

in which you are now enrolled. If other literature courses, or even mental progress. We have in mind skills useful not merely in the course structure, we are helping you develop skills that are important for your will remain in your mind for years—but we do claim that, with your in- for the rest of your life—though some of these works of literature surely quare to the new self that you have become. We can't claim to equip you acquainted in college—and that suited you for a while—are not fully ade- have new things to say, and you may even come to find that the tools you like years, you will develop throughout your life; you will find you

What I remade a song.
What I remade a song.
What I remade a song.
What I remade a song.

The friends that have it I do wish
The friends that have it I do wish
The friends that have it I do wish
The friends that have it I do wish

The skills we stress in *An Introduction to Literature* will enable you
The skills we stress in *An Introduction to Literature* will enable you
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I always rewrite each day up to the point where I stopped. When it is all finished, naturally you go over it. You get another chance to correct and rewrite when someone else types it, and you see it in clean type. The last chance in the proofs. You're grateful for these different chances. (*Writers at Work*, Second Series, intro. Van Wyck Brooks (1963), 222.

There is a lesson here for all of us, even though our own writing probably is of a humbler sort.

What are the aims of the writers of literature? Well, one of our authors, Jamaica Kincaid in various interviews mentions her "insistence on truth," even if—especially if—the truth is painful. It is not unusual for writers to insist that in their fictions they present truths, they tell it as it is, they wake us up, they seek to make us take off our rose-colored glasses, and to make us see and feel reality. Joseph Conrad, for example, said: "My task . . . is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see."

The truth that a writer makes us see is the "news that stays news" that Ezra Pound spoke of. Here is Hemingway talking about the writer's work:

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse, and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. (*Esquire*, December 1934), 68.

The Hemingway story that we reprint, "Cat in the Rain" (page 83), deals with a young woman and a young man. It's our hunch that you will find the story true: You will believe the characters and "how the weather was," and you will also find the story highly entertaining—two qualities we hope you find in all of the works in this book.

CHAPTER

1

Reading and Responding to Literature

WHAT IS LITERATURE?

Large books have been written on this subject, and large books will continue to be written on it. But we can offer a few brief generalizations that may be useful.

First, the word "literature" can be used to refer to anything written. The Department of Agriculture will, upon request, send an applicant "literature on canning tomatoes." People who ask for such material expect it to be clear and informative, but they do not expect it to be interesting in itself. They do not read it for the experience of reading it; they read it only if they are thinking about canning tomatoes.

There is, however, a sort of literature that people *do* read without expecting a practical payoff. They read the sort of writing that is in *An Introduction to Literature* because they expect it to hold their interest and to provide pleasure. * They may vaguely feel that it will be good for them, but they don't read it *because* it will be good for them, any more than they dance because dancing provides healthful exercise. Dancing may indeed be healthful, but that's not why people dance. They dance because dancing affords a special kind of pleasure. For similar reasons people watch athletic contests and go to concerts or to the theater. We participate in activities such as these not because we expect some sort of later reward but because we know that the experience of participating is in itself rewarding. Perhaps the best explanation is that the experiences are absorbing—which is to say they take us out of ourselves for a while—and that (especially in the case of concerts, dance performances, and athletic contests) they allow us to appreciate excellence, to admire achievement. Most of us can swim or toss a ball and maybe even hit a ball, but when we go to a swimming meet or to a ball game we see a level of performance that evokes our admiration.

Literature as Performance: Robert Frost, *The Span of Life*

Let's begin, then, by thinking of literature as (to quote Robert Frost) "a performance in words." Here's a very short poem by Frost (1874–1963), probably America's most famous poet.

The Span of Life

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup.

Read the poem aloud once or twice, physically experiencing Frost's "performance in words." The most immediately obvious part of the performance is that Frost has written lines that rhyme. No two readers will read the lines in exactly the same way, but it is safe to say that in reading the first line most readers will put a fairly heavy stress on as many as seven or even eight syllables, whereas in reading the second line they probably will stress only three or four:

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup.

Notice that the first line is harder to say than the second line, which more or less rolls off the tongue. Why? Because in the first line we must pause between "old" and "dog," between "backward" and "without," and between "without" and "getting"—and in fact between "back" and "ward."

And so we can say that the form (a relatively effortful hard-to-speak line followed by an easy bouncy line) is part of the content: first, a description with pauses and relatively heavy stresses of a dog that no longer has the energy or the strength to leap up, and second, a line that in a rather jingling way reports a memory of the dog as a puppy. The language, then, is highly patterned. Take a moment to read the lines again, and to enjoy the rhyme; rhyme—the repetition of a sound—is also a pattern. One can easily see what Frost meant when he said that a poem is a performance in words. The thing looks easy enough, but we know that it takes skill to make words behave properly—that is, to get the right words into the right places. Frost went into the lions' cage, did his act, and came out unharmed.

Significance

We've been talking about Frost's skill in handling words, but we have said only a little about *what* Frost is saying. One of the things that literature does is to make us see—hear, feel, love—what the author thinks is a valuable part of the experience of living. A thousand years ago a Japanese writer, Lady Murasaki, made this point when she had one of the characters in her book talk about what motivates an author:

Again and again something in one's own life or in that around one will seem so important that one cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, the writer feels, when people do not know about this.

We can probably agree with Lady Murasaki that writers of literature try to get at something important in their experiences, emotions, or visions, and try to make the reader experience the importance. And so a writer shows us what the span of life is like, or (for instance) what it is like to be in love (plenty of room for comedy as well as tragedy here), or what it is like to be an immigrant worrying whether his or her baby will be accepted as an American. (Later in this chapter we will see Pat Mora's poem on this last topic.)

