

## Literary Analysis Workshop



Included in this workshop:

**READING 3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods.

**5B** Analyze the moral dilemmas and quandaries presented in works of fiction as revealed by the underlying motivations and behaviors of the characters. **5D** Demonstrate familiarity with works of fiction by British authors from each major literary period.

## Literature as Social Criticism

Can literature shape public opinion? When does a poem become a political statement, a story become a social force? In every society, there are writers who serve as witnesses to corruption and injustice. They create stories, poems, essays, and dramas to depict the problems they observe and to expose what they perceive to be moral or political failings. These literary works subsequently influence the way people think about the issues.

### The Sharp Point of the Pen

**Social criticism** is a term used to distinguish literature that addresses specific political, social, economic, cultural, or religious issues. Throughout the history of English literature, writers have based their works on such issues. In the early 18th century, Jonathan Swift's fantasy *Gulliver's Travels* served as social criticism by satirizing political ideas and practices that Swift felt were either wrong or downright ridiculous. In the 19th century, Charles Dickens used his novels to expose the darker side of England's industrial development. Writers of the 20th century have often used literary works as commentary on the effects of war, the deplorable conditions of poverty, the results of oppression, and the fight for civil rights. For example, English poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote poems that graphically depicted the horrors of World War I in order to make a statement about the effects of war.



England has had complex relationships with its neighbors in the United Kingdom and with countries that were once British colonies. In the later decades of the 20th century, political conflicts and culture clashes inspired writers of the British Commonwealth to create fiction and poetry based on those conflicts and on the struggles for peace and justice. Writers Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, and William Trevor are a few who have taken up the cause in their literary works.

### Socially Active Ingredients

Typically, the writers whose works contain social criticism hope to do more than merely entertain readers. Although their reasons for addressing political and social problems may vary, most writers feel a responsibility to make readers aware of certain facts. Sometimes a writer's motives may be personal, based on direct experiences; in other instances, the writer may simply be presenting thoughts on a problem that has concerned him or her.

Fiction writers differ in the way they introduce social criticism into their works. One or more of the following elements may be evident in a single work.

**Treatment of an Issue** In some stories, a political or social issue may dominate the entire plot and become the central theme around which all actions revolve. In other stories, the social criticism is less direct, and the political or social issue serves as a backdrop for another situation. Often, the most striking examples of social criticism in fiction are those in which writers present the truth about situations without injecting their personal beliefs, thereby allowing readers to form their own opinions. In “The Distant Past” (page 1320), William Trevor illustrates how a large problem—the growing hostility between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland—creates conflict between neighbors, but he does not directly pass judgment on the conflict.

**Use of Tone** Other writers convey their views through the use of tone. Nadine Gordimer, in her story “Six Feet of the Country” (page 1342), sharpens her social criticism with irony and casts a critical eye on her main character.

**Focus on Individuals** Typically, writers cast their characters as ordinary individuals caught up in the context of larger world issues. The reader then observes how the larger issues affect the motives, behaviors, and destinies of real people. Some writers simply dramatize a demeaning personal experience in order to shed light on a larger social problem; Wole Soyinka uses this approach in his poem “Telephone Conversation” (page 1334). Other poets, such as Siegfried Sassoon, paint a broad portrait and slowly pull the reader into the personal, as shown in this example.

Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,  
Drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows.  
In the great hour of destiny they stand,  
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.

—Siegfried Sassoon, “Dreamers”

## TWO WRITERS' VIEWS OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

### George Orwell

*“When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art.’ I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”*



### Nadine Gordimer

*“I am not a preacher or a politician. It is simply not the purpose of a novelist. I am totally opposed to apartheid and all the cruel and ugly things it stands for, and have been so all my life. But my writing does not deal with my personal convictions; it deals with the society I live and write in. . . .”*



### Close Read

Explain how this passage represents a focus on the individual. Support your response with evidence from the passage.