

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE READING LITERATURE

When you begin a work you should read not only silently to yourself but also aloud – the whole work if it is not too long. In addition to checking footnotes, look up words and references you do not know. You should be able to paraphrase the work so that you account for the important words and ideas. The following are some questions that you will find useful to ask when reading a work of literature. Although answers to the questions can most certainly be wrong, you will realize that such questions do not have neat “right” answers.

- Who is speaking? To whom? In private or in public? Who is speaking? To whom? In private or in public?
- What is the speaker’s attitude toward the matter he or she is relating?
- What does the writer think of the speaker?
- Does the speaker undergo any change or growth? Do any other characters?
- What is the effect of the way that the work begins? Of the way it ends?
- What are the principal recurring elements in the work?
- What kind of world (setting, society, cosmos) is portrayed or implied in the work?
- How does the work resemble other works you have read – both in this course and elsewhere? How does it significantly differ?
- In what ways is your paraphrase an inadequate restatement of the original?
- How is the way the work is written related to what is written about? The implications of the metaphors? The effect of meter, rhyme, alliteration?

The section headed “Poetic Forms and Literary Terminology” in volume I of the *Norton Anthology* (pp. 2584-2598) contains brief discussions of these and other critical terms you may encounter. For fuller accounts, see M.H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, and C. Hugh Holman. *A Hand book of Literary Terms*.