Thinking further about Frost's poem, we notice something else about the form. The first line is about a dog, but the second line is about a dog *and* a human being ("I can remember"). The speaker must be getting on, too. And although nothing is said about the dog as a symbol of human life, surely the reader, prompted by the title of the poem, makes a connection between the lifespan of a dog and that of a human being. Part of what makes the poem effective is that this point is not stated explicitly, not belabored. Readers have the pleasure of making the connection for themselves—under Frost's careful guidance.

Everyone knows that puppies are frisky and that old dogs are not—though perhaps not until we encountered this poem did we think twice about the fact that "the old dog barks backward without getting up." Or let's put it this way:

- Many people may have noticed this behavior, but
- perhaps only Frost thought (to use Lady Murasaki's words) "There must never come a time . . . when people do not know about this." And
- fortunately for all of us, Frost had the ability to put his perception into memorable words.

Part of what makes Frost's performance in words especially memorable is the relationship between the two lines. Neither line in itself is anything very special, but because of the counterpoint the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Skill in handling language, obviously, is indispensable if the writer is to produce literature. A person may know a great deal about dogs and may be a great lover of dogs, but knowledge and love are not enough equipment to write even a two-line poem about a dog (or the span of life, or both). Poems, like other kinds of literature, are produced by people who know how to delight us with verbal performances.

We can easily see that Robert Frost's "The Span of Life" is a work of literature rather than mere versification if we contrast it with another short work in rhyme:

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November;
All the rest have thirty-one
Excepting February alone,
Which has twenty-eight in fine,
Till leap year gives it twenty-nine.

This information is important, but it is only information. The lines rhyme, giving the work some form, but there is nothing very interesting about it, nothing insightful. (Perhaps you will want to take issue with this opinion.) The verse is true and therefore useful; it is valuable but it is not of compelling interest, probably because it only tells us facts rather than presents human experience. We all remember "Thirty days" but the lines offer neither the pleasure of an insight nor the pleasure of an interesting tune.

Two Poems about Immigrants

Let's now think a little more about what it means to read and respond to literature. Once again we'll start with a poem by Robert Frost, but this one, titled "Immigrants," takes a little more time and effort to figure out. Frost wrote these lines for a pageant at Plymouth, Massachusetts, celebrating the three-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Mayflower from England.

No ship of all that under sail or steam
Have gathered people to us more and more
But Pilgrim-manned the *Mayflower* in a dream
Has been her anxious convoy in to shore.

To find this poem—this performance in words—of any interest, a reader probably has to know that the *Mayflower* brought the Pilgrims to America. Second, a reader has to grasp a slightly unfamiliar construction: “No ship . . . but . . . has . . .” which means, in effect, “every ship has.” (Compare: “No human being but is born of woman,” which means “Every human being is born of woman.”)

If, then, we **paraphrase** the poem—translate it into other words in the same language—we get something roughly along these lines:

All of the ships (whether sailing vessels or steamships) that have collected people in increasing numbers and brought them to this country have had the *Mayflower*, with its Pilgrims, as its eager (or worried?) escort to the coast.

We have tried to make this paraphrase as accurate and as concise as possible, but for reasons that we'll explain in a moment, we have omitted giving an equivalent for Frost's “in a dream.” Why, one might ask, is our paraphrase so much less interesting than the original?

We come back to Frost's idea that a work of literature is a “performance in words.” The lines are metrical (stresses recur more or less regularly) and they rhyme (*steam/dream*, *more/shore*), which is to say Frost, like a figure-skater, has created patterns. Probably, too, the repetition, of *s* in “sail or steam” catches the ear. The words “sail” and “steam” are somewhat alike in that they are both monosyllables, they both begin with the same sound, and they both evoke images of ships. Compare “sail or steam” with “sail or oil” or “sail or engine” and you will probably agree that the original is more pleasing and more interesting.

We can't be certain about what Frost really thought of the Pilgrims and of the *Mayflower*, but we do have the poem, and that's what we are concerned with. It celebrates the anniversary, of course, but it also celebrates at least two other things: the continuing arrival of new immigrants and the close connection between the early and the later immigrants.

Persons whose ancestors came over on the *Mayflower* have a reputation for being rather sniffy about later arrivals, but Frost reminds his Yankee audience that their ancestors, the *Mayflower* passengers, were themselves immigrants. However greatly the histories and the experiences of the early immigrants differed from those of later immigrants, the experience of emigration and the hopes for a better life link the *Mayflower* passengers with more recent arrivals.

The poem says, if our paraphrase is roughly accurate, that the *Mayflower* and its passengers accompany all later immigrants. Now, what does this mean? Literally, of course, it is nonsense. The *Mayflower* and its passengers disappeared centuries ago.

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. In our paraphrase, in an effort to avoid complexities, we did not give any equivalent for “in a dream” (line 3). The time has now come to face

this puzzle: “But Pilgrim-manned the *Mayflower* in a dream.” Readers take Frost to be saying that the long-deceased passengers of the *Mayflower* still dream of others following them. Other readers, however, interpret the line as saying that later immigrants dream of the *Mayflower*. Now, this paraphrase, even if accurate, makes an assertion that is not strictly true, since many later immigrants probably had never even heard of the *Mayflower*. But in a larger sense the statement is true. Most later immigrants, with the terrible exception of involuntary immigrants from Africa who were brought here in chains, dreamed of a better life, just as the *Mayflower* passengers did. Some hoped for religious freedom, some hoped to escape political oppression or starvation, but again, all were seeking a better life. What do you make of line 3?

