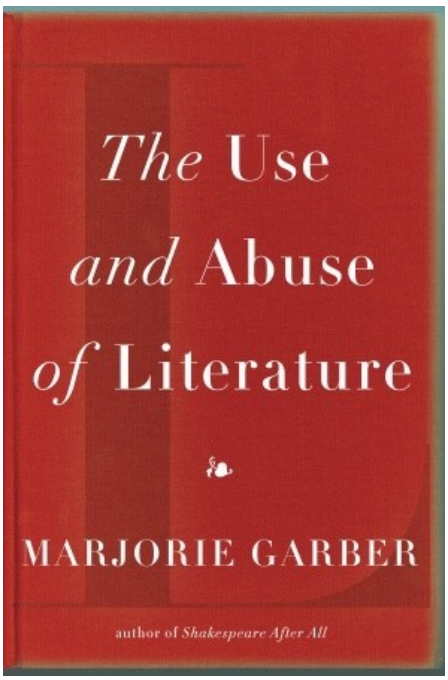


# The Use and Abuse of Literature

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As defining as Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism,* Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind,* and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* were to the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, respectively, Marjorie Garber's *The Use and Abuse of Literature* is to our times.

Even as the decline of the reading of literature, as argued by the National Endowment for the Arts, proceeds in our culture, Garber ("One of the most powerful women in the academic world"?*The New York Times*) gives us a deep and engaging meditation on the usefulness and uselessness of literature in the digital age. What is literature, anyway? How has it been understood over time, and what is its relevance for us today? Who are its gatekeepers? Is its canonicity fixed? Why has literature been on the defensive since Plato? Does it have any use at all, or does it merely serve as an aristocratic or bourgeois accoutrement attesting to worldly sophistication and refinement of spirit?  Is it, as most of us assume, good to read literature, much less study it?and what does either mean?

*The Use and Abuse of Literature* is a tour de force about our culture in crisis that is extraordinary for its brio, panache, and erudition (and appreciation of popular culture) lightly carried. Garber's winning aim is to reclaim literature from the margins of our personal, educational, and professional lives and restore it to the center, as a fierce, radical way of thinking.

## The Use and Abuse of Literature Details

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# From Reader Review The Use and Abuse of Literature for online ebook

### Hubert says

Always impressed and tickled by Professor Garber's insight into literature, culture, and the pursuit of the analytical life. Garber is super adept at examining some concept, whether it be literature, poetry, the memoir, and examines the history and concept/conceits behind the rhetoric surrounding those concepts now. At the end of the book in a spirited critique on the overreach of Lakoff and Johnson metaphor theory, Garber reinforces the primacy of literary thought (as opposed to literary thought as a vehicle of conceptual metaphor).

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### Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

(Pardon me, but I am going to take my review of How to Read Novels Like a Professor and plug in the title of this book and create my review of this book. It rarely happens but this book made me feel exactly like HTRNLP, so I have simply duplicated and slightly revised this review for UAL.)

I love books. You know that about me. But what probably you don’t know is that there are some books that I don’t like, some books I actually hate. Yes, it’s true. I hate textbooks.

I loathe textbooks. I hate the pompous, condescending tone of textbooks. I hate the know-it-all attitude of textbooks. I hate the way textbooks act like they don’t have to try to be well-written; textbooks know people will be read them anyway because people are forced to read them. I hate textbooks.

So I will say, sadly, that I found this book to be a textbook. I felt used and abused while reading this book. This book is a case of the abuse of literature, in my view. In any case, I was bored to death reading this book and that’s a shame.

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### Ted Burke says

The central conceit of a much contemporary criticism has been to raise the critic's musings on literature to the same level as the literature these folks intensely scrutinize. This seems a ploy to have literary critics form a new priesthood, an authoritative to be sought out no less than that of the poet, the novelist, the playwright, even the philosopher. Marjorie Garber is fairly typical of the academic who feels the need to produce a tract, composed almost entirely of weathered , rusty post-modernist adages, that demands that the reader requires the professional critic to open up the text for them and so facilitate a new rigor in how those so blessed think about the world. "The Use and Abuse of Literature", a manifesto intended to convince the readership she condescends to that their particular takes on books they've read and lived with are woefully incomplete, even shallow. We need to stop asking what things mean and investigate instead how they mean. If you labored for some years with attempts to grasp recent critical trends, you no doubt realize this is something that creates topic drift. Garber gives us permission to not debate ideas put forth through narrative conflict and metaphor and instead insists on turing us into mechanics. It's a messy and pointless labor, I think.

