A Modern Aesthetic Reevaluation of Literacy

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

English

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

December, 2014

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ABSTRACT

A social change is happening, and as this change progresses so does literacy. This change is an aesthetic reshaping of what it is we read, how we tell stories, how we learn, how we analyze information, and how we write. The days of words and physical pages are dwindling. Pictures, digital representations, integrated technology, reinterpretations; all of these things, and others, are evolving into a modern definition of literacy that now includes all of the above, which is transforming not only our definition of literacy, but also what we might legitimately call literature, making, by the same effect what anyone can coin "literacy" something wholly new. With the introduction of these new literatures a new term, *New Media*, takes their place for the remainder of this argument, encompassing all of the mediated literatures that are foregrounding the change in what it is we call "literate".

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Chapter 1:

New Media. New Literature

"He who finds Milton more sublime than mountains, or a statue more beautiful than a woman, requires psychotherapy rather than aesthetic theory"

- Walter J. Hipple, Jr

To effectively talk about "New Media", and about contemporary conceptions of literacy, a few words about each of their respective evolutions are in order. Literacy is a difficult concept to pin down; as its social definition shifts, as the idea of what literacy entails, as it evolves from one thing to another, there has to be a driving factor behind the change. What criteria are there for determining an encompassing, or *cultural literacy*? E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil approach this idea in the preface to *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, saying "it is our contention that such a body of information [a *cultural literacy*] is shared by literate Americans of the late twentieth century, and that this body of knowledge can be identified and defined" (x). Subsequently, we have to ask, why is it changing now? And how is it identified and defined? But most importantly, why, if it can be, is it not *universally* identified, or defined? This claim is, at best, being overtaken by changes that these others do not seem to have considered.

Based on the aforementioned emerging social change, how do we get from an evolving notion of literacy (which can be as simple as being able to "decode" a "text") to aesthetics? The connection is that Hirsch, et al. are referencing a particular type of literacy. What needs to be initially understood is that they are referring to literature

traditionally considered to be of high aesthetic value. It isn't necessary to challenge or defend what is meant by "literature" when discussing a common literacy. Hirsch, et al are arguing for reasserting the notion of "canon" and making that a cultural touchstone—at least among educated people. The argument for this thesis is that technological changes and changing tastes have begun to change what "literacy" means and, therefore, that the "new literature" that will be discussed has such aesthetic value that it should be included in our notion of a common literacy—however we define the term—and whether we would agree that a monolithic literary canon exists. The main thing to be taken away from all this is that what we call literacy is changing because social and technological forces are exerting pressure on our established notions of what literature is and what it means to be literate. This leads quite naturally to a discussion of what aesthetics is—and the argument asserting that the new literature has such aesthetic value that it merits inclusion in future discussions of what literature legitimately belongs to academic study and, therefore, what Hirsch's form of literacy might entail.

What needs to happen, therefore, in order to adequately discuss this aesthetic growth, is an in-depth look at what "aesthetic" means to this argument. *Aesthetic* is unforgivably broad in its uses and definitions. If the following chapters are to be understood fully, this thesis must flesh out in what way the term is being used. Where the discussion will go in the next few pages will only represent a small piece of what falls under the discourses encompassed by the word *aesthetic*. It will be what is needed for understanding the change, not to give a lecture on aesthetics as a whole. To see the transformation, one has to understand the medium through which it is changing, and how it is different than before. With that this argument will begin by spending some time

discussing some general concepts in aesthetics. From there it will have to present the principal ideas of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Schiller and finally conclude this section linking those things with literacy. By the time this chapter concludes the argument will be well-defined and at least the idea of an aesthetic trend in the changing landscape of literacy will be able to be easily seen as we progress.

It was Baumgarten who originally said that aesthetics was "the science of how things are recognized by means of the senses", and this is a good starting point, since it effectively begins the explanation of the importance of aesthetics to the redefinition of literacy. With that simple idea of recognition, through apprehension or appreciation of the beautiful, by the senses, a seed is planted, and a visual (pun intended) should already be growing as to what constitutes aesthetics. The potential for aesthetic theory to convolute the progress of literacy's redefinition only exists if we stop thinking of aesthetics as Baumgarten suggested, but it will be necessary to understand a little more. There are several converging arguments that need to be presented as the real heart of this thesis unfolds itself; this chapter's discussion of the aesthetic, definitions of literacy, and the relationship between traditional notions of literacy and the aesthetic.

Aesthetic, if the word is just thrown out in conversation, usually elicits either one idea or another. The first, and probably the most likely, is in reference to art. The aesthetic properties of art, in a museum, for example, mean to a great deal of people the visual pleasure associated with it. "I like that painting because I find it to be aesthetically pleasing", is not far from the mark. But in the same way, it is not unlikely for that usage to be applied to any number of things: a website layout, balloons, a horizon. There is an analogy that can be drawn here between this sort of aesthetic appreciation and the kind

experienced when reading *literary art.* Instead of museums, though, we tend to display

literary art in anthologies, lists of books that a "literate" person should have read, and on

syllabi in college classrooms. This is, however, a presumed aesthetic value that generates

academic and other social discourses on literature and literacy.

How then can we establish the importance of aesthetic theory to this thesis? And

The second typical response to the word aesthetic is in regards to aesthetic theory.

I say that as if that is a small and singular idea, but that would be more than misleading.

Aesthetic theory carries with it centuries, if not millennia, of history, but in this paper I

will simply focus on several of the theorists who have tackled it. Not everything Kant

says, for instance, applies to the redefinition of literacy as laid out in this thesis, but a

good deal of his theory does help describe 'aesthetic', and helps make it applicable.

How then can we establish the importance of aesthetic theory to this thesis? And

in what way is the term applicable? Richard Lind describes what exactly is meant by

some of the terminology, saying "an 'artwork' is any creative arrangement of one or

more media whose principle function is to communicate a significant aesthetic object"

(124). Feels a little circular doesn't it? That is something we may have to get used to,

but it does help a little in its own way. If "art", as used by any number of theorists, can

be applied to anything designed to link itself with an aesthetic object, then it can open up

the conversation surrounding literature. By this definition we can start looking at all sorts

of objects as aesthetic, including paintings, skyscrapers, or paisley wallpaper. However,

as we move on, it is worth noting that "our experience must be," according to Salim

Kemal while describing Kantian aesthetics, "constituted of causal determinations" (152).