2. In our paraphrase we mentioned that “anxious” might be paraphrased either as “eager” or as “worried.” (Contrast, for instance, “She was anxious to serve the community” and “She was anxious about the exam.”) Is Frost's “anxious convoy” *eagerly* accompanying the ships with immigrants, or is it *nervously* accompanying them, perhaps worried that these new arrivals may not be the right sort of people, or worried that the new arrivals may not be able to get on in the new country? Or does the word “anxious,” which seems to modify “convoy” (here, *Mayflower*), really refer to the new immigrants, who are worried that they may not succeed? Or perhaps they are worried that America may not in fact correspond to their hopes.

Read the poem aloud two or three times, and then think about which of these meanings—or some other meanings that you come up with—you find most rewarding. You might consider, too, whether more than one meaning can be present. Frost himself in a letter wrote that he liked to puzzle his readers a bit—to baffle them and yet (or thereby) propel them forward:

My poems—I should suppose everybody's poems—are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless. Ever since infancy I have had the habit of leaving my blocks carts chairs and such like ordinaries where people would be pretty sure to fall forward over them in the dark. Forward, you understand, *and* in the dark.

What we have been saying is this: A reader of a work of literature finds meanings in the work, but also (even when the meaning is uncertain) takes delight in the details, takes delight in the way that the work has been constructed, takes delight in (again) the performance. When we have got at what we think may be the “meaning” of a work, we do not value or hold on to the meaning only and turn away from the work itself; rather, we value even more the craftsmanship that the work displays. And we come to see that the meaning is inseparable from all of the details that go to make up the work.

3. “Pilgrim-manned” may disturb some readers. Conscious of sexist language, today we try to avoid saying things like “This shows the greatness of man” or “Man is a rational animal” when we are speaking not about males but about all people. Does Frost's “Pilgrim-manned” strike you as slighting women? If not, why not?
4. We have already mentioned that Frost's poem cannot possibly be thought to describe involuntary immigrants. Is this a weakness in the poem? If so, how serious a weakness?

5. Frost's poem celebrates immigration and does not consider its effect on the Native American population. The poem does not, so to speak, tell the whole truth; but no statement, however long, could tell the "whole truth" about such a complex topic. Do you agree that if the poem doesn't give us the whole truth, perhaps we get enough if it reminds us of a truth?

PAT MORA



Pat Mora, after graduating from Texas Western College, earned a master's degree at the University of Texas at El Paso. She is best known for her poems, but she has also published essays on Chicano culture.

Immigrants

[1986]

wrap their babies in the American flag,
feed them mashed hot dogs and apple pie,
name them Bill and Daisy,
buy them blonde dolls that blink blue
eyes or a football and tiny cleats
before the baby can even walk
speak to them in thick English, hallo, babee, hallo,
whisper in Spanish or Polish,
when the babies sleep, whisper
in a dark parent bed, that dark
parent fear, "Will they like
our boy, our girl, our fine American
boy, our fine american girl?"

Pat Mora's experience—that of a Mexican-American woman in the United States—obviously must be very different from that of Frost, an Anglo-Saxon male and almost the official poet of the country. Further, Mora is writing in our own time, not almost a century ago. A reader expects, and finds, a very different sort of poem. We won't discuss this poem at length, but we will say that in our view she too gets at something important. Among the many things in this verbal performance that give us pleasure are these:

- The wit of making the title part of the first sentence. A reader expects the title to be relevant to the poem but does not expect it to be grammatically the first word of the poem. We like the fresh way in which the title is used.
- The aptness with which Mora has caught the immigrants' eager yet worried attempt to make their children "100% American."

- The mimicry of the immigrants talking to their children: "hallo, babee, hallo." If this mimicry came from an outsider it would be condescending and offensive, but since it is written by someone known for her concern with Mexican-American culture, it probably is not offensive. It is almost affectionate.

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. The last comment may be right, so far as it goes, but isn't it too simple? Reread the poem—preferably aloud—and then try to decide exactly what Mora's attitude is toward the immigrants. Do you think that she fully approves of their hopes? On what do you base your answer?
2. What does it mean to say that someone—a politician, for instance—"wraps himself in the American flag"? What does Mora mean when she says that immigrants "wrap their babies in the American flag"? How would you paraphrase the line?
3. After reading the poem aloud two or three times, what elements of "verbal performance"—we might say of skillful play—do you notice? Mora does not use rhyme, but she does engage in some verbal play. What examples can you point to?
4. What is your own attitude toward the efforts of some immigrants to assimilate themselves to an Anglo-American model? How does your attitude affect your reading of the poem?

Two Contemporary Short Stories: Lydia Davis's "Childcare" and "City People"

Lydia Davis, born in 1947 in Northampton, Massachusetts, grew up in New York City and then lived for several years in France and Ireland. She has translated French literature into English, and written several books of stories. Among her awards is a MacArthur Fellowship.

Childcare

[2007]

It's his turn to take care of the baby. He is cross.

He says, "I never get enough done."

The baby is in a bad mood, too.

He gives the baby a bottle of juice and sits him well back in a big armchair.

He sits himself down in another chair and turns on the television.

Together they watch *The Odd Couple*.

In Davis's *Varieties of Disturbance*, the book from which we reprint "Childcare," the story appears in the middle of a page that is otherwise blank. The very appearance on the page is part of the performance, and it is also part of—dare we say?—the meaning. We see a largely blank page, a bare world, not much to look at, not much to make life rich. What do we know about the inhabitants of this world?

