Contents

ONE Reading and Questioning

WHAT TEXTS SAY AND SUGGEST

WHAT THEY SHOW AND DO—AND HOW

> Reading sets our minds, our inquiring minds, in motion as we pursue a deeper understanding of our lives and the world we live in.
>
> —PAT C. HOY II

An important question readers consider when reading literature and other challenging texts is "What does the text mean?" It's a familiar question, and it no doubt stimulates thoughtful inquiry. I'm not ready to abandon it. However, I think we should consider its limitations for literary understanding, especially its interference with readers' enjoyment of literature. To think about the question of meaning productively, we need to postpone it and reframe it in the context of other textual considerations. Reading for meaning is important, but it shouldn't drive our reading practices and limit our reading intentions.

What other questions might we ask about what we read? What else can we consider about a text, while postponing the quest for meaning? Though grappling with textual meaning(s) may be our ultimate goal, it does not follow that we should *begin* with the question of meaning. Other questions can lead us into, around, and through texts, literary works especially, with enhanced pleasure and understanding.

The questions we ask about texts reflect fundamental assumptions about textual understanding, about interpretation. Our questions determine the directions our reading can take. Our questions determine what we are able to see and say about texts; they profoundly influence how we perceive texts and what we make of them. Changing our questions changes both our understanding of texts, literary works especially, and the value they hold for us.

Let's consider, to start, a brief essay by Yoshida Kenko, a fourteenth-century Japanese writer. Kenko was a Buddhist monk best known for his *Essays in Idleness*, among the most studied of Japanese literary works, a book that remains today a staple of the Japanese high school curriculum. The following essay, like all of Kenko's essays, carries a number as its title.

Essay 189

> You may intend to do something today, only for pressing business to come up unexpectedly and take up all of your attention the rest of the day. Or a person you have been expecting is prevented from coming, or someone you hadn't expected comes calling. The thing you have counted on goes amiss, and the thing you had no hopes for is the only one to succeed. A matter which promised to be a nuisance passes off smoothly, and a matter which should have been easy proves a great hardship. Our daily experiences bear no resemblance to what we had anticipated. This is true throughout the year, and equally true for our entire lives. But if we decide that everything is bound to go contrary to our anticipations, we discover that naturally there are also some things which do not contradict expectations. This makes it all the harder to be definite about anything. The one thing you can be certain of is the truth that all is uncertainty.

Refusing to say what his essay is about, Kenko leaves us to decide this for ourselves. He draws us into the essay's topic without naming it first. Instead, we dive right into the situation—ways our intentions get subverted. Eventually, by the end, Kenko states his claim: the one thing we can be certain of is uncertainty.

How does Kenko manage this topic? How does he carry us along his trail of thought? How does he engage us in thinking along with him? He does these things by making our reading experience inductive. Kenko provides examples, but he withholds the idea those examples illustrate.

He also engages us personally. From the opening word, "You," Kenko addresses us directly. He speaks to us, naturally, even informally, "you" and "your" appearing six times in the first three sentences. The fourth sentence, using no pronouns at all, serves as a hinge, a fulcrum. From there the passage pivots to the first-person plural: Kenko talks of "our" experiences, "our" lives, and "our anticipations"; he mentions things "we discover" about our everyday experience. The move is from the individual to the larger group, from the particular "you" to the more general "we."

The essay's brevity is also noteworthy: a single paragraph of nine sentences and fewer than 175 words. In that short space Kenko invites us to consider the ways our lives are replete with the incidental and accidental. He alludes to how plans become disrupted, intentions circumvented, the way things go awry. Not always, however, as he notes that some things do go the way we hope or expect. Kenko reminds us that we don't know and can't know which things will work out for us and which will not. Uncertainty sabotages that degree of confidence.

Kenko's essay operates on a fairly high level of generality, his examples notwithstanding. The essay's personal tone and informal style coexist with declarative sentences that remain general, nonspecific. Kenko offers us nothing about his personal experience. Instead, he gets us thinking more broadly about uncertainty, about the indefinite, and about our inability to control events. Implicitly, Kenko invites us to apply his general assertions to our own experience; we reflect on our own personal examples to substantiate, qualify, or perhaps challenge his claims.