What an aesthetic object, "constituted of causal determinations," implies about the nature

of the aesthetic is an interesting link from Baumgarten to the other theorists this argument

will present, as it implies a certain kind of inevitability based on what has happened in the past, a point that will weigh heavier in later discussions on the emergence of aesthetic literature.

Aside from Lind, Israel Knox in *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer* establishes another point of reference when he says "at various times aesthetic has been reduced to sociology or psychology or morals or metaphysics" (3), but continues, drawing out the reduction saying that

> the stuff of art is discoverable in life; it is the entire panorama of human
>
> experience. The product and fruition of art is experience heightened, clarified,
>
> and coordinated. To trace the origin, to ascertain the character, to define the value
>
> of the beautiful in art and nature should constitute the proper purpose of the
>
> philosophy and science of aesthetic (3).

What Lind illustrates is a view of the aesthetic that debunks some uniformed notions, and looks at aesthetic as part of the human experience – it is valuable, and it is the beautiful – it encompasses life. The aesthetic includes, then, a wide range of human experience, literature among them.

Now that we have an initial, but useful, grasp of aesthetic, the conversation will start to move from "recognition" to these "determinations," sensations, even pleasure, among others, which are central to the works of several of aesthetic's leading theorists.

It would be very difficult, and not very beneficial, to map out, completely, in any intricate fashion, the majority of the to-be-mentioned theorists' aesthetic theory. What will to be done, instead, is to look at what they have said that is important to the ideas that will be presented in the upcoming chapters. This process will leave out certain parts

of aesthetics that do not particularly apply, such as "the sublime," though it will begin

with a quick look at "taste", before moving on.

The idea of taste, aesthetically, refers to the participator's own personal judgment

in regards to an aesthetic object. Taste is a factor in the majority of discussions about the

aesthetic, though its cogency can be either accepted or dismissed. Eva Schaper, in her

"Taste, Sublimity, and Genius: The Aesthetics of Nature and Art" notices Kant's

acceptance (though a seemingly wary one) of the validity of taste, saying "by 1790, the

year in which the *Critique of Judgment* made its appearance, Kant analyzed the judgment

of taste as a subjective judgment whose peculiar claim to validity differentiates it from

mere avowals" (371). As such, the importance of taste comes from its legitimacy as a

judgment, and

> what sets the judgment of taste apart from all other kinds of judgment is,
>
> according to Kant, that it is the feeling of pleasure alone that determines it. The
>
> most subjective and private of human capacities, that of feeling, far from being
>
> mute and inchoate, could, Kant now thought, yield the determining ground of the
>
> aesthetic judgment (271).

Taste, therefore, is the primary determinative factor linking the participator to the

aesthetic object:

> he who has taste shows by his preferences that he values what is beautiful and
>
> abhors what is ugly. Having taste is not like having an extra sense, nor like
>
> exercising a special intellectual power. It is the ability to respond with immediate
>
> pleasure and unclouded vision to beauty in nature and in art, and, further, to
>
> communicate this pleasure to others who are capable of sharing it. (Schaper 372)

The ability of taste is what allows the participator to engage, experience, and distribute the object and the pleasure they receive. Alan Singer and Allen Dunn in *Literary Aesthetics: A Reader* suggest that Kant opposed systematizing principles of taste, saying "Kant strictly proscribes against any articulation of general rules (e.g. a poetics) that might govern the judgment of taste" (104). Thus, the notion of taste is an individual answer to the aesthetic, uninfluenced by any other external factor.

Moving away from general ideas about aesthetics to a more focused investigation, it's useful to consider Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *On The Aesthetic Education of Man*. In it he begins his argument and formulates a basis on which to establish the discussion he continues for the remainder of the text. In Hegel's formulation, the "'aesthetic' means … the science of sensation or feeling" (3). With this premise, the notion of the aesthetic as that which is visually pleasing shifts gears to actual aesthetic theory. The importance in what Hegel says here is two-fold. The use of the term "science" gives "aesthetic" a certain weight that it might not have had otherwise, and the description of that science – "sensation or feeling" – lends to the more common usage of aesthetic as terminology.

Aesthetics has an undeniably close relation to "art." Robert Stecker, while defining art in his chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* takes some time to define aesthetics as well. The connection is invaluable when attempting to propagate a connection between the general knowledge of aesthetics to that of some of the leading theorists. He says that "we can stipulate that the aesthetic refers in the first instance to an intrinsically valuable experience that results from close attention to the sensuous features of an object or to an imaginary world it projects" (142). The "object" and the "imaginary

world" that Stecker references here is art. He is shifting the definition of aesthetic away from a general appreciation of beauty, including natural phenomena, to a more specialized notion in which the aesthetic refers to art – manmade objects that involve craft and imagination. For Stecker, the aesthetic and art are inseparable. In the most basic sense, our feeling towards art is inherently an aesthetic experience, and the aesthetic exists because art exists. This does not rule out aesthetic experiences that might arise from our observations of the natural world as the inspiration, or idea, that gives rise to art, and as such can include an aesthetic experience as a representation of an idea – according to Kant's theory – as a "form." Stecker continues by noting that "aesthetic definitions – attempts to define art in terms of such experiences, properties, or interest – have been, with only a few exceptions, the definitions of choice among those pursuing the simple functionalist project during the last thirty years" (142). It is with these more contemporary definitions that have created the more common usage of the aesthetic mentioned above. It is not, however, a bad definition, or even a wrong one; it is just simpler. What theorists such as Kant, or Hegel, outline, ad infinitum, includes this simple idea. Moreover, much of what they say is based on this idea, only expanded.

Israel Knox explains the importance of art rather eloquently, saying, "the field of the artist's vision is the totality of life, and the function of art is to project, to interpret, and to elucidate human experience" (3). With this he helps boil art down to a useful piece that can incorporate the experience, as well as the function, of artwork and what can be considered aesthetic. Fundamentally speaking "it is widely agreed that aesthetic properties are perceptual or observable properties, directly experienced properties, and properties relevant to the aesthetic value of the objects that possess them" (Levinson 6).

As this chapter progresses this connection and understanding can culminate into an examination of the aesthetic and its connection with literature. Gary Iseminger summarizes Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant by saying that "in addition to aesthetic emotion, aesthetic contemplation, and aesthetic pleasure, such concepts have included aesthetic perception, the aesthetic attitude, and aesthetic appreciation" (99). Iseminger also summarizes that which might be called the "aesthetic response" as discussed in the works of Iser, Bell, Hume, even Kant. The artwork, created in any form, should affect, naturally, emotions, contemplative nature, pleasure, as well as the rudimentary acts of perception, pleasure, and appreciation.

