In Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo, the main character, is a tragic hero.

So what? Who cares?

Why does this typical way of opening an essay on a literary work leave readers wondering, “Why are you telling me this?” Because, in our view, such statements leave it unclear who would say otherwise. Would anyone deny that the main character of Achebe’s novel is a tragic hero? Is there some other view of the subject that this writer is responding to? Since no such alternative interpretation is indicated, the reader thinks, “OK, Okonkwo is a tragic hero—as opposed to what?”

Now compare this opening with another possible one:

Several members of our class have argued that Okonkwo, the main character of *Things Fall Apart*, is a hateful villain. My own view, however, is that, while it is true that Okonkwo commits villainous acts, he is ultimately a tragic hero—a flawed but ultimately sympathetic figure.

We hope you agree that the second version, which responds to what someone else says about Okonkwo, makes for more
Entering Conversations about Literature

engaging writing than the first. Since the first version fails to present itself as a response to any alternative view of its subject, it comes at readers out of the blue, leaving them wondering why it needs to be said at all.

As we stress in this book, it is the views of others and our desire to respond to these views that gives our writing its underlying motivation and helps readers see why what we say matters, why others should care, and why we need to say it in the first place. In this chapter we suggest that this same principle applies to writing about literature. Literary critics, after all, don’t make assertions about literary works out of the blue. Rather, they contribute to discussions and debates about the meaning and significance of literary works, some of which may continue for years and even centuries.

Indeed, this commitment to discussion animates most literature courses, in which students discuss and debate assigned works in class before writing papers about them. The premise is that engaging with classmates and teachers enables us to make discoveries about the work that we might not arrive at in simply reading the work alone.

We suggest that you think of writing about literature as a natural extension of such in-class discussions, listening carefully to others and using what they say to set up and motivate what you have to say.

START WITH WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING

But in writing about literature, where do views to respond to—“they says”—come from? Many sources. Published literary criticism is perhaps the most obvious:
FIFTEEN  "ON CLOSER EXAMINATION"

- Critic X complains that Author Y’s story is compromised by his ________ perspective. While there’s some truth to this critique, I argue that Critic X overlooks ________.

- According to Critic A, novel X suggests ________. I agree, but would add that ________.

But the view that you respond to in writing about literature can be far closer to home than published literary criticism. As our opening example illustrates, it can be something said about the literary work by a classmate or teacher:

- Several members of our class have suggested that the final message of play X is ________. I agree up to a point, but I still think that ________.

Another tactic is to start with something you yourself thought about the work that on second thought you now want to revise:

- On first reading play Z, I thought it was an uncritical celebration of ________. After rereading the play and discussing it in class, however, I see that it is more critical of ________ than I originally thought.

You can even respond to something that hasn’t actually been said about the work, but might hypothetically be said:

- It might be said that poem Y is chiefly about ________. But the problem with this reading, in my view, is ________.

- Though religious readers might be tempted to analyze poem X as a parable about ________, a closer examination suggests that the poem is in fact ________.
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Sometimes, the “they say” that you respond to in writing about a literary work can be found in the work itself, as distinct from what some critic or other reader has said about the work. Much great literary criticism responds directly to the literary work, summarizing some aspect of the work’s form or content and then assessing it, in much the same way you can do in response to a persuasive essay:

- Ultimately, as I read it, The Scarlet Letter seems to say __________. I have trouble accepting this proposition, however, on the grounds that __________.

One of the more powerful ways of responding to a literary work is to address any contradictions or inconsistencies:

- At the beginning of the poem, we encounter the generalization, seemingly introducing the poem’s message, that “________.” But this statement is then contradicted by the suggestion made later in the poem that “________.” This opens up a significant inconsistency in the text: is it suggesting __________ or, on the contrary, __________?

- At several places in novel X, Author Y leads us to understand that the story’s central point is that __________. Yet elsewhere the text suggests __________, indicating that Y may be ambivalent on this issue.