Genre

One question we need to ask when encountering a text is what kind of text it seems to be. Just what are we looking at (and listening to)? Though brief, Kenko's text makes clear that it's an essay—a considered set of observations about human experience. And we respond to essays differently from the ways we respond to fictional

works or to poems or plays. Essays make different demands on us than do works in other literary genres.

Here is another short prose text, considerably briefer than Kenko's mini-essay. What might we make of its mere two sentences?

> This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me, they were delicious so sweet and so cold.

This text appears to be an explanatory note, a weak apology, one that might be attached to a refrigerator door. Its matter-of-fact tone, its seeking of forgiveness (playfully and teasingly), and its speaker's pleasure in eating the plums suggest as much. But what if these words were rearranged as their author, William Carlos Williams, published them?

> This Is Just to Say
>
> I have eaten
> the plums
> that were in
> the icebox
>
> and which
> you were probably
> saving
> for breakfast
>
> Forgive me
> they were delicious
> so sweet
> and so cold

How does our experience of reading this version of the text, as verse, differ from our experience reading it as a prose note of apology? How does our response to the text change when aligned as the poem Williams wrote? Seeing those sentences spanning the margins of a page, we understand them one way—as an everyday note.

Seeing them lineated as a poem, we approach and *experience* them differently—as literature. The change in genre alters our perspective and our *perception*—how we take what we are reading, what we make of it, and what we do with it. The shift of genre from note to poem changes all this and more.

Williams's poem slows down our reading, focusing our attention on plums swiped from the icebox that someone else was anticipating eating for breakfast—these facts, along with a description of their taste and the physical sensation of eating them. It's not that those details were unavailable in the prose apology—but rather that they were not accentuated and brought to our attention the way they are in Williams's poem.

Once we accept a text *as* a literary work, we know better how to look at it, what to do with it; we know what questions to ask of it and what kinds of analysis to subject it to. We know what rewards such attention can yield. Genre knowledge guides our reading of literary works; knowing a text's genre is crucial for understanding it.

Applying the conventions of literary analysis to bumper stickers, shopping lists, advertisements for shampoo, and other mundane texts is possible, of course, but the payoff is far less than when those conventions are applied to an epigram by Martial or Pope, or a lyric by Wordsworth or Dickinson—to say nothing of grander works, such as "Ode on a Grecian Urn," *The Tempest*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Fire Next Time*, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Why? Because each of those literary works says much more; each shows more, does more, suggests more, signifies more, and does so with greater complexity and fecundity.

Contexts

Considerations of context beyond genre can open up a text in still other ways. We can ask about the relationship of the text to its author's other works. How, for example, does the speaker eating plums in "This Is Just to Say" compare with the speaker eating plums in another of Williams's poems, "To a Poor Old Woman"? How are those speaker's acts of plum eating different?

Or, alternatively, how does Williams's emphasis in "To a Poor Old Woman" differ from his emphasis in "This Is Just to Say?" To what does "To a Poor Old Woman" direct our attention?

To a Poor Old Woman

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her

We notice first how the title is part of the poem's opening description: it provides a point of view—how things taste to the poor old woman. We likely notice the sheer joy and sensuous pleasure the woman takes in eating those plums; we see how they comfort her; we feel the solace they bring her. We also notice how Williams plays with line endings to shift the emphasis at the end of lines from the woman ("her") eating the plums, to their "good" taste, and her particular pleasure in eating them. The repetition of the full line at the end of the poem closes it up and reemphasizes just how good those plums tasted, calling up, perhaps, the "sweet" taste and "cold" touch of the plums in "This Is Just to Say."

We notice as well, especially when we read the poem aloud, how Williams directs our attention to the way the poor old woman eats the plums, sucking out half at a time. The poem pushes toward two

key words that complement these concrete details—"Comforted" and "solace"—abstract words that convey what her eating of the plums gives her.

Similarity and difference; similarity but difference. Connections and distinctions. We read poems and other literary works in relation to one another. We read everything in context.

We now slow down a bit to consider Williams's famous poem about a red wheelbarrow:

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

What, we might ask ourselves, does this poem have in common with the others? Though there are no plums in the wheelbarrow, "The Red Wheelbarrow" shares characteristics with Williams's poems about plums: everyday subjects, simple language, short lines, a lack of end rhyme. The poems' appearance on the page, their visual form, directs us how to read them; their form influences how we see, hear, and take them, and what we make of them.