The aesthetics' effect on the emotions can be as simply explained as to say that it affects the participator's feelings. Some of the other ideas just presented may need to be expounded upon in slightly more detail before we move on. Pleasure, for example, when utilized by Kant supports an independent view of aesthetics. Pleasure, in response to beauty, is subjective; therefore, the pleasure taken by any participator is dependent on how they view the object. It is also important to realize that:

> Human feelings of pleasure can be explained by the disruption or
> restoration of homeostasis. An individual's displeasure is a result of
> disruption of homeostasis, which raises tension, whereas pleasure is
> accompanied by the restoration of homeostasis, which produces relief. The
> appreciation process of aesthetics begins with the rise of tension evoked
> by the aesthetic features, and ends with the dominance of relief to restore
> the homeostasis. The restoration of homeostasis results in pleasure.
> (Wang, Cruthirds, Axinn, Guo, 44).

The goal of an aesthetic object, and in turn aesthetic literature, should be pleasurable to participators by creating a tension (unfamiliarity, scope, depth, etc.) and then restore the homeostasis through discovered familiarity and ability to proactively participate.

Furthermore, "the appreciation of works of art provides the fantasy that activates his or her hidden wishes" (Wang, et al., 44). The appreciation aspect of aesthetic consumption is important to the understanding of the desire to actively participate in the aesthetic object. This appreciation is key to leading to New Media and the redefinition of literacy by showing the desire for the participators in it.

The perception of an aesthetic object is another important step in New Media and the new literacy that comes with it. "Being a good critic means having one's nature trained to perceive well and, in Hume, perception has a social character. It is perception of parts, relation, unity, totality, and it is perception within a social structure" (Stradella, 35), and as such, being able to perceive the aesthetic object outside of itself and through a social lens is yet another plain to cross when implementing, and utilizing, New Media, especially in a classroom.

This discussion of the aesthetic provides a sound theoretical basis for the argument that comics and other new literature can also be aesthetic objects, and are worthy of study as part of the canon of serious literature that Hirsch, et al presume. To understand the preceding portions of this chapter space will now be given to the thoughts of Kant and Schiller. From there the aesthetic idea should be well grounded, and though many aspects of aesthetic theory will not have been introduced, the fundamental premise will be the foreground. The importance of the validity of the aesthetic is tantamount to the redefinition itself. To evolve a term like literacy requires a strong foundation, and as

the literature evolves, and a more modern literature emerges, the principles of aesthetic theory should, and do, apply to the increasingly modern perceptions of literature and literacy.

Kant clarifies in his *Critique of Judgment* that "by an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought" (181). This one sentence, in the jungle that is Kant's third critique, says much more for the aesthetic applications to literature than almost anything else. While he focuses more on the "aesthetic idea" than on art, the application to art is inherent in it. It is important to break down what Kant says into two pieces. The first piece looks at the "presentation of the imagination." Here Kant is saying that the aesthetic idea is born of a physical representation of what goes on in the mind, or the realm of forms. The representation is a less perfect version of the idea that created it, but is a secondary source of that perfect idea nonetheless. The second piece involves the premise that this "presentation…prompts much thought". This is an essential proposition for any redefinition of literacy. What exists is a physical representation of the imagination, and its primary function is to prompt thought. To Kant, any representation is capable of prompting the thoughts of whoever partakes in it. Any person, and any "presentation of the imagination," together, creates a space of thinking, and of learning. Though the importance of this presentation affects more than one facet of thinking, Kant's basic use of aesthetic, if not in every way the application, is the actual substance of this argument. To help solidify what has been said, and to initiate what is about to be said, Kant needs to be referenced a little closer. He says that "aesthetic attributes yield an *aesthetic idea*", and that

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fine art does this not only in painting or sculpture (where we usually speak

of attributes): but poetry and oratory also take the spirit that animates

[*beleben*] their works solely from the aesthetic attributes of the objects,

attributes that accompany the logical ones and that give the imagination a

momentum which makes it think more in response to these objects

[*dabei*], though in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended within

one concept and hence in one determinate linguistic expression (182).

We can finally start linking what we have talked about so far, and what will be talked

about in the next couple paragraphs. All of the attributes of aesthetics generate this

"idea." The idea is not just generated in paintings, or sculptures, as Kant points out, but in

anything that gives "the imagination a momentum." With objects other than paintings

fitting in to the aesthetic, Kant says that things like poetry are comprehended within one

concept, or one overarching idea, and in doing so define a singular "linguistic

expression" that includes all of these objects.

Kant says that "an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination," that "it is a

presentation that makes us add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable, but the

feeling of which quickens our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise

would be mere letters, with spirit" (183). Jonathan Culler summarizes Kant's general idea

of aesthetic by saying:

For Immanuel Kant, the primary theorist of modern Western aesthetics,

the aesthetic is the name of the attempt to bridge the gap between the

material and the spiritual world, between a world of forces and magnitudes

and a world of concepts. Aesthetic objects, such as paintings or works of

literature, with their combination of sensuous form (colours, sounds) and

spiritual content (ideas), illustrate the possibility of bringing together the

material and the spiritual. (33)

The necessity for a bridge, as can be seen here, is to link together the physical

representations of concepts, to the concepts themselves. This is where thought and

imagination are stimulated in the world of objects, where we reside, thanks to the higher,

or spiritual world of ideas. These forms can be represented in lots of different ways,

almost an infinite number of ways, and that is what is important to this argument.

In addition to Kant's foundational ideas on the aesthetic, Schiller's notions of the

aesthetic are also crucial. For Schiller, the aesthetic is all encompassing:

Precisely because it takes no individual function of humanity exclusively

under its protection, it is well disposed to every one of them without

distinction, and it favours no single one especially, just because it is the

ground of the possibility of them all. Every other exercise gives the mind

some particular aptitude, but also sets it in return a particular limitation;

the aesthetic alone leads to the unlimited. Every other condition into

which we can come refers us to some previous one, and requires for its

solution some other condition; the aesthetic alone is a whole in itself, as it

combines in itself all the conditions of its origin and of its continued

existence. Here alone do we feel ourselves snatched outside time, and our

humanity expresses itself with a purity and integrity as though it had not

yet experienced any detriment from the influence of external forces.

