CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Reading and Writing about Literature

"Nobody reads anymore."

"People don't know how to write."

"We're becoming a nation of illiterates."

Maybe you've heard laments like these. They have sounded through our culture for several years now, indeed for at least several decades. Proclamations on the sad lack of literacy in modern life have been widely reported, as in January 2008, when Apple Computer cofounder Steve Jobs predicted that Amazon's Kindle e-book reader was doomed to failure because "people don't read anymore." (Perhaps ironically, he said this in a room full of reporters and must have known that these writers were going to quote these words in print and that millions of people would read them.) If we take these warnings seriously, it would seem that modern culture and modern education are in big trouble.

But news of the death of literacy is premature. In fact, we can make a good case that reading and writing occupy a more central place in our day-to-day life than they have at any other point in history. We are bombarded all day long with written messages. Billboards, product packaging, Web sites, blogs, flyers, wikis, advertisements, restaurant menus, e-mails, text messages, social media updates—the list goes on and on. Even while watching TV, arguably the least literary of media, we are often given a reading task: think of the "crawl" of updates that appears at the bottom of the screen during newscasts, the captions that identify interview subjects, even the station logos in the corner of the screen. The average North American in the early twenty-first century encounters literally hundreds of written messages every day, and most of us have no particular problem reading these messages. Often we don't even notice that we are doing so.

In a similar vein, most of us spend more time writing than people have at any earlier point in history. The vast majority of jobs these days require some amount of writing. Sometimes this requirement is extensive, as when engineers write sophisticated reports on their projects, while some work-related writing is as simple as a daily e-mail to communicate with
others on the job. Students, of course, take notes, complete homework assignments, and write papers. Even in our leisure time, we are likely to update our social media, comment on a friend's blog post, send a text message, or write a note to a family member or friend.

If you were to keep a list of every single thing you read and wrote in a day (a list that would, of course, have to include an entry for the list you were writing), you might be surprised at how extensive that list was by the end of the day.

So, if literacy is alive and well in the modern world, why is a book like this one necessary? Why do colleges and universities offer, or even require, literature classes? Don't we already know enough about reading and writing? Do we really need to learn how to read and write about literature? The answer as to why people do need to learn these skills is that imaginative literature is different from most of the other writing we read every day, and reading and writing about literature requires, and builds, a very different set of skills than those we bring to a Wikipedia article or a Facebook posting.

WHY READ LITERATURE?

Let's take a moment to reflect on why we read literature. Of course, there is no single or simple answer: People read to be informed, to be entertained, to be exposed to new ideas, or to have familiar concepts reinforced. Often, people read just to enjoy a good story or to get a glimpse of how other people think and feel. But literature does much more than give us a compelling plot or a look into an author's thoughts and emotions—although at its best it does these things as well. Literature explores the larger world and the ways in which people interact with that world and with one another. So even when what we read is entirely fictional, we nevertheless learn about real life. And, indeed, by affecting our thoughts and feelings, literature can indirectly affect our actions as well. Thus literature not only reflects but even helps to shape our world.

Literature, then, is not merely informational, like so much of the reading we do in our everyday lives. It does not stand up well to haste, distractions, or multitasking. It is not meant to be browsed, skimmed, or linked away from as we search for particular facts or knowledge as efficiently as possible. Instead, it is designed for sustained reading, meaning that to do it justice we need to read it from beginning to end and pay it our full attention for all that time. What is most important in literature is rarely highlighted for us. Rather, we must use our intelligence to figure out the significance the literature holds for us, and we must realize that this significance may be different for a different reader. Because of this, reading literature helps us develop the skills of introspection, sustained attention, and deep analysis, skills that can help us in other areas of our lives as well.

WHY WRITE ABOUT LITERATURE?

Even students who enjoy reading poems, stories, or plays do not always enjoy writing about them. Some claim that having to analyze literature kills the fun they find in a good story. For others, the task of writing about literature can seem intimidating, frustrating, or just plain dull. If you share any of these prejudices, try to put them aside while we consider the value of writing about literature.