Even a critic I happen to enjoy, Harold Bloom, wrote a little instruction Manuel called "How to Read and Why", a grandiose albeit slight volume where the good critic plagiarized himself from other of his books about and offered up an inconsequential mumbling about reading in a correctly guided manner. Oh well, even smart people with insight and several levels of wit and discernment can be subject to a brief bits of blow-hardism.

In any case, Garber's insistence that the task of the critic isn't to discern what a book means but rather how it comes to mean is a handy method to avoid the harder answers a roving pundit might ask of an author's work; she seems very close to insisting that criticism defer a discussion of meaning produced by the form the author chose and instead shine the big lights on the forces contemporary criticism would insist the author is unaware of and beyond his control. This leaves little room for imagination as subject; it is a word many critics seem to fear. You wonder why, after all this time.

Though I do think that the there is a variety of "truth" that literature is best suited to reveal and bring forth for discussion, I am not taken with the idea that fiction and poetry and plays are intended to reveal facts. I have no objection to the questions that Garber wants to ask; the reservations comes with Garber's seeming need to rush past those questions and hurry instead to the next set of wonderings. She brings forth a continuous stream of inquiries and then defers, delays, goes diffuse at the edges. What this book lacks is a genuine discussion of any number issues, contradictions, controversies the task criticism contains. She resembles the critic Fred Jamison in this respect; there is a concentrated period of throat clearing and har-rumphing, followed by what can best be described as a gutless strategy of deferral. It makes you want to re-read Terry Eagleton's books on the critical arts, like "Literary Theory", "Problems of Post Modernism" or "After Theory"; background, thesis, argument. In general, I am interested in how literature works , indeed I am obsessed by it, but I am not willing to settle for the Professional Critic to be the priestly arbiter of what needs to be noticed, inspected, discussed; her insistence that the general reader's response is useless with out a Critic's watermark is implicit in this cozy apology.

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### Krys says

After reading a description for this book in my local book store, I thought this book was written for me. Upon cracking it open and slowly--VERY slowly--pulling my way through the text I found myself wondering why I wasted my time reading this, when instead I have should have been reading the texts and authors Garber mentions in her book. Without exception, the most fascinating things are passages in quotations, lifted from other works, like the scholarship of Virgina Woolf.

Perhaps this is a problem of expectation. So let me clarify: I expected 1) a cohesive, cumulative work. Instead, each chapter operates like an independent essay all circling around a similar topic like an idea web circling "Literature" at its center. This gives me the impression of a collection of papers (well-written papers, admittedly) for a graduate class about literature. Furthermore, the individual chapters are often broken into sections that often seem organized by whimsy and curated along the thinnest lines of association. In certain chapters, like the one that discusses what types of written work that have or have not at one time been considered literature, this segmented format works. But other chapters not organized around the structure of an obvious list suffer from a lack of connective tissue

2) I expected to learn something I didn't already know. While there are little facts throughout the whole of the text that were very interesting, the overall thrust--that literature itself and our uses of literature are fluid

and have changed over time--shouldn't be anything revolutionary at this point in time. Which brings me back to my comparison to a school paper. The book is very well referenced, surely meeting any professor or thesis advisor's requirement for a "well-researched" piece, but it seems more of an informative synthesis, a collection of things that have gone before, without presenting any new argument.

In its defense I would submit there is plenty profound and interesting in the chapter on metaphors, which examines exactly what we think is the line between literal and figurative, to see just how flimsy that strand is. Should I ever take up teaching again, and want to get my students thinking, the metaphor chapter would be great fodder to get them to examine HOW we express what we know, and what's more, how we know what we know without the words to give those ideas and facts shape.

