

An Essay to Core Literature Students

Doug Goodner

(Editor's Note: Doug Goodner's essay was addressed to two sections of Core Literature 11:1, "The Interpretation of Literature," which he taught in the Fall Semester, 1976. We include it here not only for whatever merit it might have on its own terms, but also for a consideration of its value as a pedagogical device.)

Since it is quite cold, this is an appropriate time for me to make a blanket statement -- to reflect upon our study, and to weave some loose threads together. Following this statement is a short examination, which you will have ample time to write. The true test, however, lies in the

future, and this should therefore be considered a beginning rather than an ending. The goals of our study have been : 1) to understand the nature of literature, and the functions and values of literary study; 2) a sense of literature as a coherent whole; and 3) an introduction to some parts of the whole, such as figures of speech, imagery, plot, character, and narrative point of view. I will review each of these goals in turn.

Since knowledge of what a thing is involves knowledge of what it is not, I will begin by contrasting the nature of literature to that of science. The nature of science is implicit in the root of its name, sker, which means "to separate, to distinguish." The purpose of science is to discover, distinguish, and describe or define what is present in nature; and science begins, therefore, by separating nature from the mind which perceives it. Once science has separated nature from mind, it can proceed to separate or distinguish one thing from another, and then to discover the relationships between those things. Scientific meaning, then, is the relationship of a thing, not to the perceiving mind, but to an absolute standard, such as a scale of measurement or a theory. Since science wants to denote or distinguish

things as precisely as possible, it states its meaning in the most denotative language possible. And since words have connotations as well as denotations, science prefers numerical to linguistic symbols. For example, chemistry distinguishes the elements by their atomic numbers and atomic weights. Whereas oxygen is denoted by its atomic number (8), and by its atomic weight (15.9994), hydrogen is denoted by 1 and 1.00797 respectively. Note that each of these denotations states the relationship of each element to an absolute standard (weight or number), and makes possible the stating of the relationship of each element to the other (in terms of a numerical ratio); since these denotations neither state nor suggest any relationship between the elements and the chemist, they are precise definitions of what is present in nature, not of what is present in the chemist's mind.

Art may be distinguished from science by the observation that its root, ar, means "to make, to join together"; note that this meaning is exactly opposite to that of sker. The purpose of art is not to discover and distinguish what is already present in nature, but to make something which never existed before; it is not to separate or distinguish things, but to join things together so that they

form a unity. Here we may make a further distinction. The practical arts, such as cooking and engineering, make things which are practical or useful, such as pizzas and bridges. The fine arts, on the other hand, make things which are fine, finished, perfected, or beautiful. While the criterion of science is factual truth, and that of the practical arts utility, that of the fine arts is beauty. Fine art, then, is neither factual nor useful. If you eat the painting of pastry in Murillo's "The Pastry Eaters," you are confusing the factual, the useful, and the beautiful.

The purpose of art is to make, create, or conceive something; and to join things together into a unity. Art can have meaning, for it can suggest relationships between itself and nature; but art is primarily concerned not with meaning, but with being. Whereas science is concerned with what is, art is concerned with what might be, with what exists in the mind, even if not (or not yet) in nature. Science involves denotation and definition; art involves connotation and association. Therefore, while the mental faculty of science is the critical judgment (the ability to separate or distinguish), that of art is the

imagination (the ability to make or conceive, and the ability to see similarities, to associate one thing with another).

Let us now consider an example or two of creations of the imagination. Henceforth we shall deal primarily not with art in general, but with literature, one of the fine arts. When Robert Burns sings:

Oh, my love's like a red, red, rose,
That's newly sprung in June;
Oh, my love's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

he is suggesting that the woman he loves is similar to a fresh rose, and to a harmonious melody -- he is associating the three things. Burns is not describing his beloved precisely, but neither is he violating the laws of logic, for analogy is a valid form of thought. A chemist may say that oxygen is like hydrogen without offending the critical judgment, but such a statement would be of little use to him. In description, especially in scientific description, associative (imaginative) language has to be used with care. Similes and analogies, which state that one thing is like another thing, are of limited value as descriptions, because in a precise description the

differences are as important as the resemblances.