(Schiller, 103)

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Aesthetic is tautological. Unlike every other discipline, no other factor needs to come in to play. It doesn't rely on any past knowledge, or any future awareness. The aesthetic experience defines and redefines our notion of the beautiful every time we encounter an aesthetic object. This definition is also somewhat circular, but it does free one to divorce the notion of aesthetic value from the institutionalized notions we find in museums and anthologies. In short, if a text (or any other aesthetic object) fires the imagination, provokes thought, and sharpens our cognitive faculties, it is worth serious study. As Raymond Williams points out in *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, institutionalized notions of the aesthetic and taste have always served to reinforce class distinctions. The notion that these distinctions no longer serve us in an age when aesthetic theory experiences are no longer confined to the traditional codex. At the same time it applies to no one thing in particular, and also does not apply to nothing. It is blanketing in its application and the usefulness of this to the imagination and mental abilities of its participators is imperative to learning and appreciating "art."

Literature may be discussed as a branch of the aesthetic in several ways, and as such – without expanding on it very far at this point – it can and should be viewed as art. Based on what has been covered so far, it would be safe to say that aesthetically speaking, literature is the realm of ideas, the spirit, and the soul, exemplified through language. The association is readily seen between aesthetics and art, and the inclusion of literature in the realm of art strengthens the bond. Though it is seemingly impossible to be able to create or even experience something *purely* aesthetically, literature feels as if it is most capable of demonstrating the utmost purity and freedom because of its more ethereal structure. A sculpture, or a painting, can be interpreted, appreciated, or perceived

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in many different ways, but literature has the ability to change itself, to adapt, to

incorporate in a way that most static objects cannot. Literature has a very intimate

relation with the imagination, and its forms, as will be discussed in the following section,

are impressively varied. Before this discussion can begin however, the last phase of the

argument for aesthetics needs to look at how literature is associated with art, and in

effect, with the aesthetic.

   Let us glance once more at a conception of art. Jerrold Levinson states that the

"conception of art of long standing sees it as essentially a vehicle of *expression* or of

communication" (5). If art can be looked at in that way, then what art is opens up quite

extensively. No longer is art particularly what is found in the Louvre, but almost any

vehicle of expression, or of communication, that can be of benefit to the participator.

Expression, as well as communication, all but describes what literature consists of, and as

such, the purpose, arguably, of literature is either one or the other, if not both. The

production, by an author, of a literary work is purposely produced to express their own

thoughts, and to communicate those thoughts, be it fiction, poetry, narrative or any other

form. Literature, lacking either of those properties cannot exist since, without expression,

the work was fabricated from nothing, and without this communicative property, it

appeals to no one. With these two attributes literature fits in with art in terms of

aesthetics. Though every aspect of aesthetic theory may not apply to literature every

time, that same problem persists among any form of art when related to aesthetics. Salim

Kemal accurately tackles this problem noting, "whether or not [the participators] feel

pleasure has to do with the subjects and their state, and is arbitrary to the object" (25).

Now, if literature is expressive, let's say of ideas, and communicative, through form,

whether or not pleasure can be afforded by it is secondary, as the pleasure taken from an

aesthetic object is not a property of the object, but a response of the participator. In short,

"a literary work is an aesthetic object because, with other communicative functions

initially bracketed or suspended, it engages readers to consider the interrelation between

form and content" (Culler 33). This also calls for a comparison of where the qualities

that define the aesthetic are located. For Kant, the notion of the subjective universal

implies that the aesthetic quality of an object has nothing to do with form but rather has

something to do with the "numinous" – a quality that can be grasped by every "subject."

The core of the comparison is that, for Culler, who views the aesthetic more formally,

there is an employment of consideration that lies with the reader, or participator, in the

aesthetic as well as the object; an idea that Kant argues is not so black and white. The

implications, in addition to those formerly mentioned, of the expressivist theory, add to

the possible use of the aesthetic in that - at the heart of this idea - it presumes it

communicates something, whether that something is the communication between form

and content, an expression of the numinous qualities of art, or the implicit exchange that

occurs between the artist and the receiver of the art.

As we have seen, literature, by virtue of its being a mode of artistic expression

and communication, is an aesthetic object. But does literature really satisfy these criteria?

The rest of this chapter will consider what, exactly, literature entails, but for now a less

specific, and more all-encompassing, question should be addressed. Does literature, in

any potential form, still count as art? David Davies argues in *Aesthetics and Literature*

that:

Any individual copy of a literary work – including the original manuscript – can perish without threatening the work's existence. Nor can we identify a literary work with the entire collection of physical copies of a book. For one thing, this would mean that the work was still coming into existence as long as new copies were being printed. And we surely want to insist that, even if all physical copies of a literary work were destroyed, and no new copies were ever printed, the work itself could still persist as long as it was preserved in the memory of either its author or those who had read it. (Davies 19)

This is important since it also solidifies the premise that literature exists as an expression, the physical copies (or digital) we hold are just a representation of that literary expression, a form through which to communicate. This is not to say that the aesthetic object should be looked at in one way, or the other. It is this interplay between the author and the receiver that forms a field in which the aesthetic can exist in its own right. The object and the expression are the necessary components of the aesthetic experience. Other answers, and questions, as to the validity of certain types of literature, as well as forms, will be discussed in subsequent chapters, but the idea of a persistent literature, no matter its form, and its tie to aesthetic theory should at this point be well-grounded.

Ultimately, in order to adequately focus on literacy and aesthetics a general idea of aesthetics is very important. In more than any specific way, and to reiterate the spectrum of the aesthetic, it can be used anywhere from an art gallery to a discussion of poetry to the layout of a website, and it is with this connection that this argument can move on. As this section comes to its conclusion, the second half of this chapter is

foregrounded in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, which, throughout, presents the

reader with many examples of what aesthetics can entail. The following pages will look

at ideas by several authors, and present a contemporary culmination of aesthetic theory

and literature. The new terminology will be the crux of the argument and will help join

all of this aesthetic theory to the main goal of a redefinition of literacy. In allusion to

chapter 5 of this thesis, where the redefinition will be fully realized, Schiller notes,

"nothing, it is true, is more common than for both Science and Art to pay homage to the

spirit of the age, and for creative taste to accept the law of critical taste" (51). It is this, a

perception of the changing tastes of an age – the zeitgeist of the 21st century – and the

shared respectability of the creative and the critical that ushers in a new era for literacy.

Each step is an important one for the redefinition to have credibility, starting with

literature as an aesthetic object. The most important thing to remember in the coming

chapters, repeated once more in closing, is Kant's thoughts on the aesthetic idea. Of

everything that has been said, the most pervading use of the aesthetic comes from Kant's

Critique of Judgment when he says "by an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the

imagination which prompts much thought" (181).