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### Lauren Albert says

This is one of those instances when I had the eerie feeling that there were two books out there masquerading as one. I read some of the vociferous reviews of it and doubt we could have read the same book. It seemed to me a good basic introduction to some of the central controversies in the study of literature--canonicity, what "qualifies" as literature, etc. She says nothing new to me but then having come from a doctoral program in English, I've read and discussed a lot of these issues before. I also see nothing particularly controversial about her presentations of the subjects. "What is certain, if the past is any indication, is this: that no one way of reading or interpreting literature is best. There are many good, or strong, ways of reading a literary text, and the more satisfying one mode of reading may be, the more likely it is to provoke a different kind of interpretation or approach from the next generation of readers." 45 How many people would argue with her point that while there is no one interpretation of a text, some interpretations are better or "stronger" than others (no one who has had to give a grade to a student English paper, certainly)? Her other point here is that there is a reaction/counter-reaction effect here as in so many areas. When she writes at one point "it would be possible to reclassify the abuses as uses, and the uses as abuses, and to emerge with an equally viable and persuasive argument," perhaps this is one way of saying that when a way of interpreting (new historicism, deconstruction) becomes popular it often gets taken to an extreme that provokes a counter-reaction. Use turns to abuse. New Historicism can provoke a turn back to close reading of the "New Criticism" kind. It is a rather pragmatic way of looking at the subject. New Historicism is not "wrong"--it is one useful way of examining literature that can be abused like all others. Later she writes, "But every practice is prone to its own excesses, and over time it has occasionally been the case that the historical fact took preeminence over the literary work." 158

I also find it hard to believe that someone would argue over her point that "literary" writing is writing that focuses on the "how" rather than the "what." At no point does she claim that this makes other ways of looking at literary texts "wrong" or useless. "New Criticism's rigorous pointing toward the text needed to be corrected or at least augmented when the next generation of readers and critics readmitted history to the realm of possible literary evidence." 143 But if presented with a "literary" passage about cars and an excerpt from a car manual, I don't think many of us would have trouble picking out the "literary" passage. I realize that there are all kinds of complications here (think of dada, found poetry, etc.). But the exception proves the rule. If we can summarize something with no loss of meaning, than it is not literary writing.

I wait fearfully for those reading the other version to respond.

### Jim Leckband says

An interesting survey on how "literature" has been defined through the ages (Western lit. that is). The audience should mostly be academics or very well read amateurs as the familiarity with a lot of different books is needed at some level to get very much out of the book. Which begs the question - if you are in that audience, don't you already have a well-formed idea what literature is? Is there much in here to enhance that idea or argue with it?

I would give a qualified yes to that last question, as a well-read amateur. It made me further hone in on some questions that I haven't thought about. The role of criticism in defining literature is discussed very well. I liked the arguments of Presentism (reading literature in the lens of present day) versus Historicism (reading lit. in the lens of what is was like then.) Garber usually is even-handed on discussing all the viewpoints and the pros and cons of each. She rarely makes value judgements and lets the reader form their own opinions from her explications.

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### Kate Woods Walker says

As students in a very small school, my class had the misfortune of following a particular English teacher through her seven long years of advancement from elementary to junior high and high school assignments. Although her requirements were exacting and her aspirations grand, she was (I'll be charitable and say) inconsistent. One year she'd love you, the next year she'd hate you. One year she'd make perfect sense, explaining the intricacies of sentence diagrams, and the next year she'd go off on a tangent and spend a good portion of the school term railing against Mexicans.

This book is a lot like that.

Once past an introduction and opening chapter as dense and pretentious as a Space Bag full of freeze-dried Ivy Leaguers, Harvard Professor Garber settles into a readable style as she reviews the Western Canon (especially as it relates to the Great Books series); the timelessness of great literature; fiction vs. nonfiction in our new, privacy-shedding, persona-adopting world; and metaphor as it exists parallel to our new understanding of brain function, where all of consciousness may indeed be the stuff of dreams.

Most of what she says will be familiar to avid readers, or just the adequately-educated. Some of what she says was new to me, and was presented in a way that made me want to seek out unfamiliar authors and obscure works. But a lot of what she said was so self-consciously elitist, so deliberately obtuse, I had to put down the book for awhile just to rein in my distaste. (Note to scholars: *These sorts* of books, and attitudes, are what feed the growing tide of anti-intellectualism, not the failings of what should be your audience. Get a clue.)

Despite an obvious love of literature, Garber loves even more her own showy mastery of every inside-baseball tidbit, term and trope of literary criticism. She can't help herself. Mid-book, she swerves back into the cadences of academic gobbledygook as she discusses poetry. Later, she drives full speed into a brick wall of ridiculousness as she attacks with great fervor the book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

The jacket copy promised a culture-defining look at the future of literature in the digital age. The book did not deliver. It was more the erudite tantrum of just one more elitist pissed off about the Internet.

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## Ci says

*** Notes of Oct 2015 -- 2nd read

I must have read this book from a lending-library copy last year. Finding a new copy on the shelf, I could not recall that I had actually read it and jotted down notes (see Feb 2014 notes). I wonder how little memory I had retained except this author's name and the solid impression of her scholarship.