Sylvia Plath's "Metaphors" begins:

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
 An elephant, a ponderous house,
 A melon strolling on two tendrils.

Plath is here using the most radical form of associative language, the metaphor, which asserts that one thing is another thing. The metaphor abandons judgment entirely, for two things can never logically be the same thing. Imagine a chemist saying that oxygen is hydrogen! Poets, it would seem, are not concerned with describing nature.

Finally, let's consider the example of Shakespeare's 73rd sonnet.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do
 hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the
 cold,
 Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet
 birds sang.

In me thou seest the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self that seals up all in
 rest.

In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
 Consumed with that which it was nourished
 by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love
 more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere
 long.

The speaker of this sonnet associates or identifies the human life cycle with the vegetative cycle of the seasons, and with the solar cycle. In particular, he associates himself with the barren trees of late Fall, and with the setting sun.

Why do poets expose themselves to the charge that they are illogical, perhaps mad? Why do they associate or identify women with flowers, and aging men with Fall and twilight? The purpose of science is to know what is present in nature. This knowledge involves the separation of subject (we, the perceivers) from object (the things perceived). Thus, science treats nature as the environment, or that which surrounds us, which is set off against us. The imagination is uncomfortable with this separation, and its purpose, therefore, is to associate us with nature, to treat nature as a home which we make, rather than as an environment which closes us in on all sides. In the words of Northrop Frye, a primary purpose of literature is "to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments

when you feel that although we may know in part, as Paul says, we are also a part of what we know" (The Educated Imagination, page 33).

The imagination, then, is the power which allows us to feel at home in the universe, to feel that we belong to a system not solely of mechanical laws, but of human concerns. The imagination, however, is necessary not only for our ultimate happiness, but for our very survival. The famed physicist and biologist (he is also an authority on the poet, William Blake), J. Bronowski, begins The Ascent of Man by describing how the grunion fish, at full moon, "comes up out of the water and lays its eggs above the normal high-tide mark. The females bury themselves tail first in the sand and the males gyrate round them and fertilize the eggs as they are being laid. The full moon is important, because it gives the time needed for the eggs to incubate undisturbed in the sand, nine or ten days, between these very high tides and the next ones that will wash the hatched fish out to sea again" (page 19). Bronowski continues:

Every landscape in the world is full of these exact and beautiful adaptations, by which an animal fits into its environment like one cog-wheel into another. The sleeping hedgehog waits for the spring to

burst its metabolism into life. The humming-bird beats the air and dips its needle-fine beak into hanging blossoms. Butterflies mimic leaves and even noxious creatures to deceive their predators. The mole plods through the ground as if he had been designed as a mechanical shuttle.

So millions of years of evolution have shaped the grunion to fit and sit exactly with the tides. But nature--that is, biological evolution--has not fitted man to any specific environment. On the contrary, by comparison with the grunion he has a rather crude survival kit; and yet--this is the paradox of the human condition--one that fits him to all environments. Among the multitude of animals which scamper, fly, burrow and swim around us, man is the only one who is not locked into his environment. His imagination, his reason, his emotional subtlety and toughness, make it possible for him not to accept the environment but to change it. And that series of inventions, by which man from age to age has remade his environment, is a different kind of evolution--not biological, but cultural evolution. I call that brilliant sequence of cultural peaks The Ascent of Man.

I use the word ascent with a precise meaning. Man is distinguished from other animals by his imaginative gifts. He makes plans, inventions, new discoveries, by putting different talents together; and his discoveries become more subtle and penetrating, as he learns to combine his talents in more complex and intimate ways. So the great discoveries of different ages and different cultures, in technique, in science, in the arts, express in their

progression a richer and more intricate conjunction of human faculties, an ascending trellis of his gifts.

