions.

Connecting (Imaginative reading)

Q. What allowed you to connect to the poem?

A. I was able to connect to this poem immediately because I'd often heard the title quoted in public speeches. Then, I became interested in seeing if I could figure out why the idea of "the road not taken" is so often mentioned in speeches.

Considering (Analysis)

Q. What do you know about the speaker in this poem?

A. The speaker is a serious, thoughtful person, and could be either a woman or a man. There is no precise indication of the speaker's age, but the last line of the poem suggests that the person is reflective, thinking not just about a present decision but about future consequences as well. Even though stanza 2 suggests the choice could have gone either way—both roads were a lot alike—the speaker chose the one "less traveled by" and is willing to accept whatever the choice will bring, knowing that choosing the other road for future travel is not possible. It is clear, also, that the speaker is reflecting on a choice related to a significant life decision that involves commitment and integrity, and is not merely selecting a road in the woods.

Concluding (Interpretation)

Q. What do the comments "telling this with a sigh" (line 16) and "that has made all the difference" (line 20) reveal about life choices?

A. I've concluded that the poem emphasizes the ambiguity associated with life choices. From what I already knew about the poem, I thought it dealt simply with making a challenging ("less traveled by") choice. However, I now see that it reflects not just on the motive for choosing, but also on the nature of choice making. There appears to be delight, at least satisfaction, on the part of the speaker at the beginning of the poem, but the "sigh" mentioned at the end suggests that the choice was more complex than it appeared: It may have even resulted in personal regret. Consequently, the poem reveals the nature of decision making, implying that, at best, it's a fuzzy process with ambiguous aspects—both at the moment a choice is made and afterwards. In this way, the poem makes a wise observation and explores important life knowledge.

Your Turn

Try using the literary response framework *connecting, considering, concluding* to explore meaning in Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour.” In this brief narrative, there is not a lot of action, but you can gain important insights about the action—and the story’s outcome—by paying close attention to what the main character, Mrs. Mallard, is thinking.

Kate Chopin (1850–1904)

Chopin was born in St. Louis (her birth name was Katherine O’Flaherty), one of five children—the only one to live beyond age 25. After attending Catholic schools, she married Oscar Chopin, a cotton broker, and moved to New Orleans. When he died 12 years later, she was left to raise their six children. Various journals, including *Atlantic Monthly* and *Vogue*, published her short stories. One of her novels, *The Awakening*, was controversial because it acknowledged a woman’s strength in spite of her adulterous life. Chopin’s writings expressed her personal quest for freedom and contributed to the rise of feminism.



Missouri History Museum,
St. Louis

The Story of an Hour

Kate Chopin (1894)

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband’s friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard’s name leading the list of “killed.” He had only taken time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister’s arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy arm-chair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was

singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. 10

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: “free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in 15

the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven’s sake open the door.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister’s importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister’s waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom. 20

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know that there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine’s piercing cry; at Richards’ quick motion to screen himself from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

This selection is in the public domain.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Connecting (Imaginative reading)

How is your interest in this story immediately established? How does Chopin create suspense?

Considering (Analysis)

Locate details in the story that give you a sense of what Mrs. Mallard’s relationship with her husband was like. In paragraphs five and six, how does the author’s mention of new spring life, twittering sparrows, and patches of blue sky help you understand Mrs. Mallard’s feelings—and her hopes?

Concluding (Interpretation)

Mrs. Mallard (in paragraphs eight and nine) is experiencing change. She feels that something is “approaching” her, seeking to “possess her.” What do you think she is struggling with? Had she ever loved her husband?

2.3 What Literature Contributes to Our Lives

Through literature, we can explore human experiences deeply and search for meaning. It opens new worlds, presents new ideas, and stimulates personal change. In these ways, literature influences each individual differently. Nevertheless, its conventional contributions fall into widely recognized categories. Here are six of these notable contributions, with a literary example selected to illustrate each one.

Literature Restores the Past

In many ways, literature reflects historical issues and conditions. Long before stories were written down, they were passed along through oral traditions. At least eight periods in literary history can be roughly identified in the development of Western civilization (Wheeler, 2010).

