

HOW TO READ A BOOK



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Chapter 14

How to Read Imaginative Literature

So far, this book has been concerned with only half the reading that most people do. Even that is too liberal an estimate.

Probably the greater part of anybody's reading time is spent on newspapers and magazines, and on things that have to be read in connection with one's job. And so far as books are concerned, most of us read more fiction than nonfiction.

Furthermore, of the nonfiction books, the most popular are those that, like newspapers and magazines, deal journalistically with matters of contemporary interest. We have not deceived you about the rules set forth in the preceding chapters. Before undertaking to discuss them in detail, we explained that we would have to limit ourselves to the business of reading serious nonfiction books. To have expounded the rules for reading imaginative and expository literature at the same time would have been confusing. But now we cannot ignore the other types of reading any longer. Before embarking on the task, we want to emphasize one rather strange paradox. The problem of knowing how to read imaginative literature is inherently much more difficult than the problem of knowing how to read expository books. Nevertheless, it seems to be a fact that such skill is more widely possessed than the art of reading science and philosophy, politics, economics, and history. How can this

be true? It may be, of course, that people deceive themselves about their ability to read novels intelligently. From our teaching experience, we know how tonguetied people become when asked to say what they liked about a novel. That they enjoyed it is perfectly clear to them, but they cannot give much of an account of their enjoyment or tell what the book contained that caused them pleasure. This might indicate that people can be good readers of fiction without being good critics. We suspect this is, at best, a half-truth. A critical reading of anything depends upon the fullness of one's apprehension. Those who cannot say what they like about a novel probably have not read it below its most obvious surfaces.

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However, there is more to the paradox than that. Imaginative literature primarily pleases rather than teaches. It is much easier to be pleased than taught, but much harder to know why one is pleased. Beauty is harder to analyze than truth. To make this point clear would require an extensive analysis of esthetic appreciation. We cannot undertake that here. We can, however, give you some advice about how to read imaginative literature. We will proceed, first, by the way of negation, stating the obvious "don'ts" instead of the constructive rules. Next, we will proceed by the way of analogy, briefly translating the rules for reading nonfiction into their equivalents for reading fiction. Finally, in the next chapter, we will proceed to examine the problems of reading specific types of imaginative literature, namely, novels, plays, and lyric poems. How Not to

Read Imaginative Literature In order to proceed by the way of negation, it is first of all necessary to grasp the basic differences between expository and imaginative literature. These differences will explain why we cannot read a novel as if it were a philosophical argument, or a lyric as if it were a mathematical demonstration. The most obvious difference, already mentioned, relates to the purposes of the two kinds of writing. Expository books try to convey knowledge—knowledge about experiences that the reader has had or could have. Imaginative ones try to communicate an experience itself—one that the reader can have or share only by reading—and if they succeed, they give the reader something to be enjoyed. Because of their diverse intentions, the two sorts of work appeal differently to the intellect and the imagination. We experience things through the exercise of our senses and imagination. To know anything we must use our powers of judgment and reasoning, which are intellectual. This does not mean that we can think without using our imagination, or that sense experience is ever wholly divorced from rational insight or reflection. The matter is only one of emphasis. Fiction appeals primarily to the imagination. That is one reason for calling it imaginative literature, in contrast to science and philosophy which are intellectual. This fact about imaginative literature leads to what is probably the most important of the negative injunctions we want to suggest. Don't try to resist the effect that a work of imaginative literature has on you. We have discussed at length the importance of reading actively. This is true of all books, but

it is true in quite different ways of expository works and of poetry. The reader of the former should be like a bird of prey, constantly alert, always ready to pounce. The kind of activity that is appropriate in reading poetry and fiction is not the same. It is a sort of passive action, if we may be allowed the expression, or, better, active passion. We must act in such a way, when reading a story, that we let it act on us. We must allow it to move us, we must let it do whatever work it wants to do on us. We must somehow make ourselves open to it.

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We owe much to the expository literature—the philosophy, science, mathematics—that has shaped the real world in which we live. But we could not live in this world if we were not able, from time to time, to get away from it. We do not mean that imaginative literature is always, or essentially, escapist. In the ordinary sense of that term, the idea is contemptible. If we must escape from reality, it should be to a deeper, or greater, reality. This is the reality of our inner life, of our own unique vision of the world. To discover this reality makes us happy; the experience is deeply satisfying to some part of ourselves we do not ordinarily touch. In any event, the rules of reading a great work of literary art should have as an end or goal just such a profound experience. The rules should clear away all that stops us from feeling as deeply as we possibly can. The basic difference between expository and imaginative literature leads to another difference. Because of their radically diverse aims, these two kinds of writing necessarily use language differently.