(pages 19-20)

I have distinguished science from art, the critical judgment from the imagination. You will have noticed that Bronowski makes a different distinction. The human species differs from all others because it possesses "imaginative gifts," the reason as well as the imagination proper. This suggests that an absolute distinction between science and art is invalid. In fact, they are interdependent. The primary criterion of art is beauty, conceptual unity, or sheer being. Yet most of us require that art also have meaning, that it to some degree take account of the facts of life. On the other hand, science devoid of imagination is not true science, for it achieves not knowledge, but the mere compilation of unrelated observations. In Bronowski's words, "All science is the search for unity in hidden likenesses" (Science and Human Values, page 13). As an example of the role which the imagination plays in scientific discoveries, Bronowski notes that Rutherford and Bohr "found a model for the atom in, of all places, the planetary system" (Science and Human Values, page 12). Thus,

the ability to perceive similarities has an essential function in science, as well as in the arts.

Literature is primarily, if not solely, imaginative in nature. We may now ask: what are the functions and values of literary study? Function must follow nature. For example, since beer is by nature intoxicating, its function must be to intoxicate. Since literature is imaginative, it follows that the function of literary study is to exercise and educate the imagination. If we are content with the way things are, we have no need of educated imaginations. But such contentment not only deprives us of the joy which Northrop Frye speaks of, but of survival as a species. By awakening and educating our imaginations, literary study performs the very healthy function of making us discontent with the way things are. By rousing our desires, it leads us to the perception that the way things are leaves something to be desired. If we are content with the status quo in our political, social, and economic institutions; and in our environmental, familial, and personal relationships, so be it. But if we sense that things are not as good as they could be, we had better educate our imaginations so we can conceive what might be. Imaginative conceptions must precede

scientific discoveries and practical inventions, as well as creations of fine art. Recipes must be created in the imagination before pizzas and pineapple passions can be made, blueprints before bridges, constitutions before societies, hypotheses before theoretical discoveries, utopian visions before family of humanity, and imaginative universes before the society of humanity and nature.

Literary study is by no means the only one which functions to educate our imaginations, for the study of any of the arts or sciences does so also. The only special claim I would make for literary study is that it is the only one which is directly and concretely concerned with human characters, situations, and actions. This concludes our reflection upon the nature of literature, and upon the functions of literary study. The values of literary study may easily be inferred from the foregoing, and I will therefore leave them to your own judgments.

We may now consider literature as a whole, as a complete imaginative universe. Science is limited by what can be discovered in nature; each scientific hypothesis is an imaginative construct, but one which must account for observed phenomena. The limits of literature, however, are the limits

of the imagination. Whatever can be conceived by the imagination can become part of the imaginative universe. Since, to the imagination, the two most important qualities are what we want and what we don't want (the dream and the nightmare), the imaginative universe takes shape between the two poles of the totally (conceivably) desirable, and the totally undesirable -- between what religion calls Heaven and Hell. The images from the human, animal, vegetable, mineral, and unformed world, which cluster around, or are associated with, each of these poles are familiar to you, and therefore need not be repeated here.¹

This universe, however, has a temporal aspect as well as a spatial one, for the desirable and the undesirable are not so much possessions as end points, which we strive through time to reach or avoid. Again, the chief concern of the imagination is to assimilate the natural and the human worlds, to establish an identity between the human mind and the world outside it. Thus, to the imagination, the solar cycle and the vegetative cycle of the seasons are identical to the human life cycle. From these recurring cycles, literature derives its main patterns or plots: romance (within Summer, or the desirable), satire (within Winter, or the

undesirable), tragedy (from Summer to Winter, or from the desirable to the undesirable), and comedy (from Winter to Summer, or from the undesirable to the desirable).

