

Nine Yardsticks of Value

As seniors you probably have wondered for years how educators choose literature to be studied in class. I don't have the exact answer, but I will share with you some of the guidelines many have used. I then will ask you to consider these NINE YARDSTICKS OF VALUE as we discuss the literature we will study in this class. I encourage you to make marginal notes and to save this handout. This set of guidelines will be useful not only for this course but also for any subsequent English classes you take and perhaps in any literary discussions you have for the remainder of your lives. Knowing *why* you respond to literature in a certain way and being able to articulate these responses are valuable skills to acquire and develop.

These ideas are based on those described by Walter Blair, then of the University of Chicago and John Gerber, then of the State University of Iowa. I found the nine yardsticks in a text I used in 1968 when I taught at Beaumont High School in St. Louis, Missouri. Over the past thirty years, I usually share them with any 12th grade English class I teach -- whether in public or private school.

In English classes from 7th grade on, you've been looking at literature in a quantitative way. You've looked at the elements of fiction: CHARACTERS, SETTING, PLOT, CONFLICT, THEME, etc. Now it's time to take the next step and learn to look at literature in a qualitative way.

We want to know what makes one story better than another, one play better than another, or one poem better than another. The Romans had the expression: *de gustibus non est disputandum* "there is no arguing about tastes." We recognize that there is no single rule or set of rules that you can use in evaluating literature. However, here is a set of standards which people have used over a long period of time and have found satisfying.

Through knowledge of these standards you will reach a sounder and more defensible conclusion, and you will see many things in a literary work that you would otherwise miss. Knowledge of standards, in short, makes for thoughtful evaluations that will be more satisfying to you and more acceptable to your friends. We will call these standards "yardsticks."

What are the yardsticks that readers most commonly use in evaluating literature? In considering each, we will shall try to discover (1) what it is (2) how it operates (3) what its peculiar advantages and disadvantages are.

CLARITY - The yardstick of clarity is a very simple standard of measuring according to which everything that resists reasonably careful reading is considered poor writing. In fairness to the author you should take into account your own relevant limitations, and you should be sure that you have read the work with sufficient care, before branding a literary work inadequate because of lack of clarity.

ESCAPE - If you measure by the yardstick of escape, the literary work that causes you to forget yourself and the circumstances of your own life is by that fact good. The story, if it is excellent as escape, is exciting, fast moving, tense, and not too complicated. You want a happy ending, exotic scenes, and unfamiliar adventure. Humor allows you to escape into the world of the incongruous where things happen in unexpected and amusing ways, and where, even the language itself is full of surprises. However, the continued practice of identifying yourself with a hero or heroine who always comes off triumphantly, while satisfying to the ego, is quite likely to make you less capable of handling

real life situations, where choices between right and wrong are not so clear-cut and where happy endings are often the exception rather than the rule.

REFLECTION OF REAL LIFE - The work that reports actuality in a flawless manner is good; the one that distorts the facts as we know them is bad. Essentially what we are doing here is demanding that the person of literature be also a historian or scientist. The unfairness of employing this standard too rigorously is obvious. Since the dramatist, poet, or fiction writer has not tried to write history or science as such, it is unjust to demand of the writer factual precision of history or science.

Truth to human nature - More than simple factual accuracy, the standard of truth to human nature requires that the work create a believable place and characters -- putting believable details together in proper proportion. The illusion of actual life will disappear if the character changes his nature too quickly. We expect consistency. The yardstick of realism will not admit any change as good unless at least three elements have been attended to: (1) a temperament that makes the change possible, (2) circumstances that motivate the change, and (3) sufficient time for such a change to take place. In other words, the thoughts and actions of characters, to be acceptable according to a real-life standard, must be well motivated and require that the characters talk like real people.

For a literary work to measure up well against a strict real-life standard:

- its events must be commonplace rather than “marvelous”
- its details must be proportioned according to their importance in actuality
- the characters must be relatively complicated
- the choice they make must not be too easy
- change in character must be understandable
- every action must be motivated
- dialogue must give the effect of real conversation

ARTISTRY IN DETAILS - By the standard of pleasure in artistic details, a work is good if it provides enough pleasurable moments through effectively handled details to compensate for the time spent on it. For many readers, a single moment of intense pleasure is enough to justify an otherwise tedious book or poem. This is the yardstick of the hedonist - the type of person who believes that one should like or dislike things for themselves, that values lie in feelings of pleasure and pain.