Describing "The Red Wheelbarrow" without worrying, initially, about its meaning frees us to notice patterns of sound and structure (as for example the assonance of lines 5 and 7 (gl*a*zed with r*ai*n; be*si*de the *whi*te), and the use of two-line stanzas, with the first line containing three words and the second line a single word of two-syllables). We can notice those things upon a second look and hearing. We can detect patterns, make connections, ask questions, consider values the work embodies, and arrive at a provisional sense of the poem's significance. In looking

carefully at its stanzas, for example, we might see each as a miniature wheelbarrow.

Another striking feature of the poem is the way Williams breaks its lines, where he turns each. By splitting "upon" from "what depends," Williams provokes us to wonder "What depends?" And, perhaps, "Why does it depend?" The word "depends" means literally "to hang from." And that is just what the word "upon" does in the poem: it hangs from the first line: "so much depends." It hangs there for us to see; and it hangs there, too, for us to think about.

In the second and third stanzas, Williams breaks lines over the words "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater." Why might he have done that and with what effect(s)? One possibility for "wheel" / "barrow" is that Williams reminds us (and helps us see) that a wheelbarrow is an object made of two parts—a "barrow" on "wheel"(s). Similarly, Williams emphasizes the fact that "rainwater" is indeed "water" that "rain(s)" down from the sky. He accomplishes this by visually dividing the words across lines on the page. In making those divisions, he gets us looking at words and noticing the things those words refer to. In the process, we see both the words and the things they describe anew.

Seeing one poem in the context of others aids what we can see and say about each. In addition to contextualizing poems and other literary works in relationship to one another, we can also consider them in the contexts of an author's life and milieu.

Contexts: Life and World

A signal fact about William Carlos Williams is that he embedded his writing life in his work as a busy pediatrician practicing in Rutherford, New Jersey. Lacking much time to write, he often jotted notes and lines of poems between his appointments with patients. And though Williams did write one long epic poem, *Paterson*, his oeuvre leans heavily toward short stories, essays, and lyric poems. Given his circumstances, this isn't surprising.

Beyond the context of an author's life per se, we might consider how a writer's works reflect, embody, or otherwise relate to the larger world in which that life was lived. We might consider, that

is, any particular text in light of the cultural milieu in which it was created. Contexts of work, life, and world allow us to expand our relationship with any particular text, enlarging our understanding of its implications and increasing our appreciation of its value. We might imagine these three contextual relationships as concentric circles: the individual text radiating into the larger contexts of a writer's oeuvre, the writer's life, and the writer's milieu.

We can illustrate with Flannery O'Connor, whose works, mostly short stories, embody an ironic vision, one embedded in the genre, temper, and spirit of Southern Gothic. O'Connor's identity as a southerner provided her with many of the raw materials she used to construct the nuanced settings of her stories and invent their richly imagined characters. Born in Savannah, Georgia, and living most of her adult life in Milledgeville, Georgia, the state's capital before the Civil War, O'Connor found her métier in portraying the South in all its complexity. Her stories, with their grotesque characters, frequent violence, savage satire, and colloquial dialogue, often point to the comic in calamity, while exploring moral issues in imaginative and provocative ways.

Complementing O'Connor's sense of herself as a southerner was her Roman Catholic faith. Her religious beliefs provide a way in to her fiction, though we need not share her beliefs to enjoy her stories. Belief is not required for appreciation.

We can see its centrality in her best-known story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in which an escaped convict comes into contact with a family traveling on vacation. Here is its opening paragraph:

> The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the *Journal*. "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here

> what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did." (137)

The story is set in the American Southeast. That the narrator refers to the grandmother's relatives as "connections" indicates the character's sense of status, suggesting her imagined gentility. In referring to her son as "her only boy" and as "the son she lived with," the narrator reveals their domestic arrangement and her babying of him. The word "boy" for this adult male will echo later in the story for the grandmother when she calls out "Bailey Boy," after she hears a sharp pistol shot emanating from the woods, where the family, in a car accident, encounters the grandmother's nemesis, "The Misfit." O'Connor hints at, but does not identify exactly, what "he [the Misfit] did to these people" about whom the grandmother was reading as she was "rattling" the newspaper at her son's bald head. (Notice how each of these details suggests an aspect of the son's or the grandmother's character, efficiently yet humorously, while also creating, ominously, the first hint of the danger they will later confront.)