If you review the above templates, you’ll notice that each does what a good discussion, lecture, or essay does: it makes an argument about some aspect of a work that can be interpreted in various ways. Instead of just making a claim about the work in isolation—character X is a tragic hero; sonnet Y is about the loss of a loved one—these templates put one claim
as a response to another, making clear what motivated the argument to begin with. They thus act as conversation starters that can invite or even provoke other readers to respond with their own interpretations and judgments.

**FIGURING OUT WHAT A LITERARY WORK “MEANS”**

In order to enter conversations and debates about literature, you need to meet the time-honored challenge of being able to read and make sense of literary works, understanding and analyzing what the text says. On the one hand, like the types of persuasive essays we focus on throughout this book, literary works make arguments their authors want to convey, things they are for and against, ideas they want to endorse or condemn. On the other hand, discovering “the argument” of a literary work—what it’s “saying”—can be a special challenge because, unlike persuasive essays, literary works usually do not spell out their arguments explicitly. Though poets, novelists, and playwrights may have the same level of conviction as persuasive writers, rarely do they step out from behind the pages of their texts and say, “Okay, folks, this is what it all means. What I’m trying to say in a nutshell is __________.” That is, since literary texts do not include an explicit thesis statement identifying their main point, it’s left up to us as readers to figure it out.

Because literary works tend to avoid such explicitness, their meanings often need to be teased out from the clues they provide: from the dialogue between characters, the plot, the imagery and symbolism, and the kind of language the author uses. In fact, it is this absence of overt argument that makes literature so endlessly debatable—and explains why scholars and critics
argue so much about what literary works mean in ways similar to the classroom discussions that you have likely participated in as a student.

The Elusive Literary Author

Indeed, not even the use of the first person “I” in a literary work is an indication that you have located the author's own position or stance, as it usually is in an essay. When David Zinczenko, for example, in his essay “Don’t Blame the Eater” (pp. 241–43) writes “I tend to sympathize with these portly fast-food patrons” who file lawsuits against the fast food industry, we can be confident that the “I” is Zinczenko himself, and that the position he expresses is his own and informs everything else in his essay. But we cannot assume that the “I” who addresses us in a work of fiction or poetry is necessarily the author, for he or she is a fictional character—and one who may be unreliable and untrustworthy.

Take, for example, the first sentence of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Cask of Amontillado”:

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge.

As soon becomes clear in the story, the “I” who speaks as the narrator here is not Poe himself but an insanely vengeful murderer whose words must be seen through to get at the point of Poe’s story. Instead of a readily identifiable position, literary works often present the perspectives of a number of different characters and leave it to readers to determine which if any speaks for the author. Thus when we encounter the seemingly eloquent lines in Hamlet, “To thine own self be true / And thou shalt not be false to any man,” we can’t assume, as we might if we
encountered this statement in an essay, that it represents the author’s own view. For these words are uttered by Polonius, a character whom Shakespeare presents as a tedious, cliché-spouting bore—not someone he leads us to trust. After all, part of Hamlet’s problem is that it’s not clear to him what being “true” to his own self would require him to do.

This elusive quality of literary texts helps explain why some of our students complain about the challenge of finding the “hidden meaning,” as they sometimes call it, let alone summarizing that meaning in the way assignments often require. Sure, some students say, they enjoy reading literature for pleasure. But analyzing literature in school for its “meaning” or “symbolism”—that’s another matter. Some even say that the requirement that they hunt for meanings and symbols robs literature of its fun.

In fact, as most students come to recognize, analyzing meanings, symbols, and other elements should enhance rather than stifle the pleasure we get from reading literature. But it can indeed be hard to figure out what literary works mean. How do we determine the point of a story or poem when the author, unlike an essayist like Zinczenko, does not tell us explicitly what he or she is trying to say? How do you go from a fictional event or poetic image (an insane man committing murder, two roads that diverge in the woods) or from a dialogue between fictional characters (“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”) to what these events, images, or lines of dialogue mean?