Writing about literature requires a special set of knowledge and skills. When you write about a story, a poem, or a play, you need to be particularly attentive to language, the medium of literature. This honed both analytical ability and creativity. In this sort of writing, you also need to pay close attention to your own use of language—just as you must pay attention to the language of the story, poem, or play—and doing so may have ripple effects that improve all your writing. Writing about literature, then, can help make you more thoughtful and articulate, better able to make yourself heard and understood, and obviously those are qualities that can improve your life well beyond the bounds of your literature classroom. And, far from killing the enjoyment of reading, writing about literature can increase that enjoyment and provide a sense of accomplishment as you look at the well-crafted paper you've written.

Writing about literature also has real-world usefulness. By forcing us to organize our thoughts and state clearly what we think, writing an essay helps us clarify what we know and believe. It gives us a chance to affect the thinking of our readers. Even more important, we actually learn as we write. In the process of writing, we often make new discoveries and forge new connections between ideas. We find and work through contradictions in our thinking, and we create whole new lines of thought as we work to make linear sense out of an often chaotic jumble of impressions. So, while reading literature can teach us much about the world, writing about literature often teaches us about ourselves.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN A LITERATURE CLASS

Every classroom, like every group of people in any setting, is its own unique world, with its own set of expectations and social interactions. However, there are certain features common to most literature class,
what might be considered the culture of a college or university literature class.

Unlike some other classes on campus, a literature class is not the sort of class where attendance is optional as long as you master the material and are able to pass the tests. Though your class may have a lecture component, it will almost certainly have a large discussion component as well, a give-and-take between students and instructor regarding the stories, poems, and plays you have read. In some ways, these discussions are the most important part of a literature class, and no amount of extra study on your own or sharing notes with a classmate can make up for having missed class. To follow these discussions, let alone to participate, you obviously will have to complete the reading. Whether or not your class has a stated attendance policy, to do well you need to be there and to be caught up with all reading and writing assignments. Participation is important.

Discussions in literature classes are usually interesting, because no two people come away from a particular literary text with exactly the same impressions. You may dislike a particular story and be surprised to discover that most of your fellow students loved it. A poem may leave you smiling while it makes one of your classmates cry. A character’s motivation might seem obvious to you but baffle someone else. These differences arise because each reader is distinctive. Because you have lived a unique life, you have a knowledge of the world that is slightly different from any other reader’s. You bring this personal history and knowledge to your reading, along with your own mind and temperament, your own likes and dislikes, and even all the knowledge gained from your past reading. Differing opinions are valid in literature classes, and each reader is in a position to enrich the conversation by speaking up in class.

Just as speaking up is part of participating, so too is attentive listening. While it is fair to regard your take on a piece of literature as valid, that doesn’t mean you need only consider your own opinions. Listening to what your instructor and classmates have to say is equally important, especially when they disagree with you. If your position has value, so do theirs. Perhaps they have seen something you missed, or perhaps they consider crucial something that you had dismissed as unimportant. You may find your first impressions shifting during these discussions, or you may find them solidifying. Either of these outcomes is a good sign that you’re learning. The most important thing you bring to a literary discussion is a willingness to share your own perspectives while remaining open to the possibility of learning from others.

Attentive listeners tend to make the best note takers, and having good class notes will prove incredibly helpful when you sit down to write your papers. This important skill will be covered in the next chapter.

LITERATURE AND ENJOYMENT

You may have noticed that little has been said so far about the idea that reading and writing about literature can also be fun. Some students really enjoy reading imaginative literature and writing papers about it. If you’re in that group, you’re lucky; your literature class will be fun and interesting for you, and—not incidentally—you’ll probably do good work in the course. If you’ve never been fond of reading and writing about literature, though, you might spend a little time thinking about why some of your classmates enjoy this sort of work as well as what you might do to increase your own enjoyment of literature and investment in the writing process. You’ll be happier and write better papers if you can put aside any previous negative experiences with literature and writing you may have had and approach your task with a positive mind-set. As you are introduced to new authors, new characters and settings, and new ideas, your literature class may surprise you. It could even end up being a favorite.