

Principles of Literary Study

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Office hours: Thursdays 11:45–12:45 in MU 040A or by appt.

January 26, 2026. Words and meanings.

resources

- ▶ NJ Office of New Americans:
www.nj.gov/humanservices/njnewamericans/
 - ▶ Know Your Rights:
www.nj.gov/humanservices/njnewamericans/newcomers/rights/
- ▶ Rutgers Immigrant Community Assistance Project:
 - ▶ RICAP-info@law.rutgers.edu
 - ▶ appointments: 856-225-6568
 - ▶ emergency assistance for students: 973-803-8008
- ▶ mostly reliable news sources: [New York Times](#), [BBC](#), [NPR](#)
 - ▶ not reliable: social media, news aggregators on your phone, whatever clips get popular on youtube

review: principles of literary study

- ▶ texts: their forms, production, uses, relationships
- ▶ approach:
 1. learn some technical concepts
 2. apply the concepts to make interesting interpretations

review: Dickinson

- ▶ “Tell all the truth but tell it slant”
 - ▶ an exhortation to be indirect
 - ▶ an argument whose “logic” is...questionable
 - ▶ contents vs. effects / *what* is said vs. *how*

review: Bradstreet

- ▶ tone is ostensibly humble, apologetic
- ▶ ...to excess: “If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none”
- ▶ stance implies a criticism of audience expectations
- ▶ and a declaration of independence (as it were)

principle 5: what is literature?

- ▶ Literature is writing that is socially and culturally marked as distinctive.
 - ▶ What is marked changes.
 - ▶ How the distinction is marked changes.
 - ▶ The significance of the distinction changes.

universal	literature
(language)	(writing)
song	poetry
stories	prose fiction
performance	drama
rhetoric	non-narrative prose

how to think about words

- ▶ the words matter...but what do they mean?
- ▶ today: metaphor (including simile with “like” or “as”)
- ▶ general idea: metaphor is typical of meaning
 - ▶ meaning depends on a rich communicative context
 - ▶ we take only some of the implications of words and sentences
 - ▶ we supplement with assumptions of our own
- ▶ e.g.: “He’s a beast!” (traditional: Achilles is a lion)

metaphors and meanings: “Harlem”

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun? (1)

Or fester like a sore— (2)

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat? (3)

Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet? (4)

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load. (5)

Or does it explode? (*6)

Langston Hughes (Joplin, MO 1901–1967 NYC), 1951.

it's, like, literally a metaphor

Astrophil and Stella 55

Muses, I oft invoked your holy aid,
With choicest flowers my speech to engarland so
That it, despised in true but naked show,
Might win some grace in your sweet skill arrayed;
And oft whole troops of saddest words I stayed,
Striving abroad a-foraging to go,
Until by your inspiring I might know
How their black banner might be best displayed.
But now I mean no more your help to try,
Nor other **sugaring of my speech** to prove,
But on her name incessantly to cry:
For let me but name her, whom I do love,
So sweet sounds straight mine ear and heart do hit
That I well find no eloquence like it.

Sir Philip Sidney (England 1554–1586 Netherlands), 1581–83?

tell all the truth, BUT

A slumber did my spirit seal,
I had no human fears:
She seem'd a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force
She neither hears nor sees
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees!

William Wordsworth (England 1770–1850), 1800.



Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,

more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem—
you are caught in the drift.

Wikipedia, s.v. "[Orphium](#)"; H.D. (Bethlehem, PA 1886–1961 Zürich), 1916.

Donne, “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning”



Galileo Galilei, Geometric and military compass, brass, ca. 1606, Museo Galileo, Florence.

Group discussion

1. What's the basic idea? (Write it down in the google doc.)
2. What is *implied* in the extended simile of the compass? Try to enumerate *as many* dimensions of meaning as you can.

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
Petals on a wet, black bough .

Ezra Pound

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
Petals on a wet, black bough .

Ezra Pound

- What is *implied* in the metaphor of the petals?

Armantrout, “Will”

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- ▶ What does “will” mean?

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- ▶ What are the other puns in the poem?

Armantrout, “Will”

- ▶ What does “will” mean?
- ▶ What are the other puns in the poem?
- ▶ (tense, tide, perfect, corn, slip)

This corn is highly
leveraged

and I'm wearing
a pink slip.

- ▶ What does the fact that words mean more than one thing mean for this poem?

This corn is highly
leveraged

and I'm wearing
a pink slip.

- ▶ What does the fact that words mean more than one thing mean for this poem?

Thy firmnes makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne.

next: lines

- ▶ exercise due Wed. 10 p.m. Canvas
 - ▶ read directions
 - ▶ find something [interesting](#) to say
- ▶ Shakespeare sonnets: hard
 - ▶ [lots](#) of notes if you follow link to Oxford Shakespeare
- ▶ print out and focus on:
 - ▶ Shakespeare, Sonnet 129 (“th’expense of spirit”)
 - ▶ Herbert, “Prayer”
 - ▶ Stevens, “The Snow Man” [snow!]
- ▶ think about how sentences are spread over lines