Look for Conflict in the Work

There is no simple recipe for figuring out what a literary work means, but one tactic that seems to help our own students is to look for the conflict or debate in the literary work itself and
then ask what the text is leading us to think about that conflict. Asking these questions—what is the conflict in the work and which side, if any, should we favor?—will help you think about and formulate a position on what the work means. And since such claims are often ones that literary scholars argue about, thinking about the conflict in a literary work will often lead you to discussions and debates about the work that you can then respond to in your writing. Because literary authors don’t tell us explicitly what the text means, it’s always going to be arguable—and your task in writing about a literary work is to argue for what you think it means. Here are two templates to help get you started responding to other interpretations:

- It might be argued that in the clash between character X and Y in play Z, the author wants us to favor character Y, since she is presented as the play’s heroine. I contend, however, that ________.

- Several critics seem to assume that poem X endorses the values of discipline and rationality represented by the image of ________ over those of play and emotion represented by the image of ________. I agree, but with the following caveat: that the poem ultimately sees both values as equally important and even suggests that ideally they should complement one another.

This tactic of looking for the conflicts in literary works is part of a long tradition of critical thought that sees conflict as central to literature. In ancient Greece, Aristotle argued that conflict between characters or forces underlies the plots of tragic dramas such as Oedipus. Indeed, the ancient Greek word agon, which means antagonism, conflict, or debate, leaves its traces in the term “protagonist,” the hero or leading character of a narrative...
work who comes into conflict with other characters or with the fates. And Plato noted the pervasiveness of conflict in literature when he banished poets from his ideal community on the grounds that their works depict endless conflict and division.

This emphasis on the centrality of conflict in literature has been echoed by modern theorists like the New Critics of the 1940s and 50s, who focused on such tensions and paradoxes as good and evil or innocence and experience—and more recently by poststructuralists and political theorists who see literature, like society, as saturated by such polarities as male/female, gay/straight, white/black, and so on. Writers today continue to recognize conflict as the engine of good storytelling. As the Hollywood screenwriter Robert McKee puts it, “Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict.”

Building on this idea that conflict is central to literature, we suggest the following four questions to help you understand and formulate your own position on any literary work:

1. What is the central conflict?
2. Which side—if any—does the text seem to favor?
3. What’s your evidence? How might others interpret the evidence differently?
4. What’s your opinion of the text?

WHAT IS THE CENTRAL CONFLICT?

Conflicts tend to manifest themselves in different ways in different literary genres. In works that take a narrative or story form (novels, short stories, and plays), the central conflict will often be represented in an actual debate between characters. These debates between characters will often reflect larger questions and debates in the society or historical era in which they
were written, over such issues as the responsibility of rulers, the consequences of capitalism and consumerism, or the struggle for gender equality. Sometimes these debates will be located within an individual character, appearing as a struggle in someone caught between conflicting or incompatible choices. Whatever form they may take, these debates can provide you with points of entry into the issues raised by the work, its historical context, and its author’s vision of the world.

One narrative work that lends itself to such an approach is Flannery O’Connor’s 1961 short story “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” which is reprinted on pp. 272–91. The story presents a running debate between a mother and her son Julian about the civil rights movement for racial equality that had erupted in the American South at the time the story was written, with Julian defending the outlook of this movement and his mother defending the South’s traditional racial hierarchy. The story raises the debatable question of which character we should side with: Julian, his mother, both, or neither?

WHICH SIDE—IF ANY—DOES THE TEXT SEEM TO FAVOR?

When we teach this story, most of our students first assume the story sides with Julian’s outlook, which to them as Northern, urban college students in the twenty-first century seems the obviously enlightened position. Who, after all, could fail to see that the mother’s views are backward and racist? As our class discussions unfold, however, most students come to reject this view as a misreading, one based more on their own views than on what’s in the text. Sooner or later, someone points out that at several points Julian is presented in highly critical ways—and
that his apparently progressive sympathy for racial integration rests on arid intellectual abstractions and a hypocritical lack of self-knowledge, in contrast with his mother’s heartfelt loyalty to her roots. Eventually another possible interpretation surfaces, that both characters suffer from a common malady, that they’re living in a mental bubble that keeps them from being able to see themselves as they really are.

The writing assignment we often give builds on this class discussion by offering students the following template for thinking about which character, if any, the text leads them to favor:

- Some might argue that when it comes to the conflict between Julian and his mother over __________, our sympathies should lie with __________. My own view is that __________.