- The unnamed man (he is merely "he") is "cross," and the unnamed baby "is in a bad mood, too."

- The next thing we learn about the man is what we deduce from his statement, "I never get enough done." Ah, he is someone who wants to accomplish something. That sounds admirable.
- But he thinks the temporary job ("it's his turn") of caring for the baby interferes with his unspecified aspirations. That sounds not so nice, and we may wonder, "What sort of a guy is this who resents caring for his infant?"

The next things we learn dispose us favorably toward the man:

- "He gives the baby a bottle of juice and sits him well back in a big armchair." This business of sitting the child "well back in a big armchair" suggests that the man takes some care to make sure that the child is secure, is safely placed. We like that, we are reassured.
- The man then sits down in another chair and "turns on the television." Television? We might have thought that this man who can "never get enough done" would balance his checkbook, or read the newspaper, or answer a letter, but no, he watches television. That's not a crime, but for a guy who complains that he "can never get enough done," it does seem a bit much.
- The final sentence is, "Together they watch *The Odd Couple*." Surely the thought crosses a reader's mind that these two are themselves an odd couple, and the reader may reasonably conclude that in some ways the man—cross, claiming that he can't get anything done—is as infantile as the baby.

It's a story told very simply, chiefly in simple sentences, "He says," "The baby is," "He gives," etc. Only twice does the author use compound sentences (simple sentences joined by a conjunction, in this case the most child-like of all conjunctions, "and," the language found in Dick and Jane children's books). Not much happens in this very simply told story, but it tells us all that we need to know about the unnamed man. And perhaps it tells us something about life, even about our own lives, for instance about the disparity between our own grand view of ourselves and the simple reality.

Now for a second very short story by Lydia Davis.

City People

[2001]

They have moved to the country. The country is nice enough: there are quail sitting in the bushes and frogs peeping in the swamps. But they are uneasy. They quarrel more often. They cry, or she cries and he bows his head. He is pale all the time now. She wakes in a panic at night, hearing him snuffle. She wakes in a panic again, hearing a car go up the driveway. In the morning there is sunlight on their faces but mice are chattering in the walls. He hates the mice. The pump breaks. They replace the pump. They poison the mice. Their neighbor's dog barks. It barks and barks. She could poison the dog.

"We're city people," he says, "and there aren't any nice cities to live in."

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. What elements of "performance"—perhaps we can say Davis's "craftsmanship"—do you see in this tiny narrative?

2. We are not told *why* these people have moved from the city to the country. Is it reasonable to offer a guess? If you think a reader can plausibly guess why they moved, what, in your view, is the reason for the move?
3. Does the story give at least a tiny glimpse of some aspect of life? Please explain.

Thinking about a Classic Story: The Parable of the Prodigal Son

This story, told by Jesus, is reported in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. Jesus here recounts a **parable**, a short story from which a lesson is to be drawn. Luke reports that just before Jesus told the story, the Pharisees and scribes—persons whom the Gospels depict as opposed to Jesus because he sometimes found their traditions and teachings inadequate—complained that Jesus was a man of loose morals, one who "receives sinners and eats with them." According to Luke, Jesus responded thus:

And he said, "A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.' And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

"And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him."

"And when he came to himself he said, 'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger? I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee. And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.'"

"And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat, and be merry. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to be merry.

"Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, 'Thy brother is come, and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.' And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, 'Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment, and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.' And he said

unto him; 'Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again: and was lost, and is found.'" (Luke 15. 11–32, King James Version)

Now, to begin with a small point, it is not likely that any but strictly observant Jews, or Muslims (who, like these Jews, do not eat pork), can feel the disgust that Jesus' audience must have felt at the thought that the son was reduced to feeding swine and that he even envied the food that swine ate. Further, some of us may be vegetarians; if so, we are not at all delighted at the thought that the father kills the fatted calf (probably the wretched beast has been force-fed) in order to celebrate the son's return.

And some readers do not believe in God, and hence are not prepared to take the story, as many people take it, as a story whose message is that we, like God (the father in this parable is usually taken to stand for God), ought to rejoice in the restoration of the sinner. Probably, then, for all sorts of obvious reasons none of us can put ourselves back into the first century CE and hear the story exactly as Jesus' audience heard it.

Still, most of us can probably agree on what we take to be the gist of the story, and, second, we can enjoy the skillful way in which it is told. This skill will become apparent, however, only after several readings. What are some examples of superb storytelling here, and what can a reader gain from a thoughtful reading? We begin by noting a few points:

- Although the story is customarily called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" or "The Parable of the Lost Son," it tells of two sons, not of one. When we reread the story, we increasingly see that these brothers are compared and contrasted: the prodigal leaves his father's house for a different way of life—he thus seems lost to the father—but then he repents and returns to the father, whereas the older son, who physically remains with the father, is spiritually remote from the father, or is lost in a different way. By virtue of his self-centeredness the older son is remote from the father in feeling or spirit.
- Again, reading and rereading reveal small but telling details. For instance, when the prodigal plans to return home, he thinks of what he will say to his father. He has come to his senses and repudiated his folly, but he still does not understand his father, for we will see in a moment that the prodigal has no need of this speech. Jesus tells us that as soon as the father saw the prodigal returning, he "had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." And (another very human touch) the prodigal—although already forgiven—nevertheless cannot refrain from uttering his heartfelt but, under the circumstances, unnecessary speech of repentance.
- The elder son, learning that the merrymaking is for the returning prodigal, "was angry, and would not go in." This character is sketched only briefly, but a reader immediately recognizes the type: self-centered, unforgiving, and petulant. The older son does not realize it, but he is as distant from his father as the younger son had been. What is the father's response to this son, who is so different from the forgiving father?