Classical period (8th century BCE to middle of 5th century CE)

Medieval period (about 1,000 years, ending in 15th century)

Renaissance and Reformation period (roughly, 16th to mid-17th century)

Enlightenment or Neoclassical period (mid-17th century through 18th century)

Romantic period (roughly, first half of 19th century)

Victorian period (1832–1901)

Modern period (roughly, first half of the 20th century)

Postmodern period (roughly, since end of World War II, 1945)

In all these periods, social, economic, political, and religious traditions greatly influenced writers. Century after century, their works reflected wars, natural disasters, common events, and human achievements in cultures they personally knew. So, although we often gain insights about *permanent things* from writers, we also get a glimpse of conditions that existed in the *passing moment* in which they were writing. Some writers develop works that openly celebrate ideas and the spirit of their age, describing them in detail and making it easy for readers to visualize past events and customs. Other writers take an indirect approach with much less description, requiring readers to read more deeply, to examine behaviors and values in order to get a sense of life in earlier periods. Either way, works of literature help to restore the past.

For example, Langston Hughes’s “Dream Boogie” (1951) lifts up the civil rights quest as a dream with human significance, “a dream deferred” that would be a long time in coming. In the 1950s, when Hughes published the poem, most black Americans were not experiencing the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams that Emancipation (nearly 100 years earlier) had promised. Looking back, we know that it would be more than a decade before significant change would come, as a result of non-violent protests under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the passage of civil rights legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

You might say, then, that this piece of literature functions both as Hughes’s *portrait* of an important human ideal that has not yet been achieved (racial reconciliation), and as a *photograph*—a snapshot of the state of that idealistic dream in the United States in the early 1950s. In an earlier essay, Hughes acknowledged,

Most of my poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. . . . [J]azz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world. (Hughes, 1926, p. 694)

Dream Boogie

Langston Hughes (1951)

Good morning, daddy! Ain't you heard The boogie-woogie rumble Of a dream deferred?	
Listen closely: You'll hear their feet Beating out and beating out a —	5
<i>You think It's a happy beat?</i>	
Listen to it closely: Ain't you heard something underneath like a —	10
<i>What did I say?</i>	
Sure, I'm happy! Take it away!	15
<i>Hey, pop! Re-bop! Mop!</i>	20
<i>Y-e-a-h!</i>	

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Literature Stimulates the Imagination

Those who create literature may make some use of literal definitions and factual descriptions, but the appeal and magic in their works are fashioned by the word pictures, feelings, and exquisite detail they create, revealing how particular things look in their minds. Writers enable us to see things clearly, often in new ways that alter previous perceptions. They often use **figures of speech** such as similes and metaphors to stimulate our imaginations. Each will be illustrated more fully in later chapters:

Simile—A direct comparison of two things that are ordinarily not thought to be similar, using *like* or *as* to connect them. In these lines from an 18th-century love **song** by Robert Burns, a person's lover is compared to a rose (visual imagery) and to a melody (auditory imagery):

O my Luve's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luve's like the melody
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

Metaphor—An imaginative comparison of two unlike things, suggesting how each resembles the other. In the following poem, poet Carl Sandburg compares changing fog patterns to the silent, subtle movements of a cat:

The Fog

Carl Sandburg (1916)

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

This selection is in the public domain.

Figures of speech such as similes and metaphors are tools of **figurative language**, any language used in a non-literal way to convey images and ideas. For example, Langston Hughes begins the poem “A Dream Deferred” with the literal question “What happens to a dream deferred?” Then, he uses explosive figurative language to describe the dream. He asks:

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run? (from Hughes, 1994)

In doing so, Hughes enables us to see things as he imagines them. First, he uses a simile to compare a deferred dream to a raisin lying in the sun, suggesting that dreams can deteriorate and ultimately fail; next, he introduces another simile to compare a dream to a festering sore, suggesting that dreams can aggravate and become destructive.

In “Dream Boogie,” Hughes asks readers to imagine the quest for civil rights as a dance (metaphor): a be-bop, not an elegant waltz. He arranges the flow of words to help us imagine movement, rhythm, and sounds. He creates fragmentary conversation to allow us to grasp dimensions of “dream” and “reality.” As he explains in his prefatory note in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” his writing must reflect change, because he is part of a changing community. It is a community

marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition. (Hughes, 1926)

Literature Glorifies the Commonplace

Even though literature often interprets lofty concepts and presents high society with irresistible glamour, much of its appeal is achieved through faithful treatment of ordinary life experiences. By dealing with common human interests and basic emotions, literature becomes relevant. For example, in “I Hear America Singing,” Walt Whitman celebrates the diversity of the working classes in 19th-century America, using familiar images of home and youthful vigor. Individually, these images reveal an ordinary slice of life, but when combined, they represent America’s democratic spirit—a defining melody inextricably connected to things that are commonplace rather than esoteric.