You may find pleasure primarily

- in language,
- in what the literature calls to mind
- in the pattern of the work

Many critics deride the use of this yardstick and say that it results only in simple-minded impressionism. Admittedly such a method can be subjective and undisciplined. There are different kinds of pleasure varying from a superficial emotional titillation to the deeply compelling satisfaction coming from an awareness of the greatest artistic achievement. The quantitative criteria are the number and duration of the pleasurable moments; the qualitative criteria are the intensity and nature of the pleasure itself. When all these are taken into consideration, the yardstick of artistry in details affords a standard for mature and defensible judgments. Even if it did not, it would still be valuable in that it brings our attention to the fact that reading can be delightful for its own sake.

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I**NTERNAL CONSISTENCY** - The problem here is to discover what the relation of the parts is to the whole and to one another. The competent work, presumably, is one in which the parts are so consistent and harmonious that the work as a totality is an organism in which no part can be changed without detriment to the whole work.

In a novel, short story, epic, or narrative poem, the reader ordinarily focuses attention upon people. The primary question is what happens to them? Do they remain the same? Make a simple change? Change and then reverse themselves? Or make a series of changes? Only as you know what happens to them can you determine whether they have been consistent. Consistency is not truth to life; it is a matter of the characters thinking, speaking, and acting in a manner that seems harmonious with their nature and setting.

The advantages of this ‘formal’ or ‘organic’ yardstick are numerous.

- It brings attention to bear upon the work itself and in so doing eliminates a great many irrelevancies that sometimes occupy our attention and get us no place.
- It is likely to make you conscious of many aspects of a literary work that you never noticed before.
- It will result in a more disciplined and a more precise kind of statement.

The system has serious drawbacks, too.

- You are concerned only with the unique work itself. It involves only description and not evaluation at all. If the answer is “This work is good because anything that is harmonious and consistent gives me esthetic pleasure.” So what?
- The method tends to result in such an emphasis on structure that matters such as mood, color, connotation, and melody are almost ignored.

T**ONE** - (The emotional quality of literature achieved by language, appropriate form, imagery, words, and rhythm.) The basic premise of those who use the yardstick of tone is that a fundamentally significant aspect of a literary work is the personal quality given the material as it passes through the mind and emotions of the author. Readers generally agree that the tone of a work should ordinarily be sincere and distinctive, and that when either (or both) of these qualities is lacking, the work does not deserve unqualified praise. The key is that the author must not only *be* sincere, but *seem* sincere. Keep in mind that tone and mood are different. The first refers to the emotional quality expressed by author’s choice of words, grammatical structure, etc.; the second is the emotional quality experienced by the reader as a result of the setting or atmosphere of the literary work.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT - The basic premise of this yardstick is that the most important aspect of a literary work is its effect upon the reader. Its concerns, therefore, are chiefly psychological, and they deal with the type of effect, its intensity, its components, its duration, and its universality.

The type or quality of effect can be designated only roughly in words like fear, pity, horror, joy, rapture, and quiet resignation – all words which name emotions.

If you find that you have difficulty communicating the exact nature of the effect of the work, however, you can still be relatively articulate about certain of its aspects. The plot may be novel or hackneyed, the details general or specific, the dialogue stilted or sparkling, the words trite or vivid, the meaning provocative or platitudinous. As a critical reader, it is your duty to indicate what various minor effects compose the parts of which the major effect is the whole. You will indicate the function and the relative importance of each of the minor effects, and suggest at what point in the work you first begin to become conscious of the major effect.

- The duration of the effect is another aspect about which you can be fairly articulate. How long did the mood of the work stay with you? How long and how well do you remember the characters, the setting, and the action? How long did you continue to mull over the author's ideas? Of these, the mood is most likely to wear off first. To be sure, if you talk about the details as ends in themselves you are not concerned with the work as a whole; but if you discuss them as a means of arriving at and of estimating the effect of the work upon you, then your primary concern is with its totality.
- One of the most important elements of this method of criticism concerns the recurrence of the effect. Does the work hold up on rereading? Do you find it more effective or less effective?
- The final major aspect of this method concerns the spread of the work's effectiveness. How many people over how long a period have found the work enjoyable?

The chief disadvantage of evaluating a work by its emotional impact on the reader has already been suggested.