<p style="text-align:center">2.</p>

The real weight of this thesis hinges on the existence of "New Media." As such,

the remainder of this chapter will focus on discussing what *exactly* is meant by New

Media, how and why it emerged, and how it ties in with aesthetic theory. The term

"media" should evolve as this chapter progresses from an overarching expression to a

specific definition of New Media. This evolution will pave the way for re-redefining

literacy toward the end of this chapter.

We begin with the assertion that electronic communication has changed what we mean by the term literacy. Lynell Burmark states in *Visual Literacy: What You Get is What You See (Teaching Visual Literacy)* that between "television, advertising, and the Internet, the primary literacy of the twenty-first century is visual" (5). Nevertheless, there is considerable hesitation, particularly in the academic community, about describing fluency in the conventions of these media as literacy. To be sure, this hesitation is not universal. Here and there references are found to the legitimacy of certain visual forms and even a few willing to call familiarity with this New Media literacy. Among those advocating expanding the definition of literacy to include fluency in visual forms are Cynthia L. Selfe, William Kist, James Paul Gee, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, and David Warlick. And why not? The link between literacy and the visual has arguably been around for millennia. Cave drawings, hieroglyphics, ideographs, and illuminated manuscripts are well-attested examples of a connection between language and the visual that has existed throughout human history. The alphabet is itself a visual artifact representing sounds. Literacy – and, again, Raymond Williams is clear and useful on this matter in *Keywords* – originally meant "lettered." That is, those who could decode the black marks on pages and draw from this interaction everything from simple transactional meaning (i.e. hold the spear on the not pointy end) to deep literary experiences. This observation, in particular, renders the argument that visual literacy isn't real literacy as absurd since all literacy is, on some level, visual literacy. An important distinction to be made, therefore, is that the integration of text and image is not what makes the New Media new. New Media is new because it is a large cultural shift from what was largely

participated in, in terms of literature and literacy to how the participators *interact* with their texts.

So how and when did this capital N, capital M, New Media emerge? These questions may not be so easy to answer, but there are focal points that suggest New Media's evolution and, at the very least, help to explain when New Media emerged, where it currently exists, and why it is so important now. There certainly are hurdles when it comes to tracing the emergence of New Media as well as an unavoidable ambiguity. Thierry Groensteen illuminates one of the biggest hurdles in his article *Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?* when he notices that, in reference to comics, "it is curious that the legitimizing authorities (universities, museums, the media) still regularly charge it with being infantile, vulgar, or insignificant. This as if the whole of the genre were to be lowered to the level of its most mediocre products – and its most remarkable incarnations ignored" (3). Groensteen identifies an issue of central importance to this thesis: i.e. comics and graphic novels have not yet been validated by culture-making institutions, but gain some semblance of validity in their history. The form "comic" can date back to Roman times, as satirical drawings used to comment on politics, as one particular example, continued on for hundreds of years to be utilized in similar applications for coalitions during the French and American Revolutions, and all the while, during this huge gap of history, the use of pictures and words existed. What then, makes New Media, new? The sphere of New Media encompasses more than just the incorporation of pictures with words, but includes digital media of all sorts, and our interactions with them.

There is undoubtedly good material to be found within the realm of New Media, yet, by and large, the focus is on the mediocre. The serialized comic series *I, Vampire* may not exactly be a paragon of the legitimacy of visual literature, but even in its case, and others, like the more familiar *Flash* or *X-Men*, it represents a part of the encompassing reach of aesthetic literature. More time in that regard will be spent later in this chapter when all of these pieces of New Media and aesthetic literature converge to re-redefine literacy as a whole. Before that though, the comic books, iPad applications, websites, graphic novels, e-readers, and video games need to be legitimized within the aesthetic theory framework, which present themselves as *the* New Media - the real inspiration for a redefinition of literacy.

As we have seen, this swell of New Media may not be quite as new as the term implies, yet the evolution is happening at an increasingly faster pace over the past hundred years, especially in this digital age. David Kunzle in *Randolfe Topffer's Aesthetic Revolution* sees and links what Randolfe Topffer and Charles Baudelaire were each working with and says, "Both anticipated the modernists' idea that art transforms nature, does nature over, transcends and bypasses it, and that art obeys its own laws independent of nature" (17). If that is to be taken to heart, then literature, and by proxy, literacy, should evolve over time as art, and the media through which the art is presented continue to evolve themselves beyond the constraints of natural perception. If art is independent of nature, then it can be assumed that literature is not a natural phenomenon, but an artistic phenomenon that is more than susceptible to change. Therefore, the emergence of this New Media makes sense, as it is simply the product of this inevitable evolution. It isn't as if there are any impressively solid definitions for literature or

literacy, and yet it is hard to deny that something new is happening in recent years. Comic books are especially interesting to look at in terms of New Media. They are among the oldest member of this family, but they still haven't quite found a foothold in academe. Thierry Groensteen in *The Impossible Definition* concludes that "the definitions of comics that can be found in dictionaries and encyclopedias, and also in the more specialized literature, are, as a general rule, unsatisfactory" (124). Perhaps one of the reasons comics have yet to achieve cultural legitimacy is that they cannot be easily defined. After all, the term "comics" applies to everything from children's stories to hyper-violent teen fantasy to extended Sunday funnies.

Comic books are not alone in their marginal status; other forms of New Media are being brushed aside as well. The aforementioned iPad application is another good place to start seeing the apparent evolution of what we read. The T.S. Eliot *Wasteland* application by TouchPress is a shining example of how even traditional literature is being transformed by New Media. From interactive facsimiles to audio recordings this application delivers a poem in a way that is wholly new. This application permits the reader to work interactively with Eliot's poem; one can search through the notes, see the locations referenced in the work, and even change the font or darken the background—all of which create a new and enhanced reading experience. This, at least to some extent, personalizes the reading experience. As mentioned above, the "field" created in the interaction between artist and observer also requires a medium, and as such, New Media foreground the medium and do so in a way that shifts the quality of the aesthetic experience in the direction of the observer who now has unprecedented control over the appearance of the medium and the depth to which s/he can understand a complex work's

references and context. There are numerous similar applications ranging anywhere from interactive spooky stories for children, to an almost point and click adventure style of storytelling. Visual renditions of the works of Shakespeare and Mary Shelley are just a few examples of enhanced and interactive reading experiences available on the iPad. While Apple is a trailblazer, similar applications can be found on Android and Windows tablets and phones as well.