I Hear America Singing

Walt Whitman (1860)

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
 Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and
 strong,
 The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
 The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves
 off work,
 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the 5
 deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing
 as he stands,
 The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the
 morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work,
 or of the girl sewing or washing,
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
 The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young 10
 fellows, robust, friendly,
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

*This selection is in the public domain.***Literature Evokes Emotions and Links Feeling to Thinking**

There is an intimate and mysterious relationship between human emotions and human thought. Both what we feel (our affective responses) and what we think (our cognitive judgments) influence our literary experiences, but there is no fixed formula for how to use these separate domains as we read. So, our literary responses vary, revealing a lot about how each of us sees the world. Feeling usually comes first as we read. Especially when we experience plays or poetry, our immediate responses are stimulated by feelings. By purposely arranging word sounds and visual images, poets fire up feelings and create a powerful emotional awareness that encourages thought; dramatists choose unique clothing and stage sets to create a captivating perspective on an idea or concern; every writer develops a particular **tone** in each work that conveys a specific attitude toward the subject presented, further deepening emotional responses. All of these techniques contribute to creating our initial, emotional response to literature.

The feelings and spirit of Jane Kenyon's poem, for example, are conveyed through carefully crafted auditory and visual **imagery**: the sand and gravel falling "with a hiss and a thud" and the cat's "long red fur, the white feathers/between his toes, and his/long, not to say aquiline, nose." Also, the "blue bowl" is a visual image that creates emotional depth. It suggests the special relationship that the owners had with their cat. They did more than just provide for the cat; they fed the cat from a special bowl, "his bowl"—something they considered to be the cat's own property, something appropriate to bury with the cat. Listen and look for the images that evoke a sense of loss and strength as well.

The Blue Bowl

Jane Kenyon (1996)

Like primitives we buried the cat
 with his bowl. Bare-handed
 we scraped sand and gravel
 back into the hole.

	They fell with a hiss and thud on his side, on his long red fur, the white feathers between his toes, and his	5
Having the curved shape of an eagle's beak	long, not to say aquiline nose. We stood and brushed each other off. There are sorrows keener than these. Silent the rest of the day, we worked, ate, stared, and slept. It stormed all night; now it clears, and a robin bubbles from a dripping bush	10
	like the neighbor who means well but always says the wrong thing.	15

Jane Kenyon, "The Blue Bowl," from *Collected Poems*. Copyright © 2005 by The Estate of Jane Kenyon. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc. on behalf of Graywolf Press, www.graywolfpress.org.

The image of the robin that "bubbles" after the storm helps to explain the complexity of human emotions—emotions that grief can render fragile and less resilient.

Literature Upholds a Vision of the Ideal

Just ask Charlie Brown. If you're familiar with *Peanuts* cartoons, you'll know that Charlie finds himself in a frustrating world in which he must overcome his own shortcomings if he's ever to be as confident as Lucy, as reflective as Linus, as practical as Sally, or as artistic as Schroeder. He even surmises that Snoopy's life is more ideal than his own. Clearly, he has a lot of winning to do—not just in baseball or in wooing his redheaded dream girl—but in getting a firm grasp on the answers he's reaching for related to life itself.

This drive to seek the ideal is central in our human experience. The English poet Robert Browning considered it to be a human obligation when he observed that our *reach* should exceed our *grasp* as we live and grow, day by day. In his view, life is an experiential quest that requires us to be continuously seeking—going beyond what we have already grasped. He explores this idea in a poem about the famous Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Del Sarto, who may have sacrificed the full expression of his artistic ability in order to please his wife. Browning's view was that

a man's reach should exceed his grasp
Or what's a heaven for? ("Andrea Del Sarto" 97–98)

Writers sense this reach-versus-grasp dilemma very deeply. It defines their creative activity that, in its broadest sense, is a process of transforming chaos into order. Within this creative process, writers often present the search for the ideal as a journey toward a desired goal. The journey depicted is not necessarily pretty and serene; like life itself, it has challenges, violent conflicts, and failures, as well as high points of exhilaration and moments of knowing.