Therefore came his father out, and entreated him.

The father goes out to the dutiful son, just as he had *gone out* to the prodigal son. (What the father *does* is as important as what he *says*.) Notice, too, speaking of sons, that the older son, talking to his father, somewhat distances himself from his brother, disdainfully referring to

the prodigal as "this thy son." And what is the father's response? To the elder son's "this thy son," the father replies, "this thy brother."

TOPIC FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

This story is traditionally called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Can a case be made for the view that it ought to be called the Parable of the Prodigal Father? Forget, if you can, the traditional title, and ask yourself if the story tells of a father who is prodigal with his property and who at the end is prodigal with his love. Explain why you accept or reject this interpretation.

STORIES TRUE AND FALSE

The word "story" comes from "history"—the stories that historians, biographers, and journalists narrate are supposed to be true accounts of what happened. The stories of novelists and short-story writers, however, are admittedly untrue; they are "fiction," things made up, imagined, manufactured. As readers, we come to a supposedly true story with expectations different from those we bring to fiction.

Consider the difference between reading a narrative in a newspaper and one in a book of short stories. If, while reading a newspaper, we come across a story of, say, a subway accident, we assume that the account is true, and we read it for the information about a relatively unusual event. Anyone hurt? What sort of people? In our neighborhood? Whose fault? When we read a book of fiction, however, we do not expect to encounter literal truths; we read novels and short stories not for facts but for pleasure and for some insight or for a sense of what an aspect of life means to the writer. Consider the following short story by Grace Paley.

GRACE PALEY



Grace Paley (1922–2007) was born in New York City, where she attended Hunter College and New York University, but left without a degree. While raising two children she wrote poetry and then, in the 1950s, turned to writing fiction.

Paley's chief subject is the life of little people struggling in the Big City. Of life she has said, "How daily life is lived is a mystery to me. You write about what's mysterious to you. What is it like? Why do people do this?" Of the short story she has said, "It can be just telling a little tale, or writing a complicated philosophical story. It can be a song, almost."

Samuel

[1968]

Some boys are very tough. They're afraid of nothing. They are the ones who climb a wall and take a bow at the top. Not only are they brave on the roof, but they make a lot of noise in the darkest part of the cellar where even the super hates to go. They also jiggle and hop on the platform between the locked doors of the subway cars.

Four boys are jiggling on the swaying platform. Their names are Alfred, Calvin, Samuel, and Tom. The men and the women in the cars on either side watch them. They don't like them to jiggle or jump but don't want to interfere. Of course some of the men in the cars were once brave boys like these. One of them had ridden the tail of a speeding truck from New York to Rockaway Beach without getting off, without his sore fingers losing hold. Nothing happened to him then or later. He had made a compact with other boys who preferred to watch: Starting at Eighth Avenue and Fifteenth Street, he would get to some specified place, maybe Twenty-third and the river, by hopping the tops of the moving trucks. This was hard to do when one truck turned a corner in the wrong direction and the nearest truck was a couple of feet too high. He made three or four starts before succeeding. He had gotten his idea from a film at school called *The Romance of Logging*. He had finished high school, married a good friend, was in a responsible job and going to night school.

These two men and others looked at the four boys jumping and jiggling on the platform and thought, It must be fun to ride that way, especially now the weather is nice and we're out of the tunnel and way high over the Bronx. Then they thought, These kids do seem to be acting sort of stupid. They *are* little. Then they thought of some of the brave things they had done when they were boys and jiggling didn't seem so risky.

The ladies in the car became very angry when they looked at the four boys. Most of them brought their brows together and hoped the boys could see their extreme disapproval. One of the ladies wanted to get up and say, Be careful you dumb kids, get off that platform or I'll call a cop. But three of the boys were Negroes and the fourth was something else she couldn't tell for sure. She was afraid they'd be fresh and laugh at her and embarrass her. She wasn't afraid they'd hit her, but she was afraid of embarrassment. Another lady thought, Their mothers never know where they are. It wasn't true in this particular case. Their mothers all knew that they had gone to see the missile exhibit on Fourteenth Street.

5 Out on the platform, whenever the train accelerated, the boys would raise their hands and point them up to the sky to act like rockets going off, then they rat-tat-tatted the shatterproof glass pane like machine guns, although no machine guns had been exhibited.

For some reason known only to the motorman, the train began a sudden slowdown. The lady who was afraid of embarrassment saw the boys jerk forward and backward and grab the swinging guard chains. She had her own boy at home. She stood up with determination and went to the door. She slid it open and said, "You boys will be hurt. You'll be killed. I'm going to call the conductor if you don't just go into the next car and sit down and be quiet."

Two of the boys said, "Yes'm," and acted as though they were about to go. Two of them blinked their eyes a couple of times and pressed their lips together. The train resumed its speed. The door slid shut, parting the lady and the boys. She leaned against the side door because she had to get off at the next stop.

The boys opened their eyes wide at each other and laughed. The lady blushed. The boys looked at her and laughed harder. They began to pound each other's back. Samuel laughed the hardest and pounded Alfred's back until Alfred coughed and the tears came. Alfred held tight to the chain hook. Samuel pounded him even harder when he saw the tears. He said, "Why you bawling? You a baby, huh?" and laughed. One of the men whose boyhood had been more

watchful than brave became angry. He stood up straight and looked at the boys for a couple of seconds. Then he walked in a citizenly way to the end of the car, where he pulled the emergency cord. Almost at once, with a terrible hiss, the pressure of air abandoned the brakes and the wheels were caught and held.

