

Blaze up into golden stones.
 I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
 A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
 I have wasted my life.

[1963]

Did the last line startle you? For many readers, Wright's poem is memorable because its conclusion is unexpected, even jarring. At first glance, nothing in the speaker's description of his surroundings justifies his blunt self-condemnation at the end. If anything, the previous lines evoke rural tranquility, so that a more predictable finish would be "I am now at peace." Instead, the speaker suddenly criticizes himself. Intrigued by this mysterious move, readers usually look at the whole poem again, studying it for signs of growing despair. Often they debate with one another how the ending does relate to preceding lines. Thus, although the poem's speaker implies his life hasn't mattered, the poem itself has mattered to readers, plunging them into lively exchanges over how to interpret Wright's text.

We present Wright's poem to begin pointing out how literature can matter to people. We will keep referring to the poem in this introduction. But now we turn to three big questions:

- How have people defined *literature*?
- Why study literature in a college writing course?
- What can you do to make literature matter to others?

How Have People Defined *Literature*?

Asked to define *literature*, most people would include Wright's text, along with other poems. In addition to poetry, they would say *literature* encompasses fiction (novels as well as short stories) and drama. But limiting the term's scope to these genres can be misleading, for they are rooted in everyday life. Often they employ ordinary forms of talk, although they may play with such expressions and blend them with less common ones. Someone lying in a hammock may, in fact, recite details of the landscape — especially if he or she is talking to someone else on a cell phone, as is common nowadays. And quite possibly you have heard someone proclaim "I have wasted my life" or make a similar declaration. In any case, surely much of Wright's language is familiar to you, even if you haven't seen it arranged into these particular phrases and lines.

The genres regarded as literary are tied in other ways to everyday behavior. For instance, things function as symbols not only in poems but also in daily conversation. Even people who aren't poets have little trouble associating shadows, evening, darkness, and hawks with death. (In the case of Wright's poem, the issue then becomes whether the text supports or complicates this association.) Hammocks, too, are often treated as meaningful images. They are familiar symbols of "taking it easy." (With Wright's poem, the issue again becomes whether the speaker's hammock signifies *more* than just leisure.)

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Throughout the day, then, into practice. Perhaps you have song lyric or citing words from the sense that you use metaphor most of us are capable, as Wright (even if we aren't apt to compare you are often theatrical as well forming any number of roles. In telling no matter how little fiction situation: you are late for a traffic, and now you must expect well become a tale of suspense; the bumper-to-bumper horde; ourselves stories in order to live because doing so helps us make story that Wright's speaker tells means for interpreting his exit on living.)

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Throughout the day, then, it can be said that people put literary genres into practice. Perhaps you have commented on certain situations by quoting a song lyric or citing words from a poem, story, or play. Surely you are poetic in the sense that you use metaphors in your everyday conversations. After all, most of us are capable, as Wright's speaker is, of comparing a butterfly to a leaf (even if we aren't apt to compare horse droppings to "golden stones"). Probably you are often theatrical as well, carrying out various kinds of scripts and performing any number of roles. Furthermore, probably you are engaged in storytelling no matter how little fiction you actually write. Imagine this familiar situation: you are late for a meeting with friends because you got stuck in traffic, and now you must explain to them your delay. Your explanation may well become a tale of suspense, with you the hero racing against time to escape the bumper-to-bumper horde. As writer Joan Didion has observed, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Almost all of us spin narratives day after day because doing so helps us meaningfully frame our lives. (Unfortunately, the story that Wright's speaker tells is "I have wasted my life." Nevertheless, it's a means for interpreting his existence, and maybe somehow it helps him keep on living.)

You may admit that literature is grounded in real life and yet still tend to apply the term only to written texts of fiction, poetry, and drama. But this tendency is distinctly modern, for the term *literature* has not always been applied so restrictively. *Literature* was at first a characteristic of *readers*. From the term's emergence in the fourteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth, *literature* was more or less a synonym for *literacy*. People of literature were assumed to be well read.

In the late eighteenth century, however, the term's meaning changed. Increasingly it referred to books and other printed texts rather than to people who read them. At the beginning of this shift, the scope of literature was broad, encompassing nearly all public writing. But as the nineteenth century proceeded, the term's range shrank. More and more people considered literature to be imaginative or creative writing, which they distinguished from nonfiction. This trend did take years to build; in the early 1900s, literature anthologies still featured essays as well as excerpts from histories and biographies. By the mid-1900s, though, the narrower definition of literature prevailed.

This limited definition has become vulnerable. From the early 1970s, a number of literature faculty have called for widening it. In 1979, for instance, a National Endowment for the Humanities-Modern Language Association institute entitled "Women's Nontraditional Literature" applied the term *literature* to genres that had not been thought of as such. Participants studied essays, letters, diaries, autobiographies, and oral testimonies. To each of these genres, women have contributed much; in fact, the institute's participants concluded that a literature curriculum slights many works by women if it focuses on fiction, poetry, and drama alone.

Of course, even within these three categories, the term *literature* has been selectively applied. Take the case of novelist and short-story writer Stephen King, whose books have sold millions of copies. Despite his commercial success,

a lot of readers—including some of his fans—refuse to call King's writing literature. They assume that to call something literature is to say that it has artistic merit, and for them King's tales of horror fall short.