The imaginative writer tries to maximize the latent ambiguities of words, in order thereby to gain all the richness and force that is inherent in their multiple meanings. He uses metaphors as the units of his construction just as the logical writer uses words sharpened to a single meaning. What Dante said of *The Divine Comedy*, that it must be read as having several distinct though related meanings, generally applies to poetry and fiction. The logic of expository writing aims at an ideal of unambiguous explicitness. Nothing should be left between the lines. Everything that is relevant and statable should be said as explicitly and clearly as possible. In contrast, imaginative writing relies as much upon what is implied as upon what is said. The multiplication of metaphors puts almost more content between the lines than in the words that compose them. The whole poem or story says something that none of its words say or can say. From this fact we obtain another negative injunction. Don't look for terms, propositions, and arguments in imaginative literature. Such things are logical, not poetic, devices. "In poetry and in drama," the poet Mark Van Doren once observed, "statement is one of the obscurer mediums." What a lyric poem "states," for instance, cannot be found in any of its sentences. And the whole, comprising all its words in their relations to and reactions upon each other, says something that can never be confined within the straitjacket of propositions. (However, imaginative literature contains elements that are analogous to terms, propositions, and arguments, and we will discuss them in a moment.) Of course, we can learn from imaginative

literature, from poems and stories and especially, perhaps, plays—but not in the same way as we are taught by scientific and philosophical books. We learn from experience—the experience that we have in the course of our daily lives. So, too, we can learn from the vicarious, or artistically created, experiences that fiction produces in our imagination. In this sense, poems and stories teach as well as please. But the sense in which science and philosophy teach us is different.

Expository works do not provide us with novel experiences. They comment on such experiences as we already have or can get. That is why it seems right to say that expository books teach primarily, while imaginative books teach only derivatively, by creating experiences from which we can learn. In order to learn from such books, we have CHAPTER 14. HOW TO READ IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE 139 to do our own thinking about experience; in order to learn from scientists and philosophers, we must first try to understand the thinking they have done. Finally, one last negative rule. Don't criticize fiction by the standards of truth and consistency that properly apply to communication of knowledge. The "truth" of a good story is its verisimilitude, its intrinsic probability or plausibility. It must be a likely story, but it need not describe the facts of life or society in a manner that is verifiable by experiment or research.

Centuries ago, Aristotle remarked that "the standard of correctness is not the same in poetry as in politics," or in physics or psychology for that matter. Technical inaccuracies about anatomy or errors in geography or history should be

criticized when the book in which they occur offers itself as a treatise on those subjects. But misstatements of fact do not mar a story if its teller succeeds in surrounding them with plausibility. When we read history, we want the truth in some sense, and we have a right to complain if we do not get it. When we read a novel we want a story that must be true only in the sense that it could have happened in the world of characters and events that the novelist has created, and re-created in us. What do we do with a philosophical book, once we have read it and understood it? We test it—against the common experience that was its original inspiration, and that is its only excuse for being. We say, is this true? Have we felt this? Have we always thought this without realizing it? Is this obvious now, though it was not previously? Complicated as the author's theory or explanation may be, is it actually simpler than the chaotic ideas and opinions we had about this subject before? If we can answer most of these questions in the affirmative, then we are bound by the community of understanding that is between ourselves and the author. When we understand and do not disagree, we must say, "This is our common sense of the matter. We have tested your theory and found it correct." Not so with poetry. We cannot test Othello, say, against our own experience, unless we too are Moors and wedded to Venetian ladies whom we suspect of treachery. But even if this were so, Othello is not every Moor, and Desdemona is not every Venetian lady; and most such couples would have the good fortune not to know an Iago. In fact, all but one would be so

fortunate; Othello, the character as well as the play, is unique.