In the selection below, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, illustrates this quest for the ideal that we all feel within us. He asks us to consider the classical Greek hero Ulysses, who has returned from his heroic battles and is feeling constrained by the routine of ordinary life. He, of course, has grasped a lot of what life offers, but he still wants to reach for more. Here is the adventurous invitation that Tennyson imagines Ulysses might make to his aging warriors—asking them to join him on a further journey that would *reach* beyond what they had already accomplished, allowing them to *grasp* a fuller understanding of their strengths and of life's significance.

Excerpt from *Ulysses*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1833)

	Come, my friends,	
	'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.	
	Push off, and sitting well in order smite	
	The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds	
	To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths	5
	Of all the western stars, until I die.	
	It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:	
Location of departed spirits	It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,	
Greek hero in siege of Troy	And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.	
	Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'	10
	We are not now that strength which in old days	
	Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;	
	One equal temper of heroic hearts,	
	Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will	
	To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.	15

This selection is in the public domain.

Literature Explores Significant Human Questions and Reveals Human Nature

As an example of the significant questions explored in literature, let's look at the underlying dilemma—the nature of time—that the heroic Ulysses faces in Tennyson's poem. As we do, think about how this dilemma might relate to your own life. Ulysses is aware of his mortality; he knows that death is a certainty and getting nearer. He faces the time dilemma that we all encounter: He can't go back and change the past, and he can't step ahead into the future. Only the present is available to him—and even as he seizes a moment in the present to express his bold intentions for a further journey, that moment dissolves into the past. His predicament, to use literary critic Northrop Frye's modern image, is like being in the caboose of a moving train, watching the rails recede, each one like a separate moment in his life. Frye pictures time as something that pulls us backwards (blindly) into the future (1991).

You, no doubt, have thought about the nature of time in relation to events in your life, perhaps when one you loved died. Maybe things you've read or movies you've seen called your attention to time's changeless pattern. Literature explores this past-present-future mystery in many ways. For example, in once-upon-a-time tales like "Sleeping Beauty," *fantasy* erases time, and the past becomes the present, which continues endlessly. In tragic dramas like *Oedipus the King*, *fate* presents consequences from past human actions, bringing misery to the present and the future. In books like *The Great Gatsby*, which often become popular movies because they touch all of us, *personal dreams* that would settle the past and satisfy future hopes are not fully achieved or remain tantalizingly elusive, making the present frenzied.

These considerations of the nature of time (life-death dilemma) are complex. Similarly, all significant life questions—those dealing with the nature of justice or love, for example—pose difficulties. Offering insights into such questions is one of the great contributions of literature. What we gain from studying literature is not a set of answers to life's hardest questions, but rather insights into the ways human beings deal with them. A study of literature, in other words, enables us to glimpse into human nature. It uncovers what lies within us, allowing us to comprehend and handle puzzling situations and unanswered questions in our own lives. Czech-born writer Franz Kafka believed that this quest for self-discovery is every reader's obligation. In a letter, he used stark imagery to describe literature's potential for enlightenment:

Altogether, I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. . . . What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is what I believe. (Kafka, 158)

2.4 A Story for Reflection

Point of view, which we will discuss in Chapter 4, refers to who tells the story—how it is presented to the reader. The most common point of view is called “omniscient.” The “omniscient” narrator is not a character in the story but has access to the thoughts, feelings, and history of the characters. The omniscient technique in the following story is particularly effective in allowing the reader to understand the old woman’s predicament and how she, and the others, deal with it.

Alice Walker

Best known for her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker was born into a sharecropper family in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. She was an outstanding student, earning a scholarship to attend Spelman College. She later transferred to Sarah Lawrence College, where she completed a degree in 1965. Issues of race and gender form the center of her literary work and her social activism, which included participation in civil rights demonstrations led by Martin Luther King, Jr. She taught gender studies courses at Wellesley College and began one of the first gender studies programs in the United States. Her publications include poems, short stories, and novels. She continues to write, exploring life situations through the eyes of African-American women and highlighting the continuing challenges of sexism, racism, and poverty in American life.