Yet people who use the term *literature* as a compliment may still disagree about whether a certain text deserves it. Plenty of readers do praise King's writing as literature, even as others deem it simply entertainment. In short, artistic standards differ. To be sure, some works have been constantly admired through the years; regarded as classics, they are frequently taught in literature classes. *Hamlet* and other plays by William Shakespeare are obvious examples. But in the last twenty years, much controversy has arisen over the *literary canon*, those works taught again and again. Are there good reasons why the canon has consisted mostly of works by white men? Or have the principles of selection been skewed by sexism and racism? Should the canon be changed to accommodate a greater range of authors? Or should literary studies resist having any canon at all? These questions have provoked various answers and continued debate.

Also in question are attempts to separate literature from *nonfiction*. Much nonfiction shows imagination and relies on devices found in novels, short stories, poems, and plays. The last few years have seen the emergence of the term *creative nonfiction* as a synonym for essays, autobiographies, histories, and journalistic accounts that use evocative language and strong narratives. Conversely, works of fiction, poetry, and drama may center on real-life events. For example, beginning with James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock," several of the poems in our book can easily be seen as autobiographical. Perhaps you have suspected already that the speaker in Wright's poem is Wright himself. In numerous interviews, Wright admitted as much. He acknowledged that he based the poem on his own experience of lying in a hammock, which really did lead him to think "I have wasted my life."

A note of caution is in order. While testimony such as Wright's can be illuminating, it should be used prudently. In crucial respects, Wright's poem still differs from Wright's life. The text is a representation of his experience, not the experience itself. His particular choice and arrangement of words continue to merit study, especially because he could have depicted his experience in plenty of other ways. As critic Charles Altieri notes, important to specify are the ways in which a poem is "binding the forms of syntax to the possibilities of feeling." Keep in mind, too, that the author of a work is not always the ideal guide to it. After all, the work may matter to its readers by raising for them issues and ideas that the author did not foresee. Besides, often the author's comments about the text leave certain aspects of it unexplained. Though Wright disclosed his poem's origins, readers must still decide how to connect its various images to its final line. Even so, "Lying in a Hammock" confirms that a literary work can stem from actual circumstances, whatever use the reader makes of facts about them.

Some people argue, however, that literature about real events is still "literary" because it inspires contemplation rather than action. This view of literature has

traditionally been summed up, however, all the poems, novels, and stories to undertake certain acts. In "Capital Punishment," a poem by Wright, not every poem is so. "Lying in a Hammock" seems more genuine. The speaker is physically reclining while the reader may take even this poem as a challenge. We can feel they have not wasted their time.

In our book, we resist the urge to encourage you to review all the works. At the same time, to expand the canon, in addition to short stories, poems, and commentaries as well as novels. We invite you to make your own choices. We need not treat them as alternate.

What Makes Literature? Comparing a News Story

We have suggested that, in a way, a news story can be like a poem. So, too, can it resemble a poem. It is a distinct category, even if it is not. Usually, works classified as literature are as imaginary. Just as often, they are and challenging. Through their language, settings, emotions, and many of the words in such a work can be ambiguous, symbolic, and often complicated, even defying simple diagnosis. They teach. They illuminate life, not to clichés or other sloganistic language. They are not immediately clear in their meaning. Overall, a literary work may then disagree with our own literary selection.

A literary work's speaker is often with another kind of text. For example, each of these poems is a response when wildlife invades the human world. The operation that many people find in them. But while one text is a poem, the other is a news story. The differences are striking.

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traditionally been summed up as "art for art's sake." This notion brushes aside, however, all the poems, novels, short stories, and plays that encourage audiences to undertake certain acts. Included in our book, for example, is Sherman Alexie's "Capital Punishment," a poem designed to spark resistance to the death penalty. True, not every poem is so conspicuously action-oriented. Wright's "Lying in a Hammock" seems more geared toward reflection, especially because the speaker is physically reclining while he observes nature and ponders his life. But readers may take even this poem as an incitement to change their behavior, so that they can feel they have not wasted their own lives.

In our book, we resist endorsing a single definition of *literature*. Rather, we encourage you to review and perhaps rethink what the term means to you. At the same time, to expand the realm of literature, we include several essays in addition to short stories, poems, and plays. We also present numerous critical commentaries as well as various historical documents. Throughout the book, we invite you to make connections among these different kinds of texts. You need not treat them as altogether separate species.

What Makes Literature "Literature"? Comparing a News Story and a Poem

We have suggested that, in some respects, literature can resemble other writing. So, too, can it resemble ordinary speech. Still, literature can be viewed as a distinct category, even if controversies arise over what specific texts belong to it. Usually, works classified as literature permit the reader to treat their characters as imaginary. Just as often, these works' use of language is especially skillful and challenging. Through their style, they dramatically depict people, situations, and settings, emotionally drawing their readers in. At the same time, many of the words in such texts can have more than one meaning. They might be ambiguous, symbolic, or metaphorical. Furthermore, the main characters are often complicated, even mysterious. Their acts, relationships, and motives defy simple diagnosis. Typically, just as complex is any "lesson" these works teach. They illuminate life, but they do so by showing how it resists reduction to clichés or other slogans. Furthermore, the basic design of these works may not be immediately clear. Their patterns may be detectable only after repeated reading. Overall, a literary work tends to make its readers *analyze* it, *interpret* it. They may then disagree about its meaning and impact. Indeed, we hope that our own literary selections will spark debates in your class.

A literary work's special features can be more apparent if you compare it with another kind of text on the same topic. Consider the following pair of examples. Each of these pieces of writing deals with the ways humans react when wildlife invades their home turf. In particular, each dramatizes the exasperation that many people feel when woodchucks destroy their farms or gardens. But while one text is a newspaper article, the other is a poem, and the differences are striking.