- The method requires you to be articulate about emotional experiences, phenomena that are difficult to name with precision and next to impossible to communicate.
- In making it necessary for you to be analytical about your reactions, it may actually inhibit those reactions.
- The method focuses your attention upon your own mind and emotions and away from the work.

On the other hand, the method makes you concentrate on certain valuable and relatively reliable criterion like intensity, duration, and universality of effect. It keeps in mind the fact that literature involves not only the mind but the emotions, that its peculiar function is to re-create human experience, and that its special power lies in its ability to make its point with vividness and force. Intelligently employed, this method of evaluation should make you a more sensitive reader and a more discerning critic.

PERSONAL BELIEFS - By the yardstick of personal beliefs a literary work is considered good if it states or implies ideas that are already congenial to the reader. In considering such a yardstick, we could range through the whole gamut of human qualities, for to one degree or another everything we have opinions about affects our judgment. Here we can discuss only those concerns that most radically affect these judgments: morality, religion, politics and economics, philosophy, and literary criticism.

- **MORALITY** - To those who are preoccupied with questions of morality, that writing that exemplifies and encourages proper conduct is good writing; conversely that which is profane, vulgar, or obscene, whatever encourages laxness in morals is bad. Behind such evaluation is the assumption that imaginative writing though primarily designed to be pleasurable, must inevitably lead to instruction in behavior. (Morality is not limited to sexual irregularity; it denotes any deviation from the mores and thus includes murder, stealing, lying, cheating, and a host of other activities.) To some it means simply that the author has been honest with himself and his material, which his is, in short, the scientific spirit. In a paradoxical sense, a literary work is moral to such critics when it is amoral -- when it does not take sides on a moral question, but merely reports what the author observes. Other readers consider a literary work immoral only when in its overall implications it condones misconduct. Still other readers believe a work to be immoral if it in any fashion exhibits an indecent act or employs a coarse or obscene word. They find a work reprehensible if it contains swearing, drinking, divorce, or any suggestion of improper sexual relations. Literature, they say, should be uplifting; it should protect its readers from immoralities, not expose its reader to them.

The problem is a thorny one. On two points practically all are agreed (1) that literature in dealing with human experience cannot fail to become involved with what is right and wrong in human conduct (2) that literature like experience itself, is a teacher. Those who argue that literature should not be expected to be the “handmaiden of morality” point out that an author cannot treat life intelligently unless he is permitted to show evil as well as good. Those who want literature to morally uplifting retort that nothing is to be gained by parading what is sordid and vulgar. Instruction, they insist, must be a matter of indoctrination in what is right, right being determined by divine law and human convention.

The basic weakness in the opposite position is that the extreme moralist too often assumes that his right and wrong are absolutes, whereas in reality they are simply a compound of his own traditions, customs, and prejudices.

- **RELIGION** - That religious affiliations and preconceptions get into our literary evaluations cannot be denied.
- **POLITICS AND ECONOMICS** - Political affiliation and economic doctrine affect our literary judgment, too. Some critics say that literature should reflect “class struggle”; others that literature should clearly uphold what they call “the American way of life.” The vicious length to which this kind of criticism can be pushed was demonstrated to us when governments burned books that did not support the “party line.”

- **PHILOSOPHY** - Philosophical beliefs often give the assumptions upon which literary conclusions are based. These involve your notions about the nature of truth, goodness, and beauty. Obviously, what you think about goodness in general will affect what you think is good literature; what you think about truth and beauty in general will determine to a large degree what you expect of them in literature.
- **LITERARY CRITICISM** - What the reading public prefers in literature varies from age to age. Eighteenth century readers wanted simplicity, if not austerity in style, ease in reading, and neatness of form. They didn't like the ways that Shakespeare played fast and loose with time and place. They urged their dramatists to confine a play to one setting and the time span of action to twenty-four hours. Poetry, they felt, should be written in rhymed couplets, and in relatively elegant language. What has happened to these notions?

Today, most readers want their details vigorous and realistic; they care very little about traditional forms; they think it silly for all poems to be written in rhymed couplets, or for most of them to be written about nature; they like a style that is colorful, jabby, almost journalistic in flavor.

