

Principles of Literary Study

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January 19, 2023. Introduction.

- ▶ Please fill out the sign-in sheet
- ▶ “While masking is optional in academic and administrative settings, we do encourage it” (Antonio Calcado, Chief Operating Officer”)
- ▶ Reaching us: use e-mail (write us both)

course goals

- ▶ 1st half: read some excellent poems
- ▶ 2nd half: read some excellent stories and novels
- ▶ learn how to discuss literary texts as scholars
 - ▶ how to ask relevant scholarly questions
 - ▶ how to analyze the evidence of texts
 - ▶ how to make arguments in writing
- ▶ make you smarter, stronger, faster
 - ▶ (no promises on the last two)

what do we do in literary studies?

- ▶ study the textual dimensions of culture

what do we do in literary studies?

- ▶ study the textual dimensions of culture
- ▶ argue about how texts are made and what they mean

poetry poems (1)

Emily Dickinson (USA, 1830–1886)

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant” (1872)

Discussion

Does this poem follow its own advice?

Tell all the truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind -

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Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
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Or every man be blind -

Tell all the truth
 but - tell it slant -
 Success in Circuit
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 dazzle gradually
 or great ^{moderately} man
 blind -

principle I: form

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- ▶ How texts are *composed* out of words or other signs matters.
 - ▶ Which words have been chosen? What other ones were available?
 - ▶ How have the words been arranged? What other arrangements were possible?
 - ▶ What meanings does this choice and organization of language produce?

principle 2: production

- ▶ The circumstances of the text's *production* matter.
 - ▶ Who made it?
 - ▶ Where and when?
 - ▶ With what aims?
 - ▶ Under what constraints?

principle 3: use

- ▶ The circumstances of the text's *circulation and use* matter.
 - ▶ Who has made it available (then or now or in between)?
 - ▶ Who has read or otherwise used it?
 - ▶ What uses has it been put to?

principle 4: relation

- ▶ The text's *relationships to other texts* matter.
 - ▶ What categories (*genres*) might readers place it in?
 - ▶ What available categories do readers *not* place it in?
 - ▶ How does the text relate to precursors?
 - ▶ How does the text relate to successors?

relationship status: it's complicated

- ▶ The circumstances of the text's *production* matter.
- ▶ The circumstances of the text's *circulation and use* matter.

Anne Bradstreet (ca. 1612–1672)

The Author to Her Book (pub. 1678)

Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, exposed to public view,
Made thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge

Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, exposed to public view,
Made thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge

...

In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nough save homespun cloth i' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst vulgars mayst thou roam.

use matters: Adrienne Rich

[1967] To have written poems, the first good poems in America, while rearing eight children, lying frequently sick, keeping house at the edge of wilderness, was to have managed a poet's range and extension within confines as severe as any American poet has confronted.

[1979] Lecturing at Douglass College on American women poets, I could raise questions which were unavailable to me when I wrote the Bradstreet essay: What did it really mean for women to come to a "new world"; in what sense to what extent *was* it "new" for them? ... To what strategies have women poets resorted in order to handle dangerous and denigrated female themes and experiences?

Rich, "Anne Bradstreet and Her Poetry," in *Works*, xx; Rich, "Postscript," in *ibid.*, xxi.

nice work if you can get it?

Lorine Niedecker (1903–1970)

Poet's Work (1962)

Grandfather

advised me:

Learn a trade

I learned

to sit at desk

and condense

No layoff

from this

condensery

nice work if you can get it?

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<https://www-oed-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/38504>

using the *OED*

- ▶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (2011), s.v. “literature”

for next time

- ▶ read the selections for Monday; print out for special attention:
 - ▶ Donne, “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning”
 - ▶ Ezra Pound, “In a station of the metro”
 - ▶ Rae Armantrout, “Will”
- ▶ Exercise due 1/25: look up a word and write 50-100 words.

poetry, a user's guide

- ▶ print at least poems in bold on the syllabus; mark up
 - ▶ blue phrases in the PDF are hyperlinks
 - ▶ notes at page bottom often link to more annotations
- ▶ it's okay not to “get” everything
 - ▶ try to notice something interesting in every poem
 - ▶ look up words you don't know
- ▶ read some poems aloud
- ▶ reread

requirements

- ▶ participation (10%)
- ▶ short exercises (15%)
- ▶ two short papers (25% each)
- ▶ in-person final (25%)

reading

- ▶ print is better for study
 - ▶ get the books (buy or borrow)
 - ▶ print out the printouts
 - ▶ screens are not allowed (in general)
- ▶ reading takes time and practice
 - ▶ so give it time and practice