
What Is Literature? What Is It For?

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In answering the question, “What is literature?” it’s useful to ask what any piece of writing is intended to do, how it’s intended to function. Literature isn’t unqualifiedly “better” than other kinds of writing; it’s simply attempting to do more. (1) It’s meant *to convey information*, and (2) it’s meant *to entertain*. But scientific or technical writing also conveys information, and it does so in a far more systematic, accessible way. And non-literary fiction is obviously entertaining: That’s what it’s for. What

separates literature from these other kinds of texts is that (3) it attempts *to bring us inside a lived human experience* so that we can understand it. Further, (4) literature *does all of these things beautifully, with language* as accurate, as moving, and as rich as possible.

Read the following texts, considering for each what the author’s purpose is in writing. Ask how effectively each author achieves his or her purpose in light of this goal.

INCIDENT

A man murders a girl with whom he is in love.

AUTOPSY SURGEON’S REPORT

Death occurred from the effects of asphyxia, cerebral anemia, and shock. The victim’s hair was used for the constricting ligature. Local marks of the ligature were readily discernible: There was some abrasion and a slight ecchymosis in the skin. But I found no obvious lesions in the blood vessels of the neck.

Cyanosis of the head was very slight, and there were no pronounced hemorrhages in the galea of the scalp. I would judge that very great compression of the arteries was effected almost immediately, with compression of the arteries as well as of the veins, and that the superior laryngeal nerve was traumatized with the effect of throwing the victim into profound shock....

The lungs revealed cyanosis, congestion, overaeration, and subpleural petechial hemorrhages....

NEWSPAPER ACCOUNT

Local Girl Found Slain by Rejected Lover

Miss Porphyria Blank, 21, daughter of Mr and Ms R.J. Blank, of El Cajon, was found strangled this morning in the cottage owned by John Doe, 25, who was apprehended on the scene of the crime by officers Bailey and Hodge. Doe was found holding the body in his arms and appeared to be in a stupor, his only reply being, “I killed her because I loved her.”

According to members of the Blank family, Doe had paid attentions to the younger Ms Blank for the last several months, though it was strenuously denied that his regard for her was returned. Ms Blank’s engagement to Mr Roger Weston was announced last month. Mr Weston couldn’t be reached for a statement. The elder Ms Blank was prostrated by the news of her daughter’s death.

The slain girl disappeared last evening at approximately 11:00 from a dinner party given at her parents’ home in honor of the approaching wedding. The family became alarmed when it was discovered that she was not in her room, and instituted a search for her about midnight. The police, who were promptly notified, in the course of their search knocked at Mr Doe’s cottage, a building some quarter of a mile from the Blank mansion, at five in the morning. Receiving no answer, they forced the door and discovered Doe sitting with the dead girl in his lap. She had apparently been strangled; Dr AP Reynolds, autopsy surgeon for San Diego County, stated that, from the condition of the body, death must have occurred at about midnight.

Doe, who has been charged with murder, could give no coherent account of what happened.

NON-LITERARY FICTION

not by Danielle Steele—but almost...

The dead girl, beautiful and peaceful in death, her scarlet lips slightly parted as though whispering a caress to her lover, her blue eyes gentle and unquestioning as a baby’s, lay in the murderer’s arms like a child who has been rocked to sleep. Her golden hair falling in profusion about her shoulders all but concealed the cruel welt of red about her throat. The murderer, clutching his still burden to him, like a mother holding an infant, appeared dazed. As the police came in, he rose to meet them, still carrying his precious burden in his arms. The officers almost had to force him to relinquish her.

He couldn’t answer questions—could merely clutch the closer to his breast all that remained of the girl he loved better than life and mutter, “I loved her, I loved her,” like a man in a dream. A few hours later, when I saw him in the sordid surroundings of the downtown police station, so different from the cozy cottage which had been the abode of a tragic love, he was still dry-eyed, though his face wore a ghastly pallor. But when I tried to question him, I became aware of the terrific strain under which he suffered, and he showed all the signs of a man on the verge of hysteria. When I tried to draw from him the motive for the pitiful tragedy, he could only reply, his pale boyish face like a mask: “I killed her, but God didn’t say a word... a word.”

At last he managed pitifully to say: “I killed her so that she would be mine alone for always!”

And this is the irony of fate! The very greatness of his love made him strangle her. Separated as they were by wealth, social position, and all that that implies, it was only in death that they could be united. Who are we to pass judgment on such a love?

LITERATURE

Porphyria’s Lover

by Robert Browning

The rain set early in tonight,

The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,

And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.

When glided in Porphyria; straight

She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate

Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,

And laid her soiled gloves by, untied

Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me—she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dis sever,
And give herself to me forever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could tonight's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
for love of her, and all in vain:
So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found

A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before,
Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled.
And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word!