People standing in the most secure places fell forward, then backward. Samuel had let go of his hold on the chain so he could pound Tom as well as Alfred. All the passengers in the cars whipped back and forth, but he pitched only forward and fell head first to be crushed and killed between the cars.

10 The train had stopped hard, halfway into the station, and the conductor called at once for the trainmen who knew about this kind of death and how to take the body from the wheels and brakes. There was silence except for passengers from other cars who asked, What happened! What happened! The ladies waited around wondering if he might be an only child. The men recalled other afternoons with very bad endings. The little boys stayed close to each other, leaning and touching shoulders and arms and legs.

When the policeman knocked at the door and told her about it, Samuel's mother began to scream. She screamed all day and moaned all night, though the doctors tried to quiet her with pills.

Oh, oh, she hopelessly cried. She did not know how she could ever find another boy like that one. However, she was a young woman and she became pregnant. Then for a few months she was hopeful. The child born to her was a boy. They brought him to be seen and nursed. She smiled. But immediately she saw that this baby wasn't Samuel. She and her husband together have had other children, but never again will a boy exactly like Samuel be known.

You might think about the ways in which "Samuel" differs from a newspaper story of an accident in a subway. (You might even want to write a newspaper version of the happening.) In some ways, Paley's story faintly resembles an account that might appear in a newspaper. Journalists are taught to give information about Who, What, When, Where, and Why, and Paley does provide this. Thus, the *characters* (Samuel and others) are the journalist's Who; the *plot* (the boys were jiggling on the platform, and when a man pulled the emergency cord one of them was killed) is the What; the *setting* (the subway, presumably in modern times) is the When and the Where; the *motivation* (the irritation of the man who pulls the emergency cord) is the Why.

Ask yourself questions about each of these elements, and think about how they work in Paley's story. You might also think about responses to the following questions. Your responses will teach you a good deal about what literature is and about some of the ways in which it works.

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. Paley wrote the story, but an unspecified person *tells* it. Describe the voice of this narrator in the first paragraph. Is the voice neutral and objective, or do you hear some sort of attitude, a point of view? If you do hear an attitude, what words or phrases in the story indicate it?
2. What do you know about the setting of "Samuel"? What can you infer about the neighborhood?
3. In the fourth paragraph we are told that "three of the boys were Negroes and the fourth was something else." Is race important in this story? Is Samuel "Negro" or "something else"? Does it matter?

4. Exactly *why* did a man walk "in a citizenly way to the end of the car, where he pulled the emergency cord"? Do you think the author blames him? What evidence can you offer to support your view? Do *you* blame him? Or do you blame the boys? Or anyone? Explain.
5. The story is called "Samuel," and it is, surely, about him. But what happens after Samuel dies? (You might want to list the events.) What else is the story about? (You might want to comment on why you believe the items in your list are important.)
6. Can you generalize about what the men think of the jigglers and about what the women think? Is Paley saying something about the sexes? About the attitudes of onlookers in a big city?

WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

The poems and stories that you have just read cannot, of course, stand for all works of literature. For one thing, although Mora's "Immigrants" and the prose stories include some dialogue, none of these works is in dramatic form, designed for presentation on a stage. Still, these examples, as well as works of literature that you are already familiar with, will provide something of a background against which you can read the other works in this book. For instance, if you read a story that, like *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*, seems strongly to imply a moral, think about how the moral is controlled by what the characters *do* as well as by what they *say*, and how one character is defined by being set against another. If you read a poem that, like Mora's "Immigrants," seems to play one tone of voice against another (for instance, the voice of the speaker of the poem against a voice quoted within the poem), think about how the voices relate to each other and how they perhaps harmonize to create a complex vision.

In short, a work of literature is not a nut to be cracked open so that a kernel of meaning can be extracted and devoured, and the rest thrown away; the whole—a performance in words—is something to be experienced and enjoyed.

We end this chapter with two short stories and a poem.

JAMAICA KINCAID



Jamaica Kincaid (b. 1949) was born in St. John's, Antigua, in the West Indies. She was educated at the Princess Margaret School in Antigua, and, briefly, at Westchester Community College and Franconia College. Since 1974 she has been a contributor to The New Yorker.

Kincaid is the author of several books, among them At the Bottom of the River (1983, a collection of short pieces, including "Girl"), Annie John (1985, a second book recording a girl's growth, including "Columbus in Chains"), A Small Place (1988, a passionate essay about the destructive effects of colonialism) and Lucy (1990, a short novel about a young black woman who comes to the United States from the West Indies).

Girl

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes in Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little clothes right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna¹ in Sunday School? always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday School; you musn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a button-hole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this i show you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you smile to some you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this i show to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make duokona;² this is how to make a pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is who to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how ot love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

¹benna Calypso music. ²duokona a spicy pudding made of plantains.

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. In a paragraph, identify the two characters whose voices we hear in this story. Explain what we know about them (their circumstances and their relationship). Cite specific evidence from the text. For example, what is the effect of the frequent repetition of "this is how"? Are there other words or phrases frequently repeated?
2. Try reading a section of "Girl" out loud in a rhythmical pattern, giving the principal and the second voices. Then reread the story, trying to incorporate this rhythm mentally into your reading. How does this rhythm contribute to the overall effect of the story? How does it compare to or contrast with speech rhythms that are familiar to you?