The grandmother's use of the word "aloose" comically identifies her lack of linguistic sophistication. The word also reveals how she manipulates her son by trying to frighten him with the highly unlikely possibility that they would encounter The Misfit in a state the size of Florida. But, of course, this is a short story by Flannery O'Connor, and so we suspect that this paragraph presages the encounter the grandmother fears, however unlikely it might be in everyday life.

O'Connor incorporates a number of religious elements in her story. Among the most important are the details The Misfit shares about his life: "I never was a bad boy that I remember of . . . but somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive" (149). We learn more when he says to the grandmother, "You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it" (150). And further: "I call myself The Misfit . . . because I can't

make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment. . . . Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?" (151). The Misfit links these ruminations and questions with Jesus, who he says "thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime" (151).

The Misfit's frustration at not knowing whether Jesus really was a miracle worker, a divine being who raised the dead and raised himself from the dead, leads him to his view that in life there is "[n]o pleasure but meanness" (152) and "[i]t's no real pleasure in life" (153). The logic of the Misfit's explanation helps us understand his view of life. It is at once harshly realistic and steadily unconventional while also being consonant with O'Connor's Christian theological paradigm.

In considering a work in different contexts, including genre, life, and milieu, we expand our understanding of it, and also of the literary ur-question we began with. In a sense, we have been questioning this question about itself, testing its limitations and exploring alternative variations on it.

Meaning, Saying, Doing

Let's turn now to some further variations of our initial question. In addition to "What does the text *mean*?" we can also ask, "What does the text *say*?" and "What does the text *do*?" Now this first variation sounds much like our question about meaning. But we can use this *saying* version of it, instead, to focus attention on voice, to attend to the tone of the speaker's words and to the attitude conveyed by that tone. Asking what the text *says* invites us to listen to its voice(s). Attending to voice in a text helps us develop an ear for how it sounds, especially if we read it aloud.

Why might we want to do this?

Attending to a texts's aural dimension, privileging its sounds, leads to an appreciation for the music of prose and poetry, rhythm especially. Developing an auditory imagination increases our ability to hear the rhythms of good writing and to feel its pulse, thereby adding to our reading pleasure.

Taking another tack, we can observe that reading aloud enables writers to hear infelicities in their prose that they normally don't see on the silent page. The ear hears what the eye overlooks; the ear prompts the eye to see. Reading aloud enables writers and readers to hear how sound shapes sense.

Reading aloud offers other advantages, as well. Readers must make choices about the tempo and tone of their reading. They must choose a spirit in which to read, one that allows the rhythms of word and phrase, sentence and paragraph, to reveal the shape of thought. The skills resulting from a heightened awareness of language, brought about largely with the aid of the ear, foster perceptive reading and eloquent writing.

In a vigorous defense of the value of memorizing texts, Thomas Newkirk suggests that learning "by heart" accomplishes all that reading aloud does, and more. Committing texts to memory, so they can readily be called up and voiced, acknowledges their value—their ideas and style and beauty. In memorizing a text, Newkirk suggests, we pledge "allegiance" to it in "an act of loyalty and deep respect" (*Slow Reading* 76). That respect extends to the artistry of the memorized texts, an artistry reflected in their styles and voices, which benefit from being heard.

We can ask yet another variation of our original question. Instead of "What does the text *say*?" we can ask, "What does the text *do*?"

This question invites a consideration of technique. It encourages us to examine not only the effects a text produces, but also the manner in which the writer creates those effects. Asking what a text *does* before asking what it *means* gives us time to consider its language and form, to make observations and connections among its words and images, its syntax and structure, even the purpose and effects of its punctuation.