Graphic novels, e-Readers, and even video games are all manifestations of the New Media. New media represents a cultural and technological advance that forces a redefinition of literature and literacy. Assuming that visual literacy qualifies as literacy, one could argue that New Media will not only maintain literacy rates as a new generation of tech-savvy readers emerges, but could even expand literacy among populations that find traditional literacy too challenging or uninteresting. The last time a shift of this magnitude occurred was when typeset codices replaced manuscripts after the advent of the printing press. Mass production created a larger audience and oriented our civilization to the written word in all sectors of society. New Media has the potential to be as powerfully transformative. Its opportunity lies in the here and now: in classrooms, at home, at the local coffee shop, or at the office. Through New Media we can see the future of literacy and it is this future we need to learn to utilize and embrace.

So how does aesthetic theory apply to New Media? The real, and simple, answer is in words and pictures. The aesthetic applies to both, and the combination is particularly poignant. Reading and literacy, from the very beginning, have been an aesthetic experience. Ever since oral stories or verbal histories were engraved on stone, or written on parchment, the act of reading them has been predominantly visual. Whether

the act of reading involved decoding hieroglyphics, following a configuration of ideograms, or scanning a sequence of letters, these manifestations of the language were physical. At its most basic level, the act of reading is an encounter with physical forms and creates in the reader's mind psychical contents. In other words, reading is an aesthetic experience.

The evolution from traditional print to the New Media does nothing but magnify the aesthetic experience that has always existed in the interplay among author, text, and reader. New Media does not abandon the written word, or even necessarily reduce its use; instead, it enhances the written word with visual content, while at the same time providing the reader with the possibility of becoming more interactive with the medium. There is a response from any individual as to what they see and what they determine to be beautiful, or of good taste, that influences their reaction to just about anything. Literature is no exception. It is surprising how often someone will request a certain font, or how often another won't buy a graphic novel because they don't like the art style. Literature, in an aesthetic sense, is really no different than paintings in a museum. A person's taste influences the appeal, and as New Media and aesthetics continue to work together and broaden literacy, the chances of immediately liking or disliking something grows exponentially. This effect can be limiting compared to the extent that black letters and white paper pages can affect the participator, at least immediately, but the appeal created by the aesthetic growth of literature will reach much further as specific works can cater to certain tastes, which they do already. This premise really takes "don't judge a book by its cover" to a whole new level; cell-shaded and other computer generated images, hand drawn, stencil drawings, paint, charcoal, ink… all different ways of

presenting words and letters, and pictures, that can all appeal, or not appeal, to any person participating in the literature would change the judgment from the cover to the entirety of the work.   The way this New Media is approached through aesthetic theory is just that, a participatory experience. The experience is unique to each individual, but more importantly, the taste of the individual could influence what that individual reads. There is no doubt the individual's taste and interest in enhancing the reading experience determine to a significant extent the quality of his/her reading experience. But the experience isn't *entirely* unique either. After all, the author creates the story; there are only a limited range of personalizing options, and such enhancements as notes, pictures, etc. range from non-existent to a limited number of high-quality links. In short, the artist's imagination and the limitations that publishers impose on a medium still determine, to a large extent, the amount of "play" available to individual readers.

Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, in the introduction to *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoon, and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills* familiarize the reader with the idea of what is to come; that the visual aspect of reading and writing is as crucial to understanding the object as much as the more traditional means currently attributed to the process. Traditional reading and writing involves a visual connection, letters and words are the prime example, and with the implementation of other visual aspects the visualization becomes more and more important.

> Visual images play an integral part in understanding. The elements of
> literacy are commonly described as *reading, writing, speaking,* and
> *listening*. *Viewing* is mentioned in passing, if at all. When visuals *are*

utilized, it is often in service of the other literacies. We speak of

visualizing as a reading comprehension strategy, or discuss the importance

of crafting strong images in writing. But notice how we indicate

understanding in everyday speech: 'I see what you mean.' (1)

The visual aspect of literacy plays a significant but underappreciated role in how we

learn, and how we read and write. It would appear (pun intended) that regardless of the

medium, literature is "seen" in some capacity; either as the simple visual of the letters

and words, the slightly less simple visual of the images created within the mind of the

reader, or just pictures on a page, with or without words, creating a story. The

redefinition of literacy requires the attention of this visualization. Visualization is an

element of literacy, New Media not only foregrounds the visual but demands that we

cultivate a particular form of literacy – or competency – a form that has, until now, been

underappreciated or simply dismissed as serving actual literacy.

Frey and Fisher insinuate an importance of aesthetics and literacy to an accurate

appreciation of New Media. Visualization is an undeniable, essential property of

literature, making it inseparable from any discussion of literacy. They notice that "when

students are first learning to read, particularly if they have had limited life and language

experience, comic strips and comic books can be a fun way to make the image-word

association" (11). The importance of how this is used to learn won't be wasted, but for

now the focus on what they are saying is that image-word association is fun and effective,

a point that leads the question, why should literature languish in some old fashioned way

when it could incorporate these aspects? Novels aren't going to disappear, but New

Media has a special place in an individual's taste, in what can and should be considered "good literature," and the definition of literacy.

Allowing that literature, even traditional literature, has an important visual component adds a new dimension to the aesthetic quality of literature previously discussed. Thus, the best examples of New Media can be said to have significant aesthetic value. As Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith put it in *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*, "nowadays, the average person has to go out of their way to even see a comic book, and if they do it will likely be of the costumed superhero variety. But these books do not accurately represent the variety or potential of the medium" (1). It is easy to agree with the going out of the way part, and it would not be a stretch to say that nine times out of ten any contact with said comic will be of the superhero variety (on the shelf at a comic book store for instance). The difficulty arises when it is assumed that these superhero comics do not represent the variety or potential of comics. They do represent just a segment of what there is however, and in that regard garner some lack of respect among readers and scholars who don't want to read about the exploits of some spandex wearing adult and his boy sidekick. Even still, these exploits have been around since the '30's, and aren't going anywhere anytime soon (much like the novel). The importance of superhero comic books is undeniable. The attention they receive from young readers especially, and the tried and true good-versus-evil stories, multi-issue plots, and character development are all respectable, and a good focal point for the serious study of the New Media in general. Comic books appeal to a large group of readers who can relate to the issues, enjoy the length, and can appreciate a serialized story. Political and social issues are, and have been, represented in comic books since

their inception (Captain America, The X-Men, the *Civil War* arc). Aesthetically

speaking, these super hero comics present some interesting issues, too. Hundreds of

comics equal hundreds (if not thousands) of writers, and equally importantly, hundreds of

artists. Each artist creates a visual for the story based on his or her own style (or at least a

personal spin on a previous style), which is where questions of aesthetic value, taste, and

style can be explored in comic books. Now, this problem lends to the application of the

aesthetic to the New Media. It shows that a person will not read *Action Comics* because

he does not like how it is drawn, but will read *Superman* because he finds the experience

more aesthetically appealing (both comics center around the exploits of Superman).