General Rules for Reading Imaginative Literature To make the “don’ts” discussed in the last section more helpful, they must be supplemented by constructive suggestions. These suggestions can be developed by analogy from the rules of reading expository works. There are, as we have seen, three groups of such rules. The first group consists of rules for discovering the unity and part-whole structure; the second consists of rules for identifying and interpreting the book’s component terms, propositions, and arguments; the third consists of rules for criticizing the author’s doctrine so that we can reach intelligent agreement or disagreement with

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him. We called these three groups of rules structural, interpretive, and critical. By analogy, we can find similar sets of rules to guide us in reading poems, novels, and plays. First, we can translate the structural rules—the rules of outlining—into their fictional analogues as follows. (1) You must classify a work of imaginative literature according to its kind. A lyric tells its story primarily in terms of a single emotional experience, whereas novels and plays have much more complicated plots, involving many characters, their actions and their reactions upon one another, as well as the emotions they suffer in the process. Everyone knows, furthermore, that a play differs from a novel by reason of the fact that it narrates entirely by means of actions and speeches. (There are some interesting exceptions to this, which we will mention later.) The playwright can never

speak in his own person, as the novelist can, and frequently does, in the course of a novel. All of these differences in manner of writing call for differences in the reader's receptivity. Therefore, you should recognize at once the kind of fiction you are reading. (2) You must grasp the unity of the whole work. Whether you have done this or not can be tested by whether you are able to express that unity in a sentence or two. The unity of an expository work resides ultimately in the main problem that it tries to solve. Hence its unity can be stated by the formulation of this question, or by the propositions that answer it. The unity of fiction is also connected with the problem the author has faced, but we have seen that that problem is the attempt to convey a concrete experience, and so the unity of a story is always in its plot. You have not grasped the whole story until you can summarize its plot in a brief narration—not a proposition or an argument. Therein lies its unity. Note that there is no real contradiction here between what we have just said about the unity of plot and what we said about the uniqueness of the language of a fictional work. Even a lyric has a "plot" in the sense in which we are using the term here. But the plot is not the concrete experience that is re-created in the reader by the work, be it lyric, play, or novel; it is only the framework of it, or perhaps the occasion of it. It stands for the unity of the work, which is properly in the experience itself, just as the logical summation of the meaning of an expository work stands for the argument of the whole. (3) You must not only reduce the whole to its

simplest unity, but you must also discover how that whole is constructed out of all its parts. The parts of an expository book are concerned with parts of the whole problem, the partial solutions contributing to the solution of the whole. The parts of fiction are the various steps that the author takes to develop his plot—the details of characterization and incident. The way in which the parts are arranged differs in the two cases. In science and philosophy, they must be ordered logically. In a story, the parts must somehow fit into a temporal scheme, a progress from a beginning through the middle to its end. To know the structure of a narrative, you must know where it begins—which is not necessarily on the first page, of course—what it goes through, and where it comes out at. You must know the various crises that lead up to the climax, where and how the climax occurs, and

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what happens in the aftermath. (By “aftermath” we do not mean what happens after the story is over. Nobody can know that. We mean only what happens, within the narrative, after the climax has occurred.) An important consequence follows from the points we have just made. The parts or sub-wholes of an expository book are more likely to be independently readable than the parts of fiction. Euclid published his *Elements* in thirteen parts, or books, as he called them, and the first of them can be read by itself. That is more or less the case with every well-organized expository book. Its sections or chapters, taken separately or in subgroups, make sense. But the chapters of a novel, the acts of a play, or

the verses of a lyric often become relatively meaningless when wrenched from the whole. Second, what are the interpretive rules for reading fiction? Our prior consideration of the difference between a poetic and a logical use of language prepares us to make a translation of the rules that direct us to find the terms, the propositions, and the arguments. We know we should not do that, but we must do something analogous to it. (1) The elements of fiction are its episodes and incidents, its characters, and their thoughts, speeches, feelings, and actions. Each of these is an element in the world the author creates. By manipulating these elements, the author tells his story. They are like the terms in logical discourse. Just as you must come to terms with an expository writer, so here you must become acquainted with the details of incident and characterization. You have not grasped a story until you are familiar with its characters, until you have lived through its events. (2) Terms are connected in propositions. The elements of fiction are connected by the total scene or background against which they stand out in relief. The imaginative writer, we have seen, creates a world in which his characters "live, move, and have their being." The fictional analogue of the rule that directs you to find the author's propositions can, therefore, be stated as follows: become at home in this imaginary world; know it as if you were an observer on the scene; become a member of its population, willing to befriend its characters, and able to participate in its happenings by sympathetic insight, as you would do in the actions and sufferings of a friend. If you can do