This time I am humbled by how little I actually know about literature. Last year's reading added nearly nothing to make up the gap of un-read books. I am now content to re-read this book every year and wish for tiny morsels of understanding along the way. Here are three new notes:

1. What is the use of reading literature? Quoting roland Barthes, literature has two different value propositions: "assertive" or "interrogative" values. I.e. "what is the meaning of the world" vs. "here is the world, is there meaning in it"?

2. The history of the trial of Ulysses in US, and the brilliant Judge Woolsey (page 89) which offers an encouraging note for me to read this book in the future. As Woolsey said that this book may be "emetic", yet it is a "serious experiment in new, if not wholly novel, literary genre" by exploring multiple, overlapping collages of human consciousness.

3. the Para-literature hack job such as those produced by de Botton (page 229). I used to be enthralled by such books, thought that they are insightful commentaries. Now I must be more discerning in filtering out such para-literary work.

*** Notes of Feb 2014 -- first read
This is an enormously accomplished scholarly work on literature, both classic and modern. Most of the materials require firsthand familiarity in university level of classic literature study setting, although there are some books less daunting. The tone is an even-balance of academic neutrality and lively scholarly attentiveness. A few note for the first round of reading:

(1) page 99 -- the use of "Diary" , particularly the diary of Anne Frank, its history of editing and publish, adaption in other media, and its overall cultural impact.

(2) Page 113 -- can one read Bible as "literature"? Interesting citing of Allan Bloom "The closing of the American Mind".

(3) Page 211 -- what is a good biography? Interesting discussion of Virginia Woolf, Boswell (praised by VW as the peak of biographic height, "It consists in personality", the triumphs of Strachey's Eminent Victorians and Queen Victoria, and his failure in Queen Elizabeth. Quote VW: "In the Victoria he [Strachey] treated biography as craft; he submitted to its limitations. In the Elizabeth he treated biography as an art; he flouted its limitations." Only Woolf can be so succinctly eloquent and precise on the sweeping issue of what is good biography instead of imagined/projected personalities.

(4) Page 230 -- put-down on para-literary books which allude to literature obliquely, dressed up either as "How-to" books or re-purposing one's reading of great books into something close to snide or commercial philosophic advice-giving. Quote Bette Midler's line "But enough about me. What do you [italic] think of me?" The literary solipsism abound.

In summary, this book is clearly from a learned scholar writing engagingly on topics that she cares and knows deeply.

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### Greg Talbot says

Garber explores our 21st century approach to reading. It isn't so much a critique about the frenetic pace of our lives, or the way in which we approach arts is to consume; rather it's about if we see a common root to our family tree in ways of documenting culture, learning to read, and being a cultured individual. While these are probably regular concerns for people in literary circles, I was fascinated by the nuanced arguments about: cultural studies, Biblical literary studies, questionable biographies, what's considers canon, poetry slams, and censorship. All of this suggests that literacy is as important as ever, but our value of it is questioned and modified by our times, as is always the case.

The parts I most enjoyed was Reuben Brower's critical scholarship on reviewing what is in the text. The slow method of seeing how the words interact, and only working with the ideas within the text. I used looked more into this method, and find it to be not only a very solid way to interact with the material, but also to identify the technique the author employs to get his work across.

At some points it's a little dry, but I the literary works discusses were weaved in beautifully with intermittent antidotes. It's a book that has you questioning the value we put on literature and teaches you a lot about how we have approached this art in the past. It's worth more than a cursory glance if you enjoy the deep swim into books.

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### Jessica says

"The future importance of literary studies--and, if we care about such things, its intellectual and cultural prestige both among the other disciplines and in the world--will come from taking risks, not from playing it safe."

In The Use and Abuse of Literature, Harvard professor Marjorie Garber outlines the current state of literature--how it is used and misused and why. She covers everything from how to define literature, to whether the role of the reader is more important than that of the writer, to what constitutes use and abuse of literature. She poses many important questions for both writers and readers. Why study literature? Are books useful? Does literature hold a place in modern culture?

Garber structures her book perfectly--she allots a certain amount of time to each aspect of literature and (if there is some contention on the subject) equally lays out both sides of the argument. She uses hundreds of sources and examples to assist each point and always shows her reasoning clearly. For example, in the third chapter Garber attempts to define what is and isn't literature. She first explains that literature has a different meaning for everyone because of taste. Yet even basic guidelines are difficult to determine. (For instance,

how should we categorize graphic novels, ballads, and diaries?) Garber uses a section of this chapter to focus on The Diary of Anne Frank, which is counted by many as a literary work. However, it is usually studied in a historical context rather than analyzed for literary qualities. Garber concludes that literature is not defined by how a book is written, but by how it is studied. "Literature is a status rather than a quality. To say that a text or a body of work is literature means that it is regarded, studied, read, and analyzed in a literary way."