You must have noticed, for example, how William Carlos Williams omits punctuation in some of the poems quoted earlier, how he uses punctuation selectively. You observed, too, I suspect, how he employs capitalization differently across those poems—sometimes capitalizing words at the beginning of lines, sometimes not, and exhibiting a similar kind of inconsistency with

capitalization at the beginning of sentences. We can't get to the significance of these details without first noticing them. Asking what a text "does" nudges us toward such noticing. And following that noticing comes thinking about we have observed.

Asking what a text *does* acknowledges its expressive power, its ability to arouse feeling as well as provoke thinking. This question encourages attention to how texts move us as well as instruct us; it directs us to their emotional resonance as well as their cognitive significance. In reading the New Testament parable of the prodigal son, for example, we can slow things down to highlight dramatic moments in which characters' feelings are paramount. We can attend to the text through both intellectual comprehension and emotional apprehension, responding to the powerful feelings the textual details generate.

Our original dominant question and its two variants enable us to engage texts on many levels—the personal and private as well as the impersonal and public, affectively and subjectively, as well as rationally and analytically. The three aspects—what texts *mean*, what texts *say*, and what texts *do*—invite us to inspect their words scrupulously and then to respond to them, contextualize them, and experience their manifold pleasures.

Reading with Questions

We can read with questions about a writer's choices of diction and syntax, image and example, sound and sense, structure and conceptual implications. We can consider questions about a work's effects, its assumptions and values, its genre and form, its nature and purpose. The questions that emerge as we read should arise organically from experiencing a text's claims and evidence, its narrative, its voice and tone and texture, its exposition, argument, and other features.

At their best, our questions about texts prompt us to think about them more thoroughly and more expansively. Our questions encourage analysis and appreciation, and they invite us to explore the ways texts stimulate our feelings and our thoughts about them. The three types of questions we have considered thus far are

suggestive rather than exhaustive. They help us approach literary works in a spirit of inquiry and exploration, joyously, without seeking a single, absolute, final, and definitive interpretive answer to their meaning.

All interpretations of a text, however, are not equally valid, equally persuasive, or equally useful. Some interpretations are more persuasive than others; some are more interesting, more convincing, more elegant. Employing a range of questions about texts invites us to consider their extrainterpretive dimensions—our feelings and noncognitive responses, which, counterintuitively, may well lead us to a more richly nuanced interpretation. Broadening the range of questions we ask about texts not only helps us see more in them, but also inspires a more richly rewarding reading experience.

Before returning to our original question—"What does the text mean?"—we can consider two additional variations: "What does the text *show*?" (or "What does the text *reveal (and conceal)*?" And "What does the text *suggest*?" Each of these questions leads us to read texts in still other ways, though ultimately, of course, taking us back to considerations of textual meaning. Essentially, then, in exploring these four variations of our text-as-meaning question—*saying* and *doing*, *showing* and *suggesting*—we expand the meaning of a text's "meaning."

So, then, what does the text "show" and what does it avoid showing, even refuse to show? How much and what does it reveal, and what might it conceal? Asking these related questions invites us to analyze a text's implications—what it does not state outright, what it does not say directly. Considering what a text "shows" can highlight a text's visual qualities, its images, its scenes, its way of describing. The classic advice given writers—"Show, don't tell"—directs readers to see what the text shows rather than what it says, what it depicts rather than what it explains. Many texts both show and tell. What they tell may be in conflict with what they show. Critics adept at deconstructive readings provide skillful examples of how texts are conflicted, at odds with themselves, how they undermine and sabotage themselves through gaps and contradictions, through forms of showing something other than what they tell.

More traditional critics, formalist critics, for example, look carefully to see what texts show and acknowledge what they don't, whether or not what those texts reveal conflicts with what they tell—if they tell anything overtly at all.

Literary works, by their nature, suggest rather than explain; they imply rather than state their claims boldly and directly. This broad generalization, however, does not mean that works of literature do not include direct statements. Depending on when they were written and by whom, literary works may contain large amounts of direct telling and lesser amounts of suggestion and implication, as in omniscient narration, for example. But whatever the proportion of a work's showing to telling, there is always something for readers to interpret. Thus we ask the question "What does the text suggest?" as a way to approach literary interpretation, as a way to begin thinking about a text's implications. What a text implies is often of great interest to us. And our work of ferreting out a text's implications tests our analytical powers. In considering what a text suggests, we gain practice in making sense of texts. And the primary way we do that is by looking closely at a text's language and details.