The well-known superhero comic may be important, but it is only one form of the

comic book genre. As a whole "comic books are a unique and powerful form of

communication" (Duncan and Smith 13). They cater to any age, any reading level, any

gender, and any background. The traditional comic book is as free in its content as any

novel, but can appeal to all; "it is true that comic books tell stories and involve readers in

ways that no other art form – not plays, novels, or film – can duplicate" (Duncan and

Smith 13). There are comics that are full of action and skintight colorful outfits, but there

are also comics about relatively normal people as well. There are comics that focus on

autobiography and comics that are illustrated (and usually abridged) versions of popular

novels. The largest portion of these stories tend to find their home in graphic novels,

where the medium is wide open for telling much longer and more engrossing stories.

Graphic novels such as *Asterios Polyp, Persepolis,* and *Black Hole* all break the

stereotypical mold usually associated with the graphic novel or comic book. These

stories, taken in order, demonstrate the range of human experiences that graphic novels

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can explore. *Asterios Polyp* features the story of a rather average, though down on his luck, man. *Persepolis* is an autobiography by a French Iranian. *Black Hole* is a teen drama in which everyone contracts a strange appearance-altering condition. With graphic novels like these, and countless others, including the familiar works of Alan Moore (*Watchmen*) and Frank Miller (*Sin City, 300*), as well as the not-so-familiar works of Shaun Tan (*The Arrival*) and Grant Morrison (*The Filth*), this segment of New Media is ambitious, complex, and noteworthy. Even the sheer number of reinterpretations of works via the graphic novel is impressive. *The Hobbit,* as drawn by David Wenzel and adapted by Charles Dixon and Sean Deming, is a prime example, as are the many re-renderings of Shakespeare and Chaucer. But if these works, to the participator of the New Media, are foregrounded by the visual dimension of reading, argue Duncan and Smith, "The very concept of literacy has been revolutionized and broadened" (14), and not only broadened, but opened up, allowing the creation of works in all new ways, whether they are old or new, popular or niche. Duncan and Smith note "some theorists propose using the degree of interdependence or interanimation of the linguistic and the pictorial as the primary aesthetic standard for evaluating comic books" (14). Were such an aesthetic proposition widely adopted, it would change the way comics and graphic novels are viewed, and would place comics and graphic novels on the same plane as traditional print literature. They would be judged based on their linguistic qualities as well as their artistic merit, a pair of criteria that are legitimate and useful in their own rights. As such, a very important moment for graphic novels came in the early '90's when

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Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* won a special Pulitzer Prize for

literature in 1992. The Pulitzer is considered to be one of the highest

honors in writing, and for a comic book to be recognized alongside the

year's best work in literature and journalism was previously unthinkable.

But *Maus* is not just any comic book. It tells the true story of a Holocaust

survivor through an unconventional cast of animals, recounting both the

horrors of the Nazi persecution of the Jews in Europe and the enduring

pain of survivors and their children. It brilliantly demonstrates the power

of the comics to communicate ideas through a poignant combination of

words and pictures. (Duncan and Smith 1)

With *Maus*, Art Spiegelman created a poignant and influential work that transcended

form and won a prize that nothing of its kind had ever won before (and has never won

since). *Maus* was properly assessed through a means of "interdependence or

interanimation of the linguistic and the pictorial," and its merits won some highly

deserved recognition, but one instance does not denote a pattern. There were graphic

novels before *Maus* (Alan Moore, for example, published *V for Vendetta* and *Watchman*

in the late 1980s), but if there was any pivotal instance when graphic novels got real

literary attention, it was at that moment. The climb to institutional respectability since

has been slow, almost non-existent, but as New Media continues to nudge itself in to the

definition of the literary, comics and graphic novels will likely be leading the vanguard.

While the scope of this thesis precludes a *careful* examination of video games, it

should be noted that they form an important dimension of New Media and require at least

a little attention. Video games, even from the beginning, have been, in part, a reading

experience. The text based Role Playing Games (RPG's) of the 1980s were little more than interactive books that invited readers to choose their own path toward the end of a story, with a little quick thinking in between. This initial pattern has branched out in several directions since then, but the formula is present in many of the games even now. RPG's maintain their text-heavy storytelling, and even a primarily multi-player shooter game all but requires a "story mode" to flesh out its characters and locales. The visuals, and the interactions with the virtual environment, create a form of literature that is relatively new, one that tells a story in a way that, arguably, expands upon other types of storytelling, forcing the participator to create a story based on what they see. The process of learning to play a video game requires a type of literacy as well, but with different characters: press R1 to shoot? Got it! Press X to interact? Done! Press START to navigate the text heavy, description-laden inventory? You got it. Games, as such, rely even heavier, as we will see, on the aesthetic judgments of their players than most other forms of New Media. The interaction and, in most cases, length of video games require the player to be more fully immersed than in a comic book or a website. James Paul Gee argues that video games possess a certain amount of academic credibility in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy,* and the comments he makes about video games help illustrate New Media and connections between them and aesthetic literacy. He quips, "'Wouldn't it be great if kids were willing to put in this much time on task on such challenging material in school and enjoy it so much?'" (2). To Gee, video games represent a task and a challenge that is relatable to what is learned in school. They demand as much or more time investment, or learning curve, as scholastic endeavor, but at the same time don't necessarily encourage or supplement

school learning. Nevertheless, Gee maintains that video games can challenge students, and students can learn from a video game if the connection between conventional learning and the game is made. Though most games will not teach students algebra (though some will), they encourage reading and critical literacy, regardless of the game. For purposes of eventually redefining literacy there is a critical step between being able to make a connection among the mental ability required to navigate a game, as well as the academic usefulness of the game itself. A game will usually have a comprehensive story, text, goals and objectives. Video games create a medium for literature that is enticing, challenging, and enjoyable. There is learning and comprehension within the games, and this forms an all-new way of approaching a story.