A lot of the questions Garber asks are left unanswered. (For example, Is literature useful or useless?) Although this can be frustrating for the reader, there is a reason for it. She did not answer many of the questions because they had no answer. She explains, "One of the defining characteristics of literature and literary study is to open questions, not to close them . . . the really interesting questions do not have final answers." Garber even has a section in the introduction titled "On the Importance of Unanswerable Questions."

I loved this book; however, this doesn't mean I would recommend it to everyone. One must truly be interested in literature as a study to enjoy it. I would also recommend having prior experience reading the works of many famous authors (in order to understand the examples) and also have had at least high school level English classes (in order to understand the terminology).

For more of my reviews, visit www.literaryllama.wordpress.com!

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### amy says

An intelligent and chatty re-examination of the basics, predicated on the idea that a canon of Western literature both exists and is necessary while avoiding the cranky horribleness of someone like Harold Bloom. Yes, "canon" gets its own chapter, but just look at the writers and works that appear over and over as examples. Encourages conversation, calm disagreement, exploration, discussing things like a rational person, etc.

Accessible, enjoyable, useful... and a surprisingly good beach read :)

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### Jonathan says

The message of this book is read books, it's good for you.

I am not going to argue with that.

Anyone who doesn't read books is never going to find this out because they don't read books and this is a book. This leaves me confused as to the target audience. Readers already read. Non readers don't read. This books sits in a vortex between these two groups never able to be happy in either camp.

I have read it and I already read. It did make me think that my reading was worthwhile rather than the constant attempt to fill the void before death.

So it was a success. Triple A rating to this book.

### Kelly says

Marjorie Garber, justifiably celebrated for both her erudition and accessibility, has written a kind of meandering history of the idea (and practice) of literature and the literary. While not as innately pleasurable to read as her most famous book, "Shakespeare After All," "The Use and Abuse of Literature" is, nonetheless, informative and oddly captivating. I say "oddly" because there is a distinctively disjointed, discursive quality to the writing itself; too, her arguments, such as they are, are elusive and intentionally untethered from definitive conclusions. Fortunately, the take-away is an expanded, more inclusive (and less judgmental) view of literature than has been offered by other academics and literary critics. Her goal seems to be more pedagogic than activist, which makes it a refreshing and welcome addition to a genre rife with polemics and political score-settling. This book is the opposite of the hateful nonsense produced by charlatans like Allan Bloom.

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### Damian says

It seems as if Ms. Garber wanted to write several books and settled for one; as such, the resulting volume is a little unfocused. There is a reasonably good overview of the critical waves of the twentieth century, and some food for thought when it comes to the difference between fiction and non-fiction. Other sections fall a little flat (of course we are always reading a book in the present, of course "closure" is different from an "ending").

Ms. Garber makes the curious choice, at one point, to explore her own title (with references to the multitude of works that have that phrase--"use and abuse"--in their own titles). How is it, then, that the reader finishes this with little sense of what the "use" of literature might be, and no sense at all of what its "abuse" is? If the book has an object in mind, it is a defense of the role of the literary critic, but we fade in and out of this mode so often that, as an argument, it seems incoherent.

The faults of this book, however, lie in the project she (vaguely) sets for herself, and not in the strength or acuity of her insights. I would certainly read more of her work, and I think I'll turn to her Shakespeare After All next; it seems as if that might have more of a single thrust to it, and the few times she touches on Shakespeare in THIS book reveal her comfort with that writer.

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### Robert Teeter says

Marjorie Garber, who teaches Shakespeare among other things at Harvard, writes about literature -- what it is, how it's used and abused. The chapters in this book can be read as self-contained essays, in the original sense of an assay, or test, of a subject. Don't read this book if you're looking for definitive answers. For example, on the subject of the criticism wars, she seems to find value in the most conservative interpretation and the wildest post-modern "theory." The chapter on "What Isn't Literature" points out that many species of written material that have been considered not-literature (plays, novels, comic books, ephemera, ballads) have come to be considered literature. So, what isn't literature? Read this book as a fascinating conversation with a witty professor.