TOBIAS WOLFF

Tobias Wolff was born in Alabama in 1945, but he grew up in the state of Washington. He left high school before graduating, served as an apprentice seaman and as a weight-guesser in a carnival, and then joined the army, where he served four years as a paratrooper. After his discharge from the army, he hired private tutors to enable him to pass the entrance examination to Oxford University. At Oxford he did spectacularly well, graduating with First Class Honors in English. Wolff has written stories, novels, and an autobiography (This Boy's Life); he now teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Stanford.

Powder

[1992]

Just before Christmas my father took me skiing at Mount Baker. He'd had to fight for the privilege of my company, because my mother was still angry with him for sneaking me into a nightclub during his last visit, to see Thelonus Monk.

He wouldn't give up. He promised, hand on heart, to take good care of me and have me home for dinner on Christmas Eve, and she relented. But as we were checking out of the lodge that morning it began to snow, and in this snow he observed some quality that made it necessary for us to get in one last run. We got in several last runs. He was indifferent to my fretting. Snow whirled around us in bitter, blinding squalls, hissing like sand, and still we skied. As the lift bore us to the peak yet again, my father looked at his watch and said: "Criminey. This'll have to be a fast one."

By now I couldn't see the trail. There was no point in trying. I stuck to him like white on rice and did what he did and somehow made it to the bottom without sailing off a cliff. We returned our skis and my father put chains on the Austin-Healy while I swayed from foot to foot, clapping my mittens and wishing I were home. I could see everything. The green tablecloth, the plates with the holly pattern, the red candles waiting to be lit.

We passed a diner on our way out. "You want some soup?" my father asked. I shook my head. "Buck up," he said. "I'll get you there. Right, doctor?"

I was supposed to say, "Right, doctor," but I didn't say anything. A state trooper waved us down outside the resort. A pair of sawhorses were blocking the road. The trooper came up to our car and bent down to my father's window. His face was bleached by the cold. Snowflakes clung to his eyebrows and to the fur trim of his jacket and cap.

"Don't tell me," my father said.

The trooper told him. The road was closed. It might get cleared, it might not. Storm took everyone by surprise. So much, so fast. Hard to get people moving. Christmas Eve. What can you do?

My father said: "Look. We're talking about four, five inches. I've taken this car through worse than that."

The trooper straightened up, boots creaking. His face was out of sight but I could hear him. "The road is closed."

My father sat with both hands on the wheel, rubbing the wood with his thumbs. He looked at the barricade for a long time. He seemed to be trying to master the idea of it. Then he thanked the trooper, and with a weird, old-maidly show of caution turned the car around. "Your mother will never forgive me for this," he said.

"We should have left before," I said. "Doctor."

He didn't speak to me again until we were both in a booth at the diner, waiting for our burgers. "She won't forgive me," he said. "Do you understand? Never."

"I guess," I said, but no guesswork was required; she wouldn't forgive him.

"I can't let that happen." He bent toward me. "I'll tell you what I want. I want us to be all together again. Is that what you want?"

"Yes, sir."

He bumped my chin with his knuckles. "That's all I needed to hear."

When we finished eating he went to the pay phone in the back of the diner, then joined me in the booth again. I figured he'd called my mother, but he didn't give a report. He sipped at his coffee and stared out the window at the empty road. "Come on, come on," he said. A little while later he said, "Come on!" When the trooper's car went past, lights flashing, he got up and dropped some money on the check. "O.K. Vámonos."

The wind had died. The snow was falling straight down, less of it now; lighter. We drove away from the resort, right up to the barricade. "Move it," my father told me. When I looked at him he said, "What are you waiting for?"

I got out and dragged one of the sawhorses aside, then put it back after he drove through. He pushed the door open for me. "Now you're an accomplice," he said. "We go down together." He put the car into gear and gave me a look. "Joke, doctor?"

"Funny, doctor."

Down the first long stretch I watched the road behind us, to see if the trooper was on our tail. The barricade vanished. Then there was nothing but snow: snow on the road, snow kicking up from the chains, snow on the trees, snow in the sky; and our trail in the snow. I faced around and had a shock. The lie of the road behind us had been marked by our own tracks, but there were no tracks ahead of us. My father was breaking virgin snow between a line of tall trees. He was humming "Stars Fell on Alabama." I felt snow brush along the floorboards under my feet. To keep my hands from shaking, I clamped them between my knees.

My father grunted in a thoughtful way and said, "Don't ever try this yourself."

"I won't."

"That's what you say now, but someday you'll get your license and then you'll think you can do anything. Only you won't be able to do this. You need, I don't know—a certain instinct."

25 "Maybe I have it." "You don't. You have your strong points, but not this. I only mention it, because I don't want you to get the idea this is something just anybody can do. I'm a great driver. That's not a virtue, O.K.? It's just a fact, and one you should be aware of. Of course you have to give the old heap some credit, too—there aren't many cars I'd try this with. Listen!"

I listened. I heard the slap of the chains, the stiff, jerky rasps of the wipers, the purr of the engine. It really did purr. The car was almost new. My father couldn't afford it, and kept promising to sell it, but here it was.

I said, "Where do you think that policeman went to?" "Are you warm enough?" He reached over and cranked up the blower. Then he turned off the wipers. We didn't need them. The clouds had brightened. A few sparse, feathery flakes drifted into our slipstream and were swept away. We left the trees and entered a broad field of snow that ran level for a while and then tilted sharply downward. Orange stakes had been planted at intervals in two parallel lines and my father steered a course between them, though they were far enough apart to leave considerable doubt in my mind as to where exactly the road lay. He was humming again, doing little scat riffs around the melody.

30 "O.K. then. What are my strong points?"

"Don't get me started," he said. "It'd take all day."

