

Reasons for Reading and Studying Literature

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How do readers in an introductory course in English literature at the University of Alberta explain their own reading proclivities? What reasons do they provide for the satisfaction taken in reading different types of text? How are their preferences for particular types of text related to their reasons for deciding to study literature? We are beginning to obtain answers to these questions, thanks to a questionnaire designed by Achim Barsch, and used by him and a group led by Sonia Zyngier in Brazil. Our interest in this work led us to adapt the questionnaire for the Canadian context, thus we now have findings from three different countries. In this paper we introduce some of our own findings.

A preliminary report on his research was given by Barsch at the last IGEL conference in Toronto two years ago. He asked: who are the students of literature who are commonly the participants in our empirical studies? Why do they go to university? Why do they choose to study literature? What do they believe to be the topic of literary studies? How do they view literature? He administered a questionnaire to first year university students in Germany (106 responses). Questions were asked about what types of texts students read most often, but without imposing preconceptions about literature on the students (to avoid the privileging of “literary” texts: Barsch, 1996); also sought were comparisons between different media, the difference between private reading and reading for study, etc. Items exploring reasons for reading were chosen in accord with Schmidt’s three functions: hedonistic (e.g., entertainment), cognitive (gaining new information), and social-moral questions (insight into others). Barsch found that the value of literary reading included the use of imagination, readers’ appreciation of stylistic features, the appropriateness of literature for the individuality of reader, and its value for coping with problems as well as for relaxation and entertainment. A clear distinction between literary and non-literary texts emerged when comparing reasons for reading for study. The most

important motive for study was liking to read, followed by an interest in literature, its treatment of philosophical questions, etc., and an interest in literary history. In contrast, non-literary texts were seen to offer information, to represent what could happen in reality, to illuminate ideological questions, and to contribute to one's general education. We will pursue some of these issues in our own study with Canadian students.

First we should describe the questionnaire in more detail. The questionnaire combines open and closed questions, in the following sections:

- I. Reasons for studying literature (12 items: e.g., interest in writing; because I am fond of reading)
- II. Expectations from studying literature
- III-IV. Education background
- V. Types of text read frequently (here the student enters three genres, then rates each genre on 18 criteria)
- VI. Satisfactions of literature compared with other media
- VII. What stimulates the reader to read a text
- IX. Time spent on each media type
- X. Difference between private reading and reading for study
- XI. Content of private reading (15 genres that can be endorsed)
- XII. Whether reading often is important
- XV. Reading in secondary school
- XVI-XVII. Private reading undertaken or planned
- XVIII-XIX. Current university studies and year

We administered the questionnaire to 120 first year students of English registered in a course that was chosen by those expecting to pursue further studies in English literature. Despite this, responses to open questions about the status and value of literature varied considerably. Some saw nothing distinctive about literary reading (half of the readers); others claimed, among other features, that it gave a new perspective on one's life, inspires the imagination, offers alternative viewpoints, or moves the emotions. When

asked if it was important to reading often, most agreed but gave a wide range of reasons, from its value in training mental ability, to its moral effects, or its role in explaining to us what we think or feel. When asked why they were studying literature, however, most students gave no reply (101 out of 120), and among those who did answer, 8 out of 19 gave utilitarian answers (e.g., that English is a prerequisite for their other studies); our analysis of their answers elsewhere will be more suggestive on this question. Asked if there was a difference between reading privately and reading for study, 100 out of 120 readers acknowledged a difference; while some said that reading for study was a chore, for many the main difference lay in the mode of attention demanded by study reading (sitting up at a desk, taking notes).

In the main part of this report we focus on the closed questions answered by ratings, the different text genres and the reasons students endorse for reading them, and briefly examine some relationships between this questionnaire and the Literary Response Questionnaire (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) that was completed by the same students.

Table 1. Text types derived from readers' genres

11 literary fiction (includes children's fiction & fairy tales) 12 novels 13 short stories 14 drama 15 poetry	21 popular fiction (we generally used this when 'fiction' was described, depending on what the other 2 field answers were) 22 romances 23 mystery/detective 24 horror/adventure 25 fantasy (including when fantasy/sci-fi was identified as one genre) 26 legal thrillers	31 history 32 historical fiction 33 autobiography / biography 34 historical documentary
41 social sciences 42 social (e.g., political) fiction 43 social documentary (unused) 44 crime	51 technical / scientific texts 52 science fiction (retained when sci-fi was not listed as one genre with fantasy) 53 scientific documentary (unused)	61 religious texts
71 magazine / newspapers	81 philosophy / critical theory (analytic & critical thinking texts)	91 other (non-fiction / porn /

	humour)
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We began by classifying the texts that our readers like to read most frequently (V[a,b,c]) into 26 specific categories (see Table 1).