Let's listen to the opening of a perennially popular novel: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. What do we notice about the beginning: to what does Austen direct our attention? What does Austen *say* and *do*, *show* and *suggest*, in this famous opening?

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.
>
> However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.
>
> "My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"
>
> Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.
>
> "But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? How can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

What does this famous text *say*? What does it *do*? What does it *show*? And what does it *suggest*? We can answer each of these questions briefly before considering their implications in more detail.

In listening to what the text "says," we hear three voices—the voice of the narrator, which begins the novel, and which interpolates three brief comments between the voices of two characters, Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet. What do we hear in each of these voices? What impression do we gain of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet by listening to their dialogue? What impression do we gain of the narrator through the novel's opening sentences and those three brief interpolated comments? What impression does the narrative voice convey about Mr. and Mrs. Bennet? These are the kinds of questions useful for listening to a text's voices.

In asking, next, what the text "does," we might say simply that it introduces us to two things: to the novel's primary subject—marriage and its connection with money and status—and to a pair of important characters, who we soon learn have five daughters in need of marital partners.

Viewing the text from the perspective of "showing," we might say that it shows us what's important in the world of the novel. It provides a quick look, too, at the novel's setting—in the country rather than the city, in rural England in the late eighteenth century, when Austen wrote the novel, though it wasn't published until 1813. Country estates are briefly mentioned and will become a central concern of the Bennet family as the novel progresses.

To consider what the text "suggests" is to engage in speculation about the importance of what it *says*, *does*, and *shows*. We can consider what this brief excerpt of Austen's novel suggests by asking questions about its language and selection of detail—about what the author chooses to tell us through the remarks of her narrator, and what she chooses to let us overhear in her characters' dialogue.

To gain access to what the text suggests, we need to ask a few questions about it. Is it a truth—that is, do we accept as fact what the opening sentence seems to assert: that a single man of means must be looking for a wife? Do we believe that this search for a wife is a phenomenon universally acknowledged, recognized around the world in other times and places, and not merely in the time and place of Austen's novel? Is it possible that Jane Austen's sentence means the opposite of what it purports to suggest: that single men of means more often than not are not in search of wives at all? How would we go about determining whether the sentence is ironic—whether what it says overtly and what it implies covertly are at odds, discrepant, and thus should not be taken at face value?

We can feel confident about the ironic tone of Austen's first sentence when we consider it in relation to the sentence that follows it. There we are told that knowledge of the eligible bachelor's feelings and views is of little if any importance. Clearly, however, the man's feelings and views should be a prime concern (especially a wealthy man in eighteenth-century England). That his feelings are unknown suggests they are of no consequence to the families, all

intent on marrying off one of their daughters to the gentleman. This, of course, is ironic, the opposite of what might be expected in such a situation. And then there is the irony concerning ownership: that a man of wealth would be considered the rightful property of some marriageable daughter. A further irony is that marriageable eligibility is determined by wealth alone, with character, intelligence, wisdom, virtue, and other admirable and presumably desirable qualities in a spouse, ignored entirely. In this world, marriage matters; money matters; status and rank matter. Personal feelings do not matter—at least to Mrs. Bennet.

Portraying characters whose view of marriage is so mercenary, Austen distances herself from them and from their avaricious values. She does this through the comments of her narrator. This ironic distance is enforced when the author describes the misconceptions of her characters about single men, along with their reversal of the common notion that a wife is a man's property.

For these and other reasons, as the chapter and the novel develop, Austen displays an ironic tone that she uses to satirize Mrs. Bennet, as well as a number of other characters who make their appearance later. In these opening lines of her novel, and throughout its brief opening chapter, Austen teaches us how to read *Pride and Prejudice*—how to consider what it says and does, what it shows and suggests, and, ultimately, what it comes to mean for readers.

From "What" to "How"

Implicit in much of what I have said with respect to the sample texts previously discussed is the notion of literary artistry, which becomes explicit in what ensues here. We need to adjust our original question one last time—changing "what" to "how": from "*What* does the text mean?" to "*How* does the text mean?" What are the implications of this change? What does this variation do, say, and suggest? How does this new "how" question help readers discover the meaning(s) of a text?

