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Forum Prompt

J. Hillis Miller

University of California-Irvine

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forum prompt

Why Literature?

J. Hillis Miller (Univeristy of California-Irvine)

Note: When Dr. Miller provided this prompt, he was writing an article titled "What Ought Humanists to Do?" This is an excerpt from that article, which appeared in *Daedalus* earlier this year.¹

New digital devices—computers, iPhones, iPads, Facebook, Twitter, video games, and the like—are rapidly diminishing the role literature plays in many people's lives. A lot of people these days play video games or watch films on Netflix or surf the Net instead of reading printed literature. That is a big loss, but it is not the end of civilization, any more than was the shift from manuscript culture to print culture.

The reading, study, and teaching of literature, even so, is surviving more strongly than one might expect in the midst of an exceedingly rapid and no doubt irreversible global change from one dominant medium (print) to another (digital). A lot of people are going on reading literature, but in digital form—on Kindles and the like. An amazing number of literary works (in the old-fashioned sense of printed novels, poems, and plays) are now available on-line either for free or for a few dollars. These digital versions are usually searchable. This a great help in certain kinds of literary study.

¹ "What Ought Humanists To Do?" *Daedalus*, Winter 2014, Vol. 143, No. 1, Pages 19-34.

Multitudes of teachers in the United States and globally, moreover, both young ones and old ones, are continuing in their classrooms every day quietly teaching their students as best they can a love of literature and how best to read it. Many of these are brilliant teachers. They are my unsung heroes and heroines.

Here are several answers to the question, "Why Literature?"

1) No doubt the real world is transformed by being turned into literature, but I see no reason to deny that we learn a lot about that real world now and in the past by reading literature. Such learning is a great value.

2) In addition, we can learn from literary works the way what might be called "ideological mistakes" often come to be made, namely by taking figurative language literally. "We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them," says George Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch*. The novel gives a striking example of this in the way the intelligent and sensitive heroine, Dorothea Brooke, thinks the dry-as-dust scholar, Edward Casaubon, is like Augustine, Milton, Bossuet, Oberlin, or Pascal. Therefore, marrying Casaubon would be like marrying one or another of these worthies. Much fiction deals thematically with imaginary characters who, like Dorothea Brooke, are wrong in their readings of others, for example Elizabeth Bennett in her misreading of Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, or Isabel Archer's misreading of Gilbert Osmond in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, or the disastrous effect on Conrad's Lord Jim of reading too many adventure stories. Flaubert's Emma Bovary and Cervantes's Don Quixote are Jim's predecessors in making that mistake. All three think life is really going to be like the romances they have read.

3) Getting students to see this aspect of fictions might possibly lead them to have a sharper eye out for the lies politicians, advertising, and mass media tell by manipulation of false figurative transfers. Those admirable Op-Ed writers for the New York Times, Paul Krugman and Maureen Dowd, use what Paul de Man calls "the linguistics of literariness" as one of their major tools in the unmasking of ideological aberrations. Dowd uses irony to devastating effect in her unmasking, and Krugman has repeatedly pointed out that conservatives' propaganda for austerity depends on a false analogy between household finances and spending by the Federal government. Believing that is like Dorothea believing that Casaubon is like Milton or like Pascal. If we learn about the real world by reading literature, the danger of taking figures of speech literally is one of the major things we can learn.

4) Even more important, as an indispensable function of reading literary works, is the sheer pleasure of entering an alternative imaginary world. We do this by way of the words on the page. Every work opens a different and unique world. This pleasure of entering a new world is a good in itself. It needs no further justification. The need for the imaginary seems to be a basic feature of human nature. A slow immersive reading of *Middlemarch* does not just teach you about “the linguistics of literariness.” It also allows you to dwell for a prolonged period in a wonderfully vivid fictitious world peopled by characters that seem as real as real people and are better known to us than our real neighbors.

5) The other pleasure of dwelling in an imaginary world is a kind of surplus joy. This is the sheer delight of felicitous and unexpected language. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, named this pleasure with the more or less untranslatable French word, *jouissance*. The word means “joy,” but also has an erotic overtone. This bodily and mental delight is usually caused by some shimmering of word play, as in George Eliot’s image of thoughts *entangled* in metaphors or Yeats’s marvelous phrase, “*riddled with light*.”

The pleasure caused by felicitous and surprising language is the hardest aspect of literature to carry over into the new media. Films, video games, and television sit-coms are no doubt also alternative worlds, but they cannot easily match the pleasurable linguistic complexity of literary works, as the relative thinness of language in films made from classic novels attests. The narrative voice and the characters’ interior thoughts and feelings vanish, to be replaced by faces on the screen and dialogue. Those faces and their talk have their own power, but it is a different sort of power from the words on the page. It is only partly linguistic. One often waits in vain to hear in a film version some piece of word play that has caused *jouissance* in reading the print-text original.

Helping students share in my joy of the text is what I do as a humanist and feel I ought to do. The contexts in which I go on performing that work have, however, changed considerably, to say the least.