WHAT’S YOUR EVIDENCE?

In entering the types of discussions and debates modeled by the above template, how do you determine where your “sympathies should lie”? More generally, how do you arrive at and justify an interpretation of what a literary text says?

The answer lies in the evidence provided by the work: its images, dialogue, plot, historical references, tone, stylistic details, and so forth.

It is important to remember, however, that evidence is not set in stone. Students sometimes assume that there exists some fixed code that unlocks the meaning of literary works, symbols, images, and other evidence. A character dies? This must mean that he or she is being condemned. A stairway appears? A symbol for upward mobility. A garden? Must be something sexual.
But evidence itself is open to interpretation and thus to debate. The mother’s death in O’Connor’s story, for instance, *could* be seen as evidence that we are supposed to disapprove of her as someone whose racial views are regressive and on the way out. On the other hand, her death may instead be evidence that she is to be seen as a heroic martyr too good for this cruel, harsh world. What a character’s death means, then, depends—on how he or she is treated in the work, positively or negatively, which in turn may be subject to debate.

As we’ve repeatedly emphasized in this book, others will often disagree with you and may even use the same evidence you do to support interpretations that are contrary to your own. Like other objects of study, literary works are like the famous ambiguous drawing that can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit, depending how one views it.

Since the same piece of evidence in a literary work will often support differing, even opposing interpretations, you need to argue for what you think the evidence shows—and to acknowledge that others may read that evidence differently.
In writing about literature, then, you need to show that the evidence you are citing supports your interpretation and to anticipate other alternative ones:

- Although some might read the metaphor of ________ in this poem as evidence that, for Author X, modern technology undermines community traditions and values, I see it as ________.

To present evidence in such a “they say / I say” way, you need to be alert for how others may read the work differently than you—and even use this very same evidence in support of an opposing interpretation:

- Some might claim that evidence X suggests ________, but I argue that, on the contrary, it suggests ________.

- I agree with my classmate ________ that the image of ________ in novel Y is evidence of childhood innocence that has been lost. Unlike ________, however, I think this loss of innocence is to be read not as a tragic event but as a necessary, even helpful, stage in human development.

Are Some Interpretations Simply Wrong?

No matter how flexible and open to debate evidence might be, not all interpretations we arrive at using that evidence are equally valid. And some interpretations are simply unsupported by that evidence. Let us illustrate.

As we noted earlier, some of our students first favored Julian over his mother. One student, let us call her Nancy, cited as evidence a passage early in the story in which Julian is compared to Saint Sebastian, a Christian martyr who is said to have exhibited exceptional faith under extreme suffering and
persecution. As the mother stood preparing for Julian to take her to her weekly swimming class, Julian is described as standing “pinned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him.”

Thinking this passage proves that Julian is the more sympathetic character, Nancy pointed to other evidence as well, including the following passage:

[Julian] was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for [his mother] as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother. (412)

Citing passages like this in her essay, Nancy concluded: “Julian represents the future of society, a nonracist and an educated thinker.”

After rereading the story, however, and hearing other students’ views, Nancy came to realize that the passages she had cited—comparing Julian to a saint, suggesting that he is racially progressive, and that he is “free of” his mother and “objective” about her—were all intended ironically. Julian congratulates himself for being saintlike, free of prejudice, and objective, but the story ultimately implies that he deludes himself.

How did the supporters of the ironic reading convince Nancy to revise her initial reading—to see it as wrong, unsupported by the evidence? First, they pointed to the glaring discrepancy between the situations and kinds of suffering endured by Julian and Saint Sebastian. Could anyone be serious, they asked, in comparing something as mundane as being forced to wait a few minutes to go to the YMCA to a martyr dying for his faith? No, they answered, and the jarring incongruity of the events being
compared, they argued, suggests that Julian, far from saintlike, is presented in this passage as an impatient, ungrateful, undutiful son. In addition, students pointed out that the gap between Julian's self-image as a progressive man of "complete objectivity" and "facts," "free of [his mother]" and the blubbering young man crying "Mama, Mama!" with "guilt and sorrow" at the end of the story suggests that Julian's righteous, high-minded image of himself is not to be taken at face value.