In a way, our four variants of the ur-question, along with our attention to textual meaning through *saying* and *doing*, *showing* and

suggesting—our considerations of textual implication—have led us to *how* a text means what it does. Our "how" question directs us toward technique, toward craft and art, toward the many and varied ways writers say, show, suggest, and do things with words as they create literature.

Let's have a look, first, at a brief poem by Langston Hughes, one of his best- known and most frequently anthologized pieces. (Many readers will recognize its second line as the title of a play by Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was made into a popular film.)

Langston Hughes

Dream Deferred [Harlem 2]

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

In this celebrated poem, Hughes relies on simile and metaphor to suggest a range of meanings. A pair of similes occupy each of the first two stanzas, and a single simile stanza three. Hughes concludes by shifting from simile to metaphor, which he presents in a separate stanza, as the poem's conclusion. The stanzas become progressively shorter and increasingly emphatic. The final line, which employs metaphor, differs from the other poetic comparisons that precede it, redirecting the poem's energy and discharging its cumulative, pent-up force.

Hughes builds his poem from a fundamental question: "What happens to a dream deferred?" The rest of the poem consists of answers in the form of questions, with the penultimate answer a statement (though it works much like a question with the hypothetical "Maybe"). Hughes invites us to think about the implications of each of his questioning answers.

Our understanding of the poem hinges on how we interpret its opening question. What is being asked about a deferred dream? What type of "dream" is the poet inviting us to think about? What kind of dream is at stake? And once we move to a metaphorical or symbolic reading, we begin to consider what the deferral of those dreams might do to an individual or a group of people, whatever their race or skin color, but certainly including the dream of racial equality for African Americans, prominent among the deferred dreams that loom large for them.

Questions beget questions, each comparison inviting interpretive consideration, each simile suggesting yet another way a dream's deferral leads to its destruction. The various similes suggest different ways an unrealized dream results in undesirable, even destructive consequences. The final comparison is like the earlier ones, yet also differs from them. This concluding metaphor occupies a single line only, making it more emphatic; *italics* provide additional emphasis. And then there's that final word: *explode*. You don't get more conclusive—or explosive—than that.

Slowing things down this way allows us time to process what the poem says and suggests, what it shows and does. It gives us a chance first to notice and then to connect the kinds of details noticed—and how. Only then, after we've have had a chance to make observations and establish relationships among them, might we begin making inferences and drawing provisional interpretations about the poem.

And whether different readers focus on the unrealized nature of individual dreams or the deferral of social dreams of groups of people, all readers need to consider the implications of the poem's final line with its metaphor of explosion. What kind(s) of explosion, we might ask? And with what consequences?

If "Dream Deferred [Harlem 2]" is constructed almost exclusively of questions, the following poem, "The Art of Failing," includes only assertions. The poem *says* and *does*, *shows* and *suggests* in ways that are discernibly different from the strategies of Hughes's poem.

Robert DiYanni

The Art of Failing

The art of failing isn't hard to master.
Just draft your project with the aim to fail.
Then fail better and fail faster. Skirt disaster.

Success is fine, but no match for failing well.
Fail better, fail faster, and be smart.
The art of failing isn't hard to master.

So Samuel Beckett says about his art.
Perfection eludes us at every turn.
So fail better and smarter to forestall disaster.

You won't get anything right from the start.
Don't try. Forgive yourself; make a mess.
Avoid duress. Fail smarter to prevent disaster.

Failure, not success, is what you're after.
That's where the surprises lurk—the discoveries.
The art of failing isn't hard to master.

Court failure. Don't fear its painful pleasure.
Follow missteps—embrace them, take their measure.
The art of failing you can learn to master.
Fail better, smarter, faster. Avert disaster.

Besides its use of the declarative mode, one of the first things we notice about "The Art of Failing" is its two repeating lines, the first and third of the poem (though these lines vary slightly in their repetitions as the poem progresses). Along with this syntactic

repetition we also hear the echo of rhyme repeating throughout the poem, with the first and third lines of each three-line stanza rhyming with each other until the final stanza. The second line of each stanza rhymes with every other second line, including the second line of the slightly longer last stanza.