"Oh, right. Name one."

"Easy. You always think ahead."

True. I always thought ahead. I was a boy who kept his clothes on numbered hangers to insure proper rotation. I bothered my teachers for homework assignments far ahead of their due dates so I could make up schedules. I thought ahead, and that was why I knew that there would be other troopers waiting for us at the end of our ride, if we got there. What I did not know was that my father would wheedle and plead his way past them—he didn't sing "O Tannenbaum" but just about—and get me home for dinner, buying a little more time before my mother decided to make the split final. I knew we'd get caught; I was resigned to it. And maybe for this reason I stopped moping and began to enjoy myself.

35 Why not? This was one for the books. Like being in a speedboat, but better. You can't go downhill in a boat. And it was all ours. And it kept coming, the laden trees, the unbroken surface of snow, the sudden white vistas. Here and there I saw hints of the road, ditches, fences, stakes, but not so many that I could have found my way. But then I didn't have to. My father was driving. My father in his 48th year, rumpled, kind, bankrupt of honor, flushed with certainty. He was a great driver. All persuasion, no coercion. Such subtlety at the wheel, such tactful pedalwork. I actually trusted him. And the best was yet to come—the switchbacks and hairpins. Impossible to describe. Except maybe to say this: If you haven't driven fresh powder, you haven't driven.

JAMES MERRILL

James Merrill (1926–1995) published his first book of poems in 1950, three years after graduating from college. (His manuscript was chosen by W. H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets series.) Merrill was extremely inventive in

his forms, and admirably successful in combining an engaging or even a playful tone with serious topics.

Christmas Tree

[1997]

To be
Brought down at last
From the cold sighing mountain
Where I and the others
Had been fed, looked after, kept still,
Meant, I knew—of course I knew—
That it would be only a matter of weeks,
That there was nothing more to do.
Warmly they took me in, made much of me,
The point from the start was to keep my spirits up.
I could assent to that. For honestly,
It did help to be wound in jewels, to send
Their colors flashing forth from vents in the deep
Fragrant sables that cloaked me head to foot.
Over me they wove a spell of shining—
Purple and silver chains, eavesdripping tinsel,
Amulets, milagros: software of silver,
A heart, a little girl, a Model T,
Two staring eyes. Then angels, trumpets, BUD and BEA
(The children's names) in clownlike capitals,
Somewhere a music box whose tiny song
Played and replayed I ended before long
By loving. And in shadow behind me, a primitive IV
To keep the show going. Yes, yes, what lay ahead
Was clear: the stripping, the cold street, my chemicals
Plowed back into the Earth for lives to come—
No doubt a blessing, a harvest, but one that doesn't bear,
Now or ever, dwelling upon. To have grown so thin.
Needles and bone. The little boy's hands meeting
About my spine. The mother's voice: *Holding up wonderfully!*
No dread. No bitterness. The end beginning. Today's
Dusk room aglow
For the last time
With candlelight.
Faces love-lit,
Gifts underfoot.
Still to be so poised, so
Receptive. Still to recall, to praise.

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. How would you characterize the tone of the first sentence (lines 1–8)? That is, what do you take to be the speaker's attitude(s)?

2. Beginning with the last line of the lowest branches ("No bread"), and continuing to the end of the poem, how would you characterize the tone(s)? Does this ending satisfy you? Why, or why not? (In your response to this question about the ending, you will of course take into consideration everything that precedes the ending.)
3. About two-thirds of the way through the poem, the tree speaks of "a primitive IV / To keep the show going." What is an IV literally, and what is it in this poem?
4. If you find some lines that strike you as especially witty, point them out. And do you find some lines especially moving? If so, which ones, and why?
5. If someone asked you what the poem is about, what would you say?
6. When did you become aware of the shape that this poem makes on the page? Does this shaping of the poem make it more or less effective? Explain your position.

The Pleasures of Reading—and of Writing Arguments about Literature

"The pleasures of reading," a student may say, are obvious, "but when it comes to talking about the 'pleasures' of writing, surely you must be kidding." Students who makes this reply have on their side the authority of a good many distinguished writers. To cite only three: Edna Ferber said that writing "is a combination of ditch-digging, mountain-climbing, treadmill, and childbirth"; Ernest Hemingway is reported to have said, "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed"; and in our own day the novelist William Styron said, "Let's face it, writing is hell."

Every student and every professor understands what these writers are talking about. The bad news is that they are talking about the difficult job of getting on to paper some coherent thoughts that they think are good enough to share with a reader. But there is good news too: All writers know that the very act of writing will stimulate *better* thoughts than those that they begin with. Writers—professionals as well as students—put words on paper with the understanding that the process of writing is a way of getting better ideas, a way of improving the nearly incoherent stuff that at first drifts through our minds.

- **A Common Misapprehension:** Students often think they are writing "for the teacher." Such an assumption leads to (a) miserable attempts to guess about what this mysterious figure has in mind, and (b) writing that ultimately satisfies neither the student nor the instructor.
- **The Facts:** You are, first of all, *writing for yourself*; you are trying to clarify something. The instructor may have set the problem—let's say (to take a famous example), "Is Hamlet mad or only pretending to be?"—or the problem may be one of your own choosing, possibly even so broad and so basic as "Why don't I care for this work?" In any event, you start looking again at the text, thinking, jotting down brief notes that come to mind, then perhaps commenting on these notes, perhaps amplifying them, perhaps almost immediately seeing that even though you wrote them only a few seconds ago you no longer agree with them. Again, you are writing in order, ultimately, to explain something *to yourself*.