All stories are adaptations of these basic patterns, and we can therefore see one of these plots in every drama and every work of narrative which we view or read. Some poems also have plots. Those that do not nevertheless take their images from some point on the cycle, and thus convey a mood associated with some moment in the movement toward, or away from, the desirable. For example, Shakespeare's 73rd sonnet conveys a tragic mood. There are three reasons why every story involves one of these patterns. First, to achieve its imaginative purpose of establishing an identity between the human mind and nature, each story must remind us that human images and actions have natural analogies. Secondly, because the imagination is concerned with the two qualities of the desirable and the undesirable, every story must involve a movement within these qualities, or toward them. Finally, in order to meet the criterion of beauty, every story must have a pleasing or satisfying pattern -- it can't just begin or end anywhere. The novelist and critic, E.M. Forster,

puts it this way: "If it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude. . . . so no wonder that nothing is heard but hammering and screwing" (Aspects of the Novel, pages 95-96).

The foregoing, I hope, gives us a sense of literature as a whole, as an autonomous imaginative universe. Within this universe, the vertical axis of the desirable and the undesirable is primary. But there is also a horizontal axis, which connects the imaginative universe to the world we live in; for we require that literature take account not only of our dreams and nightmares, but of the facts of life. This does not mean that all literature is realistic. What it does mean is that the literary exists as an analogy to the factual universe.

It remains for us to consider (all too briefly) some few parts of the whole of literature. We have already considered in passing the two most important figures of speech (simile and metaphor), imagery, and the four basic patterns of imagery (or plots). The organization of this course suggests that there are three broad types of literature: poetry, drama, and narrative. "Poetry" is a woefully inadequate term; we may consider it here to refer to those works of literature which deal

primarily with moods and attitudes, rather than with stories. A drama is a story without a story-teller, for its characters enact the story directly before a viewing audience. Finally, a narrative is a story told by a story-teller, or narrator, to a listening audience, or reader. Thus, in narrative, we perceive the story indirectly, from the perspective or point of view of the narrator.

This concludes our review, and brings us to the examination, and to the test. I give you my best wishes for both.

Footnote 1

Mode: Romance

Quality: beauty, the desirable, the wish-fulfillment
dream, Heaven

Phase of solar cycle: noon

Phase of vegetative cycle: summer

Phase of human life: maturity

Images:

of human world: community, feast, wedding, hero
or heroine at height of success

of animal world: domesticated animals, sheep, the
lamb, the dove

of vegetable world: garden, grove, meadow, park,
the tree of life, the rose, the lotus

of mineral world: city, single building, temple,
precious stones, fountain

of unformed world: river, brook, stream

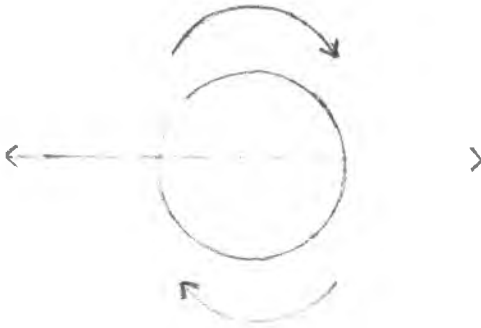
Mode: Comedy

Pattern: integration

Phase of solar cycle: morning

Phase of vegetative cycle: spring

Phase of human life: birth



Mode: Tragedy

Pattern: disintegration

Phase of solar cycle: evening

Phase of vegetative cycle: fall

Phase of human life: age

Mode: Satire

Quality: ugliness, the undesirable, the nightmare,
Hell

Phase of solar cycle: night

Phase of vegetative cycle: winter

Phase of human life: death

Images:

of human world: tyranny; anarchy; war; brawl;
riot; hero or heroine betrayed, deserted,
or isolated

of animal world: birds and beasts of prey,
wolf, vulture, snake, dragon

of vegetable world: sinister forest, heath,
swamp, wilderness, tree of death

of mineral world: desert, ruins, rocks, cemetery

of unformed world: sea, flood