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The Welcome Table

Alice Walker (1970)
for sister Clara Ward

I’m going to sit at the Welcome table
Shout my troubles over
Walk and talk with Jesus
Tell God how you treat me
One of these days!
Spiritual

The old woman stood with eyes uplifted in her Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes: high shoes polished about the tops and toes, a long rusty dress adorned with an old corsage, long withered, and the remnants of an elegant silk scarf as head rag stained with grease from the many oily pigtailed underneath. Perhaps she had known suffering. There was a dazed and sleepy look in her aged blue-brown eyes. But for those who searched hastily for “reasons” in that old tight face, shut now like an ancient door, there was

nothing to be read. And so they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known. Some of those who saw her there on the church steps spoke words about her that were hardly fit to be heard, others held their pious peace; and some felt vague stirrings of pity, small and persistent and hazy, as if she were an old collie turned out to die.

She was angular and lean and the color of poor gray Georgia earth, beaten by king cotton and the extreme weather. Her elbows were wrinkled and thick, the skin ashen but durable, like the bark of old pines. On her face centuries were folded into the circles around one eye, while around the other, etched and mapped as if for print, ages more threatened again to live. Some of them there at the church saw the age, the dotage, the missing buttons down the front of her mildewed black dress. Others saw cooks, chauffeurs, maids, mistresses, children denied or smothered in the deferential way she held her cheek to the side, toward the ground. Many of them saw jungle orgies in an evil place, while others were reminded of riotous anarchists looting and raping in the streets. Those who knew the hesitant creeping up on them of the law, saw the beginning of the end of the sanctuary of Christian worship, saw the desecration of Holy Church, and saw an invasion of privacy, which they struggled to believe they still kept.

Still she had come down the road toward the big white church alone. Just herself, an old forgetful woman, nearly blind with age. Just her and her eyes raised dully to the glittering cross that crowned the sheer silver steeple. She had walked along the road in a stagger from her house a half mile away. Perspiration, cold and clammy, stood on her brow and along the creases by her thin wasted nose. She stopped to calm herself on the wide front steps, not looking about her as they might have expected her to do, but simply standing quite still, except for a slight quivering of her throat and tremors that shook her cotton-stockinged legs.

The reverend of the church stopped her pleasantly as she stepped into the vestibule. Did he say, as they thought he did, kindly, "Auntie, you know this is not your church?" As if one could choose the wrong one. But no one remembers, for they never spoke of it afterward, and she brushed past him anyway, as if she had been brushing past him all her life, except this time she was in a hurry. Inside the church she sat on the very first bench from the back, gazing with concentration at the stained-glass window over her head. It was cold, even inside the church, and she was shivering. Everybody could see. They stared at her as they came in and sat down near the front. It was cold, very cold to them, too; outside the church it was below freezing and not much above inside. But the sight of her, sitting there somehow passionately ignoring them, brought them up short, burning.

The young usher, never having turned anyone out of his church before, but not even considering this job as that (after all, she had no right to be there, certainly), went up to her and whispered that she should leave. Did he call her "Grandma," as later he seemed to recall he had? But for those who actually hear such traditional

pleasantries and to whom they actually mean something, “Grandma” was not one, for she did not pay him any attention, just muttered, “Go ‘way,” in a weak sharp *bothered* voice, waving his frozen blond hair and eyes from near her face.

It was the ladies who finally did what to them had to be done. Daring their burly indecisive husbands to throw the old colored woman out they made their point. God, mother, country, earth, church. It involved all that, and well they knew it. Leather bagged and shoed, with good calfskin gloves to keep out the cold, they looked with contempt at the bootless gray arthritic hands of the old woman, clenched loosely, restlessly in her lap. Could their husbands expect them to sit up in church with that? No, no, the husbands were quick to answer and even quicker to do their duty.

Under the old woman’s arms they placed their hard fists (which afterward smelled of decay and musk—the fermenting scent of onionskins and rotting greens). Under the old woman’s arms they raised their fists, flexed their muscular shoulders, and out she flew through the door, back under the cold blue sky. This done, the wives folded their healthy arms across their trim middles and felt at once justified and scornful. But none of them said so, for none of them ever spoke of the incident again. Inside the church it was warmer. They sang, they prayed. The protection and promise of God’s impartial love grew more not less desirable as the sermon gathered fury and lashed itself out above their penitent heads.