In short, we notice the poem's form, that of the villanelle, a nineteen-line poem with the opening line repeating in alternate stanzas as the last line of stanzas 2, 4, and 6 (though in this final stanza it is the third line of four). A villanelle's third line repeats in similar fashion, alternating among the odd-numbered stanzas before closing the poem off in its concluding line in slightly varied form.

The tone of "The Art of Failing" is far less urgent than that of Hughes's "Dream Deferred [Harlem 2]." Its statements explain and advise. They make assertions about how failing is an art that can be learned, and that learning the art of failure isn't all that difficult. (Early in the poem, however, we might wonder whether the speaker is being serious.) The reader is advised to embrace failure, to "court" it, even. The poem's advice runs counter to normal expectations and to conventional wisdom. Most people try to avoid failure, which can be costly both financially and emotionally, although there are those who believe that we can all learn from failure.

"The Art of Failing," however, takes this valuing of failure to another level. It's not just that we can learn from failure, the poem suggests; it's more that we should seek multiple opportunities and ways to fail. Through frequent practice with failure we can learn to fail "better" and "smarter." That seems to be the speaker's recommendation; it's what the poem appears to advise.

"The Art of Failing" is ironic in reversing our expectations about failure. It's also ironic in suggesting that through embracing failure we can "forestall disaster," which normally we would do by avoiding failure at all costs. Whether it's also, simultaneously, ironic about its recommendation to fail often is left for the reader to decide. Some readers, for example, might agree that failure is valuable for the reasons the poem suggests. But they might resist the impulse to look for ways to fail.

Unlike Hughes's poem, which works, largely, through a series of comparisons—both similes and metaphors—"The Art of Failing" avoids them. It offers, instead, a series of admonitions: do this, don't do that; this is what you should seek; this is what you should value.

We also notice how the poem uses rhyme and repetition, how its informal tone plays up the value of failure in our lives. Exact rhymes and slant, or approximate, rhymes are abundant: "faster" and "disaster"; "smart," "art," and start"; "won't" and "don't"; "mess," "duress," and "success"; "after," "master," and "disaster"; "pleasure" and "measure," "skirt" and "avert." Finally, you likely noticed as well the heavy use of alliteration: "failing," "fail," "faster"; "fine," "failing," "fail," "fail," failing"; "fail," "forestall"; "forgive," "fail"; "failure," "failing"; "failure," "follow," "failing," "fail," "faster."

"The Art of Failing" takes pleasure in playing with all those rhymes and repetitions. While observing the "rules" of the villanelle, the poem entertains readers while simultaneously instructing them. Slowing down to enjoy the poem's verbal play increases our pleasure in reading it. The poem's rhymes and repeating sounds, words, and lines help us remember what it advises. That, we might surmise, is the poet's intention. What any reader, ultimately, makes of it, though, remains entirely the decision of that reader. And one thing we know for certain is that different readers will make different sense of this or any poem.

Conclusion

Postponing the question about a text's meaning through variations on it can broaden and deepen understanding of textual meaning(s). Coming at texts from different questioning directions allows for a wider range of interpretive possibilities than does insisting upon a text's meaning before we have a chance to hear what it says, notice what it does, see what it shows, and consider what it suggests. Doing those things enables us to analyze how it creates meaning. In addition, we question a text's ways of saying and doing, showing and suggesting—analyzing how a text means what it does—in relation

to its genre and rhetorical potentialities. And we also consider a text in relation to the contexts of its author's life and work, as well as the context of its milieu.

Using these questions and their affiliated approaches to textual analysis rewards any reader's efforts. Postponing the question of meaning to consider what a text says and does, shows and suggests—and how—sharpens critical insight while deepening interpretive understanding. Delaying the meaning question in these ways leads to a fuller, richer, and more pleasurable encounter with texts, especially with literary works.

If we accept this approach to reading literature and other serious works, why might we wish to engage with them? What's the payoff? we might ask. One answer among others proposed in the following chapters is that this deliberative way of reading aids in the search for truths that literature and other serious writing makes possible. Our primary reasons for reading are to acquire knowledge, deepen understanding, experience pleasure, and even, as we attain these ambitious goals, attain wisdom we might live by. Isn't that what we want from our reading, especially from our reading of literature?

Index