Profiles of the mean ratings of the reasons given for reading each category of texts (q14-31, q32-49, q51-68) were subjected to cluster analysis to identify more inclusive categories of similarly rated texts. The nine categories of texts this produced were compared using one-way analyses of variance (with post hoc LSD assessment of category pair differences), in order to elicit the most important reasons for reading assigned by our readers. In the following table we focus on the four main categories that emerged, with a summary of the reasons for reading them:

Table 2. Text types following analysis.

Text type and no. readers	Text genres	Reasons for reading
Popular fantasy (33)	romances, science fiction, and horror/adventure stories	non reality, to relax, no challenge, not information, not educational
Popular narrative (54)	short stories and mystery/detective stories	information, some challenge, educational
Cultural accounts (50)	biography, historical fiction, magazines, newspapers, and social science	insight into others, reality, information
Literary fiction (74)	novels, drama, and poetry, children's fiction	style, some reality, some insight, imaginative, challenging, educational
Other – 5 types (61)	history texts, religious texts, analytic / critical texts, scientific / technical, “other”	

Popular Fantasy. The clearest differentiation from all other text categories is provided by popular fantasy. These texts are read independently of any apparent conviction about their “reality”: they are most frequently read “because this reading has nothing to do with reality” (q28, q46, q63) and they are least often read “because the described things could have happened in reality” (q20, q38, q57). Correspondingly, they

are least often read “in order to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world” (q31, q49, q68) and “because I can get new information” (q26, q 44, q63). Also, relaxation, rather than personal benefit, is the reward of reading popular fantasies: they are most frequently read “to relax” (q15, q33, q52) and least often “because I want to be able to join in the conversation about this reading” (q29, q47, q66), “because I am challenged intellectually” (q30, q48, q67), “because it is important for my all-around education” (q17, q35, q54), and because it adds to my personal development” (q27, q45, q64). This profile of responses suggests that popular fantasy is read to provide relief from tension; little intellectual challenge or gain in understanding is expected.

Popular Narrative. Despite the seemingly anomalous inclusion of short stories as a form of popular narrative, several findings suggest that the rationale for reading popular narrative differs from that for reading either popular fantasy or literary texts. First, less often than literary texts and more often than popular fantasy, popular narrative is read “because I can get new information” (q26, q44, q63) and “to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world” (q31, q49, q68). Second, less often than literary texts but more often than popular fantasy, popular narrative is read “because I am challenged intellectually” (q30, q48, q67) and “because it is important for my all-round education” (q17, q35, q54). These responses suggest that popular narrative is midway between popular fantasy and literary texts in the intellectual challenge or gain expected from reading it.

Cultural Accounts. Among the four largest categories of text, cultural accounts are most frequently read “to gain insight into thoughts and actions of other people” (q14, q32, q51), although in the religiously active province of Alberta, Canada, religious texts are just as frequently read for this reason. Similarly, more often than popular fantasy, popular narrative, and literary texts, cultural accounts are read “because they described things could have happened in reality” (q20, q38, q57) and “because I can get new information” (q26, q44, q63). More often than popular fantasy and popular narrative, and as often as literary texts, cultural accounts were read “to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world” (q31, q49, q68). These motives for reading, especially the

emphasis on information and realism, are compatible with the inclusion of social science, history, and current events media within this text category.

Literary Texts. Literary texts, perhaps not surprisingly, are differentiated from popular fantasy, popular narrative, and cultural accounts in that they are read “because I am fond of the style of language” (q25, q43, q62). Beyond such care for language, literary texts (like popular narrative) are read more often than popular fantasy, but less often than cultural accounts, “because the described things could have happened in reality” (q20, q38, q57). Conversely, literary texts (again, like popular narrative) are read less often than popular fantasy, but more often than cultural accounts, “because this reading has nothing to do with reality” (q28, q46, q65).

This modest sense of reality, somewhere between the assuring convictions derived from documentary texts (e.g., magazines) and the implausibilities found in fantastical ones, apparently supports the sense that literary texts can be read for insight. More often than popular fantasy, as often as popular narrative, but less often than cultural accounts, readers turn to literary texts “to gain insight into thoughts and actions of other people” (q14, q32, q51). And, there is something holistic about this insight: more often than popular fantasy and popular narrative, and as often as cultural accounts, readers read literary texts “to deal with questions concerning the conception of the world” (q31, q49, q68). Finally, there is something instructive about literary insights: more often than popular fantasy and popular narrative, although less often than cultural accounts, readers read literary texts “because I can get new information” (q26, q44, q63).