this, the elements of fiction will cease to be so many isolated pawns moved about mechanically on a chessboard. You will have found the connections that vitalize them into members of a living society. (3) If there is any motion in an expository book, it is the movement of the argument, a logical transition from evidences and reasons to the conclusions they support. In the reading of such books, it is necessary to follow the argument. Hence, after you have discovered its terms and propositions, you are called upon to analyze its reasoning. There is an analogous last step in the interpretive reading of fiction. You have become acquainted with the characters. You have joined them in the imaginary world wherein they dwell, consented to the laws of their society, breathed its air, tasted its food, traveled its highways. Now you must follow them through their adventures. The scene or background, the social setting, is (like the proposition) a kind of static connection of the elements of fiction. The unraveling of the plot (like the arguments or reasoning) is the CHAPTER 14. HOW TO READ IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE 142 dynamic connection. Aristotle said that plot is the soul of a story. It is its life. To read a story well you must have your finger on the pulse of the narrative, be sensitive to its very beat. Before leaving these fictional equivalents for the interpretive rules of reading, we must caution you not to examine the analogy too closely. An analogy of, this sort is like a metaphor that will disintegrate if you press it too hard. The three steps we have suggested outline the way in which one becomes progressively aware of the artistic achievement of an

imaginative writer. Far from spoiling your enjoyment of a novel or play, they should enable you to enrich your pleasure by knowing intimately the sources of your delight. You will not only know what you like but also why you like it. One other caution: the foregoing rules apply mainly to novels and plays. To the extent that lyric poems have some narrative line, they apply to lyrics also. But the rules do not cease to apply to non-narrative lyrics, although the connection is much less close. A lyric is the representation of a concrete experience, just like a long story, and it attempts to re-create that experience in the reader. There is a beginning, middle, and end of even the shortest lyric, just as there is a temporal sequence in any experience, no matter how brief and fleeting. And though the cast of characters may be very small in a short lyric, there is always at least one character—namely, the speaker of the poem. Third, and last, what are the critical rules for reading fiction? You may remember that we distinguished, in the case of expository works, between the general maxims governing criticism and a number of particular points—specific critical remarks. With respect to the general maxims, the analogy can be sufficiently drawn by one translation. Where, in the case of expository works, the advice was not to criticize a book—not to say you agree or disagree—until you can first say you understand, so here the maxim is: don't criticize imaginative writing until you fully appreciate what the author has tried to make you experience. There is an important corollary to this. The good reader of a story does not question the world that the

author creates—the world that is re-created in himself. “We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donné*,” said Henry James in *The Art of Fiction*; “our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it.” That is, we must merely appreciate the fact that a writer sets his story in, say, Paris, and not object that it would have been better to set it in Minneapolis; but we have a right to criticize what he does with his Parisians and with the city itself. In other words, we must remember the obvious fact that we do not agree or disagree with fiction. We either like it or we do not. Our critical judgment in the case of expository books concerns their truth, whereas in criticizing belleslettres, as the word itself suggests, we consider chiefly their beauty. The beauty of any work of art is related to the pleasure it gives us when we know it well. Let us restate the maxims, then, in the following manner. Before you express your likes and dislikes, you must first be sure that you have made an honest effort to appreciate the work. By appreciation, we mean having the experience that the author tried to produce for you by working on your emotions

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and imagination. Thus, you cannot appreciate a novel by reading it passively (indeed, as we have remarked, you must read it passionately) any more than you can understand a philosophical book that way. To achieve appreciation, as to achieve understanding, you must read actively, and that means performing all the acts of analytical reading that we have briefly outlined. After you have completed such a reading, you are competent to judge. Your

first judgment will naturally be one of taste. You will say not only that you like or dislike the book, but also why. The reasons you give will, of course, have some critical relevance to the book itself, but in their first expression they are more likely to be about you—your preferences and prejudices—than about the book. Hence, to complete the task of criticism, you must objectify your reactions by pointing to those things in the book that caused them. You must pass from saying what you like or dislike and why, to saying what is good or bad about the book and why. The better you can reflectively discern the causes of your pleasure in reading fiction or poetry, the nearer you will come to knowing the artistic virtues in the literary work itself. You will thus gradually develop a standard of criticism. And you will probably find a large company of men and women of similar taste to share your critical judgments. You may even discover, what we think is true, that good taste in literature is acquired by anyone who learns to read.