

Eleven

A Weekly Bulletin from
the Center for Academic Advising

5 Things Worth Knowing about Literary Study at Wooster

by Larry Stewart



Larry Stewart, Mildred Foss Thompson Professor of English Language and Literature, specializes in 18th century literature, the novel, and children's literature. Recently, he has used the methods of computational stylistics to comment on eighteenth century fiction. He has spent much of his forty-one years at Wooster making smart remarks about his colleague Peter Havholm.

1) **It's not found only in the English Department.** Although some think of literary study and “English” as nearly synonymous, deep and committed study of literature occurs in the departments of Chinese, French, German, Russian, Spanish, and Theatre, as well as programs in Comparative Literature and Film Studies. As well, fascinating work with narrative and story is being done by those in other disciplines, like sociology, religious studies, philosophy, and law.

2) **It's not just “great books” or even just books.** As committed as many of us are to written texts that have come to be seen as having special significance, literary study is not limited to texts from a single canon—or even to written texts. Film and television, for example, are deeply influential sources of narrative today, and the study of these narratives is becoming increasingly widespread and important.

3) **It is something that nearly all of us already do at some level.** Few people emerge from a movie theater or finish a novel without wanting to talk about their experience. We find ourselves engaged in debates about the latest movie or displaying our list of favorite novels on a Facebook page. Obviously, literary study goes beyond these responses, but they seem rooted in the same desire to enter into a conversation about texts, to explain our responses, and to come to understand the responses of others.

4) **It's not easy.** Although we all respond to literature at some level, thinking critically about the complicated ways in which texts work calls for the level of engagement, thought, and study required by any discipline. Like other disciplines, literary study has its own vocabulary (or perhaps vocabularies), methods, and procedures. It calls for wide reading, grounded in a sophisticated understanding of language and culture.

5) **It is worth doing.** Making sense out of texts—written, visual, or even aural—is central to our lives as human beings. Reading stories, plays, and poems with awareness and understanding shows us the complication of life and pushes us to think deeply about the world. A certain story, an arresting image, a particular phrasing can make us see things just a slight bit differently. One group of critics speaks of literature as *defamiliarizing*, meaning that it takes that which is so familiar to us that we don't really notice it and places it in a context that forces us to see it anew. Without such texts, our view of the world and our selves would be less rich and full. However, without an understanding of how texts work, we are at their mercy.