At this point you may be wondering, how can we say that some interpretations of literature must be ruled out as wrong? Isn't the great thing about interpreting literary works—in contrast to scientific and historical texts—that there are no wrong answers? Are we saying that there is one "correct" way to read a literary work—the one way the work itself tells us we "should" read it?

No, we aren't saying that there is only one way to read a literary work. If we believed there were, we would not be offering a method of literary analysis based on multiple interpretations and debate. But yes, acknowledging that literary interpretations are open to debate is not to say that a work can mean anything we want it to mean, as if all interpretations are equally good. In our view, and that of most literature teachers, some interpretations are better than others—more persuasively reasoned and better grounded in the evidence of the text.

If we maintain that all interpretations are equally valid, we risk confusing the perspective of the work's author with our own, as did the students who confused their own views on the civil rights movement of the 1960s with Flannery O'Connor's. Such misreadings are reminiscent of what we call "the closest cliché syndrome," where what's summarized is not the view the author actually expresses but a familiar cliché—or,
in O'Connor's case, a certain social belief—that the writer believes and mistakenly assumes the author must too. The view that there are no wrong answers in literary interpretation encourages a kind of solipsism that erases the difference between us and others and transforms everything we encounter into a version of ourselves.

As the literary theorist Robert Scholes puts it, reading, conceived “as a submission to the intentions of another is the first step” to understanding what a literary work is saying. For “if we do not postulate the existence of [an author] behind the verbal text,” we will “simply project our own subjective modes of thought and desire upon the text.” In other words, unless we do the best we can to get at what the author is saying, we will never truly recognize his or her ideas except as some version of our own. Scholes acknowledges that good reading often involves going beyond the author’s intention, pointing out contradictions and ideological blind spots, but he argues that we must recognize the author’s intention before we can try to see beyond it in these ways.

WHAT’S YOUR OPINION OF THE TEXT?

In accord with the principle that we must try to understand the text on its own terms before responding to it, we have thus far in this chapter focused on how to understand and unpack what literary texts say and do. Our approach to get at what they say involves looking for the central conflict in the work and then asking yourself how the author uses various types of evidence (characters, dialogue, imagery, events, plot, etc.) to guide you in thinking about that conflict. Ultimately, your job as a reader...
of literature is to be open to a work as its author presents it, or else your reading will fail to see what makes that work worth reading and thinking about.

But once you have reached a good understanding of the work, it is time to allow your own opinion to come into play. Offering your own interpretation of a work and opening that interpretation to response are crucial steps in any act of literary analysis, but they are not the end of the process. The final step involves offering your own insight into or critique of the work and its vision, assessing whether, as you see it, it is morally justified or questionable, unified or contradictory, historically regressive or progressive, and so forth. For example:

Though she is one of the most respected Southern authors of the American literary canon, Flannery O’Connor continually denigrates the one character in her 1961 story who represents the civil rights movement, and in so doing disparages progressive ideas that I believe deserve a far more sympathetic hearing.

Offering a critique, however, doesn’t necessarily mean finding fault:

Some criticize O’Connor’s story by suggesting that it has a politically regressive agenda. But I see the story as a laudable critique of politics as such. In my view, O’Connor’s story rightly criticizes the polarization of political conflicts—North vs. South, liberal vs. conservative, and the like—and suggests that they need to come together: to “converge,” as O’Connor’s title implies, through religious love, understanding, and forgiveness.

We realize that the prospect of critiquing a literary work can be daunting. Indeed, simply stating what you think an author is
saying can be intimidating, since it means going out on a limb, asserting something about highly respected figures—works that are often complex, contradictory, and connected to larger historical movements. Nevertheless, if you can master these challenges, you may find that figuring out what a literary work is saying, offering an opinion about it, and entering into conversation and debate with others about such questions is what makes literature matter. And if you do it well, what you say will invite its own response: your “I say” will become someone else’s “they say,” and the conversation will go on and on.