

# John Lye's Course and Source Page

## ON THE USES OF STUDYING LITERATURE

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As are many of my posts, this document is open to change. If you have any suggestions (additions, qualifications, arguments), mail me.

Literature, like any art form, engages the reader in a complex set of emotional, symbolic, moral, intellectual and social considerations.

Literature uses the normal means of communication -- language, images, symbols, codes, stories -- but uses them with more complexity and subtlety than is normal in everyday communication.

As well, it avails itself of a certain sensibility we have to such things as form, sensual experience, rhythm, repetition, contrast, which sensibility we call the 'aesthetic'.

What I have listed below are a number of suggestions as to how literature works for us, presented as theses; they are tentative -- open to challenge and change -- and not exclusive. My goal is to give you a sense of how one can begin to conceptualize why, aside from the fact that it might be fun, one can profit from the reading and study of literature. In the case of literature, as with any art form, reading and study are closely allied: the more one learns how literature works, the more open one is to the effects that it can have -- one gains competency as a reader, and literature becomes richer and more engaging for one. You will notice that there are overlaps among the theories.

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### 1. THE 'WISDOM' THESIS.

According to this general thesis, literature explores the texture and meaning of human experience in a complex, compelling way, and leads us to insight and rich reflection, hence wisdom, concerning our lives and the nature of human experience. Literature does so for one or more (perhaps all) of the following reasons:

- An argument is often made that the artist has heightened sensibilities, or powers of perception -- that she or he feels, experiences and imagines intensely, richly, complexly, and so can convey a richer, deeper sense of experience.
- It is argued that writing, to be considered 'literature', requires a use of language, images and ideas which is refined, precise, and self-reflective, and that as we use language and imagination more fully and consciously, we actually can think about and imagine the world more accurately and deeply.
- The point is made that literature is built on lines of tension, is composed of many ambiguities, contradictions and ironies. Such tensions, ambiguities and ironies bring out the richness, density and complexity of human experience.
- Literature is written in various traditions and genres, and these traditions and genres have customary topics, themes, and patterns of reflection and representation; these topics, themes, and patterns of reflection and representation have a rich history, and have accumulated wisdom and insight over time as many thoughtful people have contributed to their evolution. Literature, then builds on previous literature to establish rich histories of thought and expression.

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### 2. THE 'EXPLORATION' OR 'HEURISTIC' THESIS.

According to this argument literature creates 'possible worlds', imagined dramatic embodiments of experience which allow the artist to explore basic 'rules' of human nature and of the structure of the world. In *Macbeth* for instance Shakespeare explores the power of and logic of evil (the way evil destroys itself, of its very nature) and the way in which the fundamental goodness at the heart of things asserts itself; he does so by constructing and in a sense 'letting loose' a highly charged dramatic and symbolic situation within a particular world-view.

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### **3. THE 'REPRESENTATION' OR 'REFLECTION OF REALITY' THESIS.**

According to this argument literature is "mimetic," that is to say, re-presents 'reality', 'nature', or 'the way things are'. It portrays moral and other experiences in a compelling, concrete, immediately felt way through its aesthetic devices and powers, yet allows as well for reflection, for a theorizing or reconsideration of the experiences evoked, as we are both 'experiencing' the world evoked and are separated from it. It is important to understand, under this thesis, a couple of aspects of literature and representation:

1. human experience is affective and symbolic; literature, which uses affect and symbol, can represent it as we genuinely experience and imagine it.
  2. literature works through the senses both immediately (in its sounds and rhythms) and symbolically (as words conjure up images, associations and so forth) -- there is a concrete as well as a symbolic presence.
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### **4. THE 'IDEOLOGY' OR 'WORLD-VIEW' THESIS.**

Because of a number of factors -- the traditions of thought in the culture (1d), the representational role of literature (3) , the insights into human experience (1), the use of cultural codes (5) -- literature re-presents and explores the way in which the world is viewed and experienced by people in that society or social group: that is, it tells us a great deal about how the world is actually understood by the society to which the artist belongs, understood not only intellectually but symbolically and emotionally. Because of its imaginative and technical richness and its expressive power, literature is a very effective way of understanding a culture of a particular time, or of a particular class, or social or ethnic group. Thus literature can let us understand how diverse times, cultures and classes are different, and how they are the same. Without this understanding of the range of human experience in its continuities and possibilities we live in a claustrophobic world in which we cannot make meaningful discriminations. Only difference, contrast, allows us to define what is.

Because of this relation between literature and social experience we can use literature not only to understand the past and other cultures and classes (and therefore to understand ourselves), but to critique as well -- that is, we can analyze causes and effects and we can evaluate social change, social values and so forth. For instance, we could argue that the rise of the emphasis on individual experience in the Romantic movement

1. was a result of the ideological imperatives of industrial capitalism, which for its purposes turned a once-cohesive society into a set of separate and thus easily manipulable and exchangeable entities, called 'individuals', or
  2. was a response to the growing uncertainty about whether or not there is any ultimate ground of meaning behind or beyond experience, which response moved to make the guarantee of meaningfulness of experience the meaningfulness to the 'individual' him or herself (as opposed to the guarantees of custom, Scripture, and so forth)
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### **5. THE CULTURAL CODE THESIS.**

Human experience is 'coded': that is, we have systems of signs which establish meanings and relationships. Our clothes are coded, for instance -- we can tell social class, personal tastes and so forth from the kind of clothes people wear. In fact our whole environment and all our actions are coded: everything we do that has meaning only has meaning because it conforms to codes. The argument is made that literature uses

codes more densely, subtlety and complexly than other communication modes: again, this is one of the things that makes art. If we can master the use of codes of literature, we have considerably more control over the codes of everyday life. This is a large part of what makes people with a liberal education such good performers in professional roles: they are able to communicate and analyze, and they tend to be 'flexible' -- that is, to be able to make adaptations in behaviour and conception in order to better meet their goals.