The old woman stood at the top of the steps looking about in bewilderment. She had been singing in her head. They had interrupted her. Promptly she began to sing again, though this time a sad song. Suddenly, however, she looked down the long gray highway and saw something interesting and delightful coming. She started to grin, toothlessly, with short giggles of joy, jumping about and slapping her hands on her knees. And soon it became apparent why she was so happy. For coming down the highway at a firm though leisurely pace was Jesus. He was wearing an immaculate white, long dress trimmed in gold around the neck and hem, and a red, a bright red, cape. Over his left arm he carried a brilliant blue blanket. He was wearing sandals and a beard and he had long brown hair parted on the right side. His eyes, brown, had wrinkles around them as if he smiled or looked at the sun a lot. She would have known him, recognized him, anywhere. There was a sad but joyful look to his face, like a candle was glowing behind it, and he walked with sure even steps in her direction, as if he were walking on the sea. Except that he was not carrying in his arms a baby sheep, he looked exactly like the picture of him that she had hanging over her bed at home. She had taken it out of a white lady’s Bible while she was working for her. She had looked at that picture for more years than she could remember, but never once had she really expected to see him. She squinted her eyes to

be sure he wasn't carrying a little sheep in one arm, but he was not. Ecstatically she began to wave her arms for fear he would miss seeing her, for he walked looking straight ahead on the shoulder of the highway, and from time to time looking upward at the sky.

All he said when he got up close to her was "Follow me," and she bounded down to his side with all the bob and speed of one so old. For every one of his long determined steps she made two quick ones. They walked along in deep silence for a long time. Finally she started telling him about how many years she had cooked for them, cleaned for them, nursed them. He looked at her kindly but in silence. She told him indignantly about how they had grabbed her when she was singing in her head and not looking, and how they had tossed her out of his church. A old heifer like me, she said, straightening up next to Jesus, breathing hard. But he smiled down at her and she felt better instantly and time just seemed to fly by. When they passed her house, forlorn and sagging, weatherbeaten and patched, by the side of the road, she did not even notice it, she was so happy to be out walking along the highway with Jesus, she broke the silence once more to tell Jesus how glad she was that he had come, how she had often looked at his picture hanging on her wall (she hoped he didn't know she had stolen it) over her bed, and how she had never expected to see him down here in person. Jesus gave her one of his beautiful smiles and they walked on. She did not know where they were going; someplace wonderful, she suspected. The ground was like clouds under their feet, and she felt she could walk forever without becoming the least bit tired. She even began to sing out loud some of the old spirituals she loved, but she didn't want to annoy Jesus, who looked so thoughtful, so she quieted down. They walked on, looking straight over the treetops into the sky, and the smiles that played over her dry wind-cracked face were like first clean ripples across a stagnant pond. On they walked without stopping.

The people in church never knew what happened to the old woman; they never mentioned her to one another or to anybody else. Most of them heard sometime later that an old colored woman fell dead along the highway. Silly as it seemed, it appeared she had walked herself to death. Many of the black families along the road said they had seen the old lady high-stepping down the highway; sometimes jabbering in a low insistent voice, sometimes singing, sometimes merely gesturing excitedly with her hands. Other times silent and smiling, looking at the sky. She had been alone, they said. Some of them wondered aloud where the old woman had been going so stoutly that it had worn her heart out. They guessed maybe she had relatives across the river, some miles away, but none of them really knew.

"The Welcome Table" from *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, copyright © 1970 and renewed 1998 by Alice Walker. Reproduced by permission of The Wendy Weil Agency, Inc.

RESPONSE AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Connecting

What allowed you to connect to this story?

Considering

At what points were your feelings heightened because of the omniscient point of view—allowing you not just to observe action, but also to “see inside” the minds of those involved in the action?

Concluding

Consider the six ways literature contributes to our lives discussed in this chapter. How many of these can be illustrated by “The Welcome Table”?

A Concluding Exercise: Supporting Your Response to a Literary Work

Responding to something you have read involves more than simply summarizing the content or re-stating what happened. As this chapter has shown, responding to literature requires you to imagine, to think, to reflect, and to make connections to life experiences and human concerns. Your response will be unique, composed of your personal insights. But, at the same time, your response must be credibly related to what the writer of the literary work has presented. So you need to show how particular things in the piece of literature actually support your response.

1. Below are three responses to “The Welcome Table.” Each presents a different view of the old woman and her role in the story. Consider how the selected aspects of the story can be used to support the response in each case.

“She is old, black and ‘different’; she represents the possibility of a servant class stepping out of line.” —Peter S. Hawkins (1994), *Listening for God*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, p. 108.

Support from the Story:

Image describing her appearance: “She was angular and lean and the color of poor gray Georgia earth, beaten by king cotton and the extreme weather.”