The yardstick of personal beliefs is a tricky and often deceptive affair. One of its characteristic weaknesses is that it too often introduces criteria that are irrelevant. Worse than that, it too often becomes a matter of evaluation by prejudice, and hence ceases to be evaluation at all. Conclusions reached by this method are frequently inconsequential, sometimes crude and vicious. Yet we cannot escape from our age or our temperament. We would be a pretty sad lot if we had no convictions at all about religion, politics and economics, philosophy, or literature. Provided a belief is reasonable and relevant, no one can logically argue against its use simply because it is the result of your private loyalties. You may be a partisan, but that is no reason for your becoming grossly unreasonable. This yardstick, therefore, can be manipulated to personal, unintelligent, and evil means. Too often it is, but it need not be.

SIGNIFICANT INSIGHTS - The basic premise of those who use the yardstick of significant insights in making literary judgments is that literature should be the repository of the best that has been thought and said. In the highest sense, it should be a "criticism of life," for in making us conscious of the best it provides us with a standard against which we can measure our own thoughts and actions. A work, then, is great to the extent to which it provides us with insight into what is best – what is true, good, and beautiful. To apply this yardstick, the reader should consider every aspect of the work to determine what is the totality of its insight into life. The core of the answer is likely to fall in one of four fields – the psychological, the sociological, the ethical, or the metaphysical.

- **PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT** - By this yardstick a literary work is valuable and good to the extent that it provides the reader with what for her are new and profound psychological perceptions. In this sense it is different from the reflection of real life, which demands only that the characters act in accordance with what the reader already knows about human behavior. Possibly the chief danger in the use of this yardstick lies in the tendency to place a higher value upon perceptions of abnormal behavior than on those of normal behavior.

Most of us would agree that psychological insight is most likely to result from those works that cast light upon the typical and even commonplace in human behavior.

- **SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHT** - By this yardstick a literary work is valuable when it shows how human beings under given conditions operate. We have come to expect that our literature go beyond the personal problems of a few human beings to the more general problems of human beings. What is the effect on humans of the environment, on the economic system, on the political system? Of ones institutions, folkways, and mores? The yardstick of significant insights in the field of social problems is a demanding one that discriminates wise selection and interpretation from hit-and-miss reporting, thoughtful analysis from flippancy, and sympathetic understanding from cheap sensationalism.
- **ETHICAL INSIGHT** - Using this yardstick, we come back to the conviction that literature has a dual role: it must be pleasurable and it must be instructive (i.e., ennobling). The most effective blending of these two elements results in the profoundest literature. The chief weakness of this approach is that it too often results in a narrowing of one's interests, in dogmatism, and in intellectual absolutism. What happens is that one gets so preoccupied with the ancients that he finds to his own loss that he is no longer interested in any writers but them. He believes all writing should be like theirs. Worst of all, this approach leads to an absolutism in which the critic assumes that he, having studied the ancients (often in translation), knows The Truth, knows pompously what is needed for The Truly Great Interpretation of Life. What happens, in short, is that in practice, this mode of evaluation like the sociological approach too easily slips off into the method that we called Personal Beliefs: the search for truth gives way to the application of dogma. But this need not happen. When properly employed in the field of ethics, the yardstick of significant insights is a demanding one that finds adequate only those works that give pleasure of a serious and lasting nature.
- **METAPHYSICAL INSIGHT** - The term here refers to insight into the nature of being, into the fundamental causes of processes of things. More specifically, it is insight into the relation of human beings to nature, to the cosmos, and to God. To rank high by this standard of judgment a work must raise and attempt something of an answer to such ultimate questions as: What is life? Why am I here? What is man's eventual destiny? Is there a God? What is his nature? Is there purpose to our universe?

The chief danger in this yardstick lies in its current popularity. Is Huck Finn on an allegorical journey down the Mississippi River of life? But, the fact that this yardstick may be overused and misapplied is no argument for avoiding it when a literary work clearly provides perceptions of a metaphysical sort. Indeed it would be unfair to an author who attempts to deal with such difficult considerations not to take them into account in making a judgment about his work. This is the most demanding of all our yardsticks, and a work that measures up well to its demands is likely to be one of the finest products of the human genius.

In summary, then, we must acknowledge that there is no one way of measuring works of art because we all would use different yardsticks. Loosely, we could call the yardstick "taste." More specifically, a yardstick simply is a compound of our likes and dislikes, our desires and needs, our preconceptions, our knowledge and wisdom and experience -- everything, in short, that makes up our particular psycho-physiological being. Since we are all different, we like different things, and since we like different things we are not going to agree wholly on what makes one piece of literature better than another. We therefore, will focus our attention on using this set of nine yardsticks as a common vocabulary to evaluate the literature we read, discuss, and write this year.

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