It is argued that because literature creates defined imaginative worlds and because it is informed with conscious design, it leads more easily than immediate experience does to reflection: to examining the nature of the codes, what they mean, their implications; this enables us to be more conscious of our cultural environment, more alert to meanings, more flexible, more analytic.

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## 6. THE LANGUAGE THESES.

The first language thesis holds that our ability to conceptualize, analyze and to some extent to feel is dependent on our ability to use language accurately, freshly and complexly. A function of literature is to use the means of communication in precise and effective ways, and to engage oneself in literature is to engage oneself in a continuing process of refining one's capacities to use language and one's sensibilities to good language use. The sentimental and the clichéd **disguise** reality in that they produce immediate and unreflective feelings and ideas; literature, the argument goes, teaches us to be more alert to the whole range of ideas, feelings, images and symbols which ground our political, social and private lives.

The second language thesis holds that literature can give people the language with which to conceptualize and talk about their experience. This access to the language of experience gives the person access to their own experience in a way that they did not previously have and locates that experience within a cultural frame.

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## 7. THE SUBJECTIVITY THESIS.

In the view of this thesis the individual is a socially constructed subject: we have social roles which dictate how we feel and how we act -- as men or women, as children, parents, friends, as outsiders or insiders, and so forth. Literature models and examines such 'subject positions', and allows us imaginatively to enter subject positions we might not otherwise occupy. Literature also allows us to examine the nature of and the integration of our subjectivities, or the subject positions we occupy, more critically -- this is what might be called a moral effect of literature, as we can develop a sense of a self which is more able to respond to the possibilities the world has for us and more able to deal with the limitations that society and chance and nurture place on us.

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## 8. CULTURAL FUNCTION THESES

The functions above have suggested many ways in which literature can be meaningful and even revelatory; they tend, however, to refer to personal use. Literature is a form of cultural discourse, and has functions within the culture as a whole. These can be seen from two main points of view: that literature is culturally integrative, or that literature, as a form of discourse controlled by the elite, is one of the means through which the elite maintain their power.

**Looked at as culturally integrative**, literature, like any discourse of values, like any representation of life, like any significant narrative, like any art, might be said to function on the cultural level in at least these ways:

- it articulates values in a robust, symbolically resonant, complex way, maintaining the power of the symbols and language of the culture and thus supporting the imaginative life and the expressive capacity which are so basic to a culture's good.
- it captures the complexities of the human situation, illustrating (dramatically, imaginatively, compellingly) the grounds and the meanings of values, and the nuances of our experiences

- it allows us imaginatively to inhabit the lives, the experiences, the meanings of others
- it challenges the sentimentalization of values, and those distortions of values which serve the ends of the powerful, the opportunistic, and those who want only to serve their own desires.
- it explores and reflects on conflicts -- conflicts in the culture itself, conflicts in the values and ideas of the culture, the conflict of social groups (ethnic, racial, class, gender, religious and so forth).
- it identifies and addresses issues of particular concern to the culture
- it gives a sense of identity and community -- for instance by establishing and maintaining founding narratives, and narratives which capture the 'essence' of what typifies the culture or community, or by dramatizing those particular stories and images which give the culture a sense of common meaning and purpose.

**Looked at as privileging and maintaining the position of the elite**, literature can be seen to do the following things (see also my page on [ideology](#)):

1. it creates a sense of exclusion and privilege for the ruling classes, including creating uses of language and sets of ideas which mark these people as culturally privileged, as the elite.
2. it makes the agenda of the privileged classes the agenda of the culture.
3. it makes the narratives which support the position of the privileged the informing narratives for all. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty marry the prince (and Elizabeth Bennett gets the rich, intelligent Mr. Darcy); with pluck and luck young men can rise in the world, become rich, get the girl; and a 'successful' professional and domestic life is, after all, the main goal of all (no matter how many suffer in lonely rooms, how many die with flies feeding on their flesh, how many have their dreams cruelly shattered, or live out their lives secluded in Veteran's Hospitals or in alcohol, how many grieve, how many are haunted, hurt... the girl gets her guy, the good guy beats the bad guy, 'order' within the system is maintained).
4. in dramatizing personal conflicts and crises in compelling ways, it hides ('makes disappear') the larger structural sources of injustice -- inequity of goods and treatment, for instance. If people can see romantic love, for example, as the most crucial claim on their imaginative life, they will not much notice that what consumes their imaginations disguises their real problems and needs.
5. in doing this it mystifies the real construction of society, creates pseudo-problems and gives pseudo-solutions ; its real social function is to keep us quiet, to create a false consciousness.

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 Last updated on April 22, 2008 by Professor John Lye

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