Action in the story: She explained, in her imaginary conversation with Jesus, “how many years she had cooked for them, cleaned for them, and nursed them.”

Action in the story: “Others saw cooks, chauffeurs, maids, mistresses, children denied or smothered in the deferential way she held her cheek to the side, toward the ground.”

“This old black woman challenges the very thing that gives them [white women] privilege. Both they and she are women—but they are white, their only claim to the pedestal on which they so uneasily stand.” —Barbara Christian (1981) “A Study of *In Love and Trouble: The Contrary Women of Alice Walker*,” *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 12, No. 2, (March/April 1981), p. 70.

Support from the Story:

Image describing her appearance: “They gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known.”

Action in the story: “Leather bagged and shoed, with good calfskin gloves to keep out the cold, they looked with contempt at the bloodless gray arthritic hands of the old woman, clenched loosely, restlessly in her lap.”

Action in the story: “It was the ladies who finally did what to them had to be done. Daring their burly indecisive husbands to throw the old colored woman out they made their point.”

“The old woman is empowered by an irrepressible spiritual tradition, ‘singing in her head,’ that allows her to resist conventions and be hopeful.”

Support from the Story:

Image describing her appearance: “In that old tight face, shut now like an ancient door, there was nothing to be read.”

Image describing her appearance: “On her face centuries were folded into the circles around one eye, while around the other, etched and mapped as if for print, ages more threatened again to live.”

Action in the story: “She told him [Jesus] indignantly about how they had grabbed her when she was singing in her head and not looking, and how they had tossed her out of his church.”

Action in the story: “She even began to sing out loud some of the old spirituals she loved.”

The epigraph: Five lines from a spiritual, dedicated to the Gospel singer Clara Ward.

- Using the “Short-Answer Written Response” model that appears earlier in this chapter, write your response to “The Welcome Table,” and to support your view include references to specific aspects of the story, like those above.

Summary

Chapter 2 describes the nature and scope of responses that readers typically make to literature. Some responses require more intellectual inquiry than others do, but in every productive response you must *connect* imaginatively to the literature, *consider* the literary techniques that make it effective, and then *conclude* what meaning your reading experience holds for you.

Among the many contributions literature makes to our lives, six are particularly important: Literature restores the past, stimulates the imagination, glorifies the commonplace, evokes emotions and links feeling to thinking, upholds a vision of the ideal, and reveals human nature by exploring significant human questions. The writing process is driven by a human impulse to give form to something abstract—an idea, a feeling, a speculation. Literature, therefore, grows out of creative activity that begins in writers’ experiences and imaginings; their finished works capture and represent the abstract. The extent to which a work’s intrinsic ideas are recognizable and memorable will determine its ultimate artistic value.

The literature in this chapter invites and requires a broad range of responses, some falling within familiar boundaries of your life experiences, some pulling you into unfamiliar territory of thought and reflection. Even though the following outline identifies only one approach for responding to each piece of literature (when many are possible), it highlights the range of pleasure and insight that responding to literature can bring.

Key Terms and Concepts

figurative language Language used in a non-literal way to convey images and ideas. Figures of speech, including similes and metaphors, are the main tools of figurative language. For example, ordinary descriptive language: “The moon looked hazy through the clouds.” Figurative language: “The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.”

figures of speech Tools of figurative language; the most common are similes and metaphors.

imagery A distinct representation of something that can be experienced and understood through the senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), or the representation of an idea. Writers use precise language in developing imagery.

metaphor A figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between one object and another that is different from it. Example: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances,” from *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare.

persona Literally, in Latin, “a mask.” When it is used in analyzing literature, *persona* refers to the narrator in a story or the speaker in a poem, who may or may not reflect the perspective of the author.

simile A figure of speech that compares two objects or ideas that are not ordinarily considered to be similar, linked by using *like* or *as*. Example: “The water made a sound like kittens lapping,” from *The Yearling* by Marjorie Rawlings.

song A lyrical musical expression, a source of emotional outlet common in ancient communities and still influential in contemporary culture.

symbol An object, person, or action that conveys two meanings: its literal meaning and something it stands for. For example, *rain* is often symbolized as a life giver; a *snake* is often symbolized as evil.

tone In a literary work, the speaker’s attitude toward the reader or the subject. Tone might be described as serious, playful, ironic, condescending, bored, affectionate, sad, detached, or any other word that would describe “attitude.”