But the primary vehicle for literary insight is its capacity to captivate: more often than popular narrative and cultural accounts, and as often as popular fantasy, literary texts are read “because I like to be captivated by texts” (q19, q37, q56). Similarly, more often than cultural accounts, and as often as popular fantasy and popular narrative, literary texts are read “because I can use my imagination” (q24, q42, q61). This form of involvement is expected to be intellectually bracing: more often than each of the other three general text categories—and as often as history texts, religious texts, and analytic/critical texts—

literary texts are read “because I am challenged intellectually” (q30, q48, q67) and “because it is important for my all-round education” (q17, q35, q54).

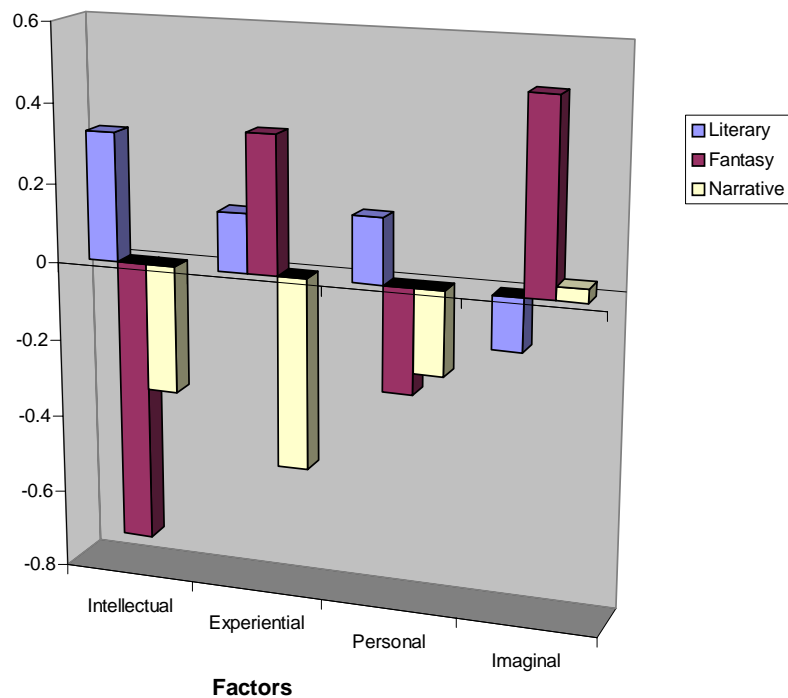
We also examined more closely the reasons given for reading literary texts, since readers of any particular type of text differ among themselves. To explore these individual differences, while controlling for text category, we conducted a factor analysis of the reasons given for reading literary texts. This analysis was restricted to the subset of 74 readers indicating (V[a,b,c]) that literary texts were among those that they like to read most frequently. Their ratings (or, in some cases, their mean ratings) of the reasons given for reading literary texts (q14-31, q32-49, q51-68) were subjected to factor analysis (Principal Components, Varimax rotation) to identify the underlying dimensionality of their rationale for reading. Although we extracted six factors, we examined closely only the first three, which accounted for 27%, 16%, and 9% of the total variance, respectively (see Table 3). The other three factors were less important, if not trivial, sources of variation among these readers. Factor loadings greater than .450 are indicated below for each of the first three factors.

Table 3. Factor Analysis of Reasons for Reading Literary Texts

Questionnaire Item	Factor I	Factor II	Factor III
To entertain myself (q22)	.902		
Because I can use my imagination (q24)	.843		
To relax (q15)	.810		
Because I like to be captivated by texts (q19)	.805		
Because I can identify with the description (q16)	.550		
Because it is important for my all-round education (q17)		.862	
Because it adds to my personal development (q27)		.815	
Because I want to be able to join in the conversation about this reading (q29)		.611	
Because I can deal with problems in my mind without having direct consequences for myself (q23)			.830
Because I get help for my personal problems (q18)			.810

Factor I reflects concern with entertainment, relaxation, and imaginative involvement. Factor II reflects concern with “all-round” educational and personal development. Factor III reflects concern with the imaginal address of personal problems.

A similar analysis of the other categories led us to examine the differences across the three main categories of text: literary texts, popular fantasy, and popular narrative. We extracted four main factors. The text types differ from each other significantly on several of these factors, as shown in the following figure:



Post-hoc (LSD) comparisons between groups indicate that, compared to readers choosing either popular fantasy or popular narrative, those readers choosing literary texts did so because they expected intellectual understanding; and compared with popular narrative, literary texts were seen to offer experiential involvement and to facilitate educational and personal development.

Predicting Literary Reading

Having established these parameters, our next objective was to predict the preference for and the reasons for preferring literary reading. First, using multivariate analysis of variance, we compared readers who chose literary texts (at least once) with those who did not ($V[a,b,c]$). We compared these participants' answers to a series of questions about their reasons for studying literature (12 items in section I). The overall difference between the two groups was statistically reliable, $F(12,101) = 2.405$, $p < .009$. The items that most clearly differentiated these readers were (1) their interest in literature in general; (2) their interest in how text meaning is related to its literary context; (3) their interest in the history of literature; and (4) their fondness for reading.

However, we were also interested in understanding how they presented their reasons for preferring literature. So, we inserted the same set of 12 questions into a linear regression model to predict each of the three factors reported in Table 4 (below). First, the reasons for studying literature (q1-12) that reliably predicted readers' concern with entertainment, relaxation, and imaginative involvement (Factor I, Table 3) were (1) whether friends, teachers, and parents were role models (q5); (2) whether readers were interested in the literary processing of psychological, philosophical, or political questions (q9); and (3) whether they were fond of reading (q10). Second, the reasons for studying literature that reliably predicted readers' concern with "all-round" educational and personal development (Factor II, Table 3) were (1) whether they studied literature to get a good education (q4) and (2) whether they were interested in writing (q7). Third, the reasons for studying literature that reliably predicted readers' concern with imaginal resolution of personal problems (Factor III, Table 3) were (1) whether they were interested in literature in general (q2); (2) whether friends, teachers, parents were role models (q5); and (3) whether they liked to deal with language structures and grammar (q11).

Table 4. Comparisons Of Readers Who Do and Do Not Like To Read Literary Texts

Questionnaire item	Univariate F value	p value
Interested in the history of literature (q1)	12.176	.001
Interested in literature in general (q2)	19.151	.000
To increase communicative abilities (q3)	5.026	.027
To get a rounded education (q4)	3.850	.052
Friends, teachers, parents were role models (q5)	5.992	.016
Did not get a place in the discipline I wanted to study first (q6)	.709	.402
Interested in writing (q7)	2.775	.099
Because of interests going beyond the meaning of texts but related to their literary contexts (q8)	13.820	.000
Interested in the literary processing of psychological, philosophical or political questions (q9)	5.589	.020
Because I am fond of reading (q10)	10.556	.002
Because I like to deal with language structures and grammar (q11)	1.129	.290
Because of good job prospects outside university (q12)	.793	.375

Cross-validation with LRQ

Finally, additional evidence for our readers' approach to reading is provided by their answers to a second questionnaire. We examined correlations between scales on the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ; Miall & Kuiken, 1995) and the sources of individual variation among readers (as identified in the factor analyses). We observed, for example, that the Leisure Escape scale from the LRQ consistently correlated with those factors that reflect reading for entertainment and relaxation, but this was true for all three of the main text types: literary texts, popular fantasy, and popular narrative. This suggests that the Leisure Escape scale from the LRQ predicts reading for the purposes of entertainment and relaxation, regardless of the type of text. The same was true of the Imagery Vividness scale and the Empathy scale, which also correlated with the entertainment and relaxation factors.

But readers' expectations of imaginal involvement in the experience of reading literary texts also have an epistemic aspect. The correlation between the Insight scale

from the LRQ and reported reading of literary texts for entertainment and relaxation was .409, $p < .001$ (Factor I, readers of literary texts), although this correlation was not significant for either popular fantasy ($r = .095$) or popular narrative ($r = .200$). This pattern of correlations, plus examination of the specific LRQ Insight scale items (e.g., “Reading literature makes me sensitive to aspects of my life that I usually ignore”) suggest that the Insight scale reflects an “interiority” in understanding that is expected through the experience of reading literary texts but not through the experience of reading either popular fantasy or popular narrative.

In conclusion, perhaps the most interesting finding from the questionnaire study is how students in Canada think about literature. While half made no distinction between literature and other kinds of reading, it is clear that a significant number believe that literature offers something unique: it involves more profound emotions, and provides insight into the self or others of a kind not available from other reading. “Much of the media,” one student [121] said, “is sensationalized, biased and doesn't stimulate the intellect,” whereas “Literary texts inspire the imagination and delve deeper into its characters' psyche and thoughts.” And unlike other texts, said another student [1007], “Literary texts also play with language and writing.” That a number of students speak in these terms about literature suggests why so few responded to the question requesting their reasons for studying literature. Since, among the small number who did reply, most gave utilitarian answers (e.g., English was a prerequisite, they intend to become a teacher), perhaps the question made no sense to the majority of the students: reading literature is an end in itself. This gives us some hope that, despite the attractions of other, newer media, literary reading remains an activity of choice with some distinctive satisfactions.