The new literacy required to play many video games is relatively recent and illustrates the ways New Media alters the artist-medium-participant dynamic. Video games also illustrate the range of aesthetic experiences and "texts" available through New Media—and which can properly be considered to belong to any contemporary definition of literature and literacy. As Gee observes, in reference to being able to navigate a video game as opposed to other, more familiar tasks, he says "suddenly all my baby-boomer ways of learning and thinking, for which I had heretofore received ample rewards, did not work" (2). It should be obvious, as it was to Gee, that New Media requires in some ways a new set of literary competencies, and in others a different application of traditional competencies. Modern gaming demonstrates that literature is, certainly, changing. There is a disconnect, to be sure, between the preconceived literary practices of Gee and those required to master a video game, yet the push towards a definition of literature that can include the likes of video games depends on challenging what it means to be literate. It

works in conjunction with what was, but is also wholly different, and requires a new mindset, an aesthetic lens and a distinction from the participator as to the basics of literacy: reading, thinking, analyzing textual information, even visual information.

Games are changing the people who use them as well. They create a group that doesn't want shortcuts, that doesn't want a weak experience, and that certainly want to be as invested as possible in what it is that they are participating. As Gee points out, "designers could make the games shorter and simpler. That's often what schools do with their curriculums. But gamers won't accept short or easy games. So game designers keep making long and challenging games and still manage to get them learned…If you think about it, you see a Darwinian sort of thing going on here" (Gee 3). It's evolutionary then. It's part of a change that is happening in learning and in literacy, it's important because it shows a growth in the acceptance of challenging media and a growth in the willingness to learn it. If the principles implemented in video games were applied to all of New Media, it could potentially promote a desire to expand the literacy inherent in many of the media and help establish them as literature. It may not be spearheading the campaign for New Media, but video games are a driving force in what is being accessed by a large group since the decade preceding the 21st century.

New Media might feel like a broad interpretation of what is happening to literature, but with the advent of e-readers, tablets, more personal and user-friendly websites, and applications, not to mention the continuing presence and growth of comic books and graphic novels, the interpretation feels more specific. New Media is literature. It expands literature. It creates new forms and new media through which literature may emerge; and, most importantly, it changes what we mean by the word literature. Whether

these changes are truly as beneficial as they seem is yet to be seen, but the interactivity inherent in the more technical areas of iPads and blogs, the aesthetic response that is nurtured by the new presentation of literature, the visuals of a Kindle, or a copy of the graphic novel *The Arrival*, definitely affect the participator in ways they probably were not affected before. A new way of thinking needs to emerge for this New Media that utilizes both literature and the aesthetic. A graphic novel isn't particularly a book for children, though it is interesting to pay attention to why picture books are so beneficial for children, and why an iPad is infinitely more than just a glorified MP3 player.

New Media cannot be dismissed as a passing phase in literature; its impact on literacy is real and growing. In February 2011, the sales of digital books tripled from the year before, and in 2013, for the first time, digital books surpassed their physical counterparts. If it were simply to be labeled as a fad it would be dismissing history and ignoring just how important these technologies have become to our culture.

Chapter 2:

Literature Then. Literacy Now

Foundations For a Re-Evaluation

"It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore"

- Theodore W. Adorno

This argument centers on what literacy is. However, literacy is a tough term to identify, in any form. In order for a redefinition to happen, a look at what it has meant to be literate needs to happen. As the definition of literature changes, and as New Media works its way into that definition, what is considered literacy has to change as well. Later in this chapter will look at what is happening with literature itself rather extensively, but for now it is time to describe how preexisting notions of what it means (and meant) to "be literate" affects any real change in literacy *now*. The goal is to track literacy as close to the present as possible, and in order to do this a good deal of time will be spent looking at Raymond William's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. In *Keywords* Williams takes care to present some of the most important words in 20th century culture, a subject he also explored in *Culture and Society: 1780-1950.* Williams informs the reader that "a lot of the basis, it would seem, from which the term 'literacy' sprouted its legitimacy would be from the use of its negative, 'illiterate'" a term that "usually meant poorly read or ill-educated" (184). Obviously, the reverse would all but coin itself; "literacy" means, conveniently enough, well read or learned. In order to fully discuss literacy, then, this argument needs to pay close attention to the literature that makes it possible. But can literature really be so narrowly defined? Williams also says that "at the same time many, even most poems and plays and novels are not seen as

literature; they fall below its level, in a sense related to the old distinction of *polite*

learning; they are not 'substantial' or 'important' enough to be called works of literature"

(186). If certain works (or complete genres) fall outside of the term "literature," then our

notions of literacy get a little convoluted as well. By this standard, very few are

"literate". Williams indicates that this view of literacy was not originally the case,

pointing out that from the 14th century it meant to learn from reading, and before that, its

predecessors (etymologically speaking) were quite similar (184). "Thus a man of

literature, or of *letters*, meant what we would now describe as a man of wide reading"

(184).

The definition of literacy presented by Williams provides an etymology and a

history, of sorts, of the word "literacy", and an indication that it started as a much more

neutral term that has since acquired some of its culturally exclusive connotations as

various groups attempted to make class-based distinctions between those of "vulgar"

taste and the "refined" taste of the elite. So, not surprisingly, just as mediated texts are

taking us back to a time when image is at least as important as the written word, it is

forcing us to return to the original meaning of literacy – learning from reading.

Now that a brief outline of literacy has been established, some time currently

needs to go to how literature can fit in a visual, or aesthetic framework. For this we

continue with Williams as he documents the change he was seeing in literature as a

whole. "Clearly", says Williams, "the major shift", away from art as considered 'any

human skill' to a more specialized, and more socially prestigious skill, "represented by

the modern complex of literature, *art, aesthetic, creative* and *imaginative* is a matter of

social and cultural history" (186). This shift is the same shift that has yet to come in to its

own in this chapter's proposed redefinition of literacy. As the literature itself changes, or

molds to encompass not just literature but also art, the aesthetic, and even what is

considered creative and imaginative, changes as well. These shifts occur, as Williams

notes, because of "social and cultural history." This history is continually moving

forward, and by no means is it leaving literature behind. The term "literary" has,

according to Williams "acquired two unfavorable senses, as belonging to the printed

book, or to past literature rather than to active contemporary writing and speech" – an

issue that permeates written texts, but that can be overcome through a change in the

literature that allows it to become a representation of, or even a part of, the present – "or

as (unreliable) evidence from books rather than 'factual inquiry'" (187). If these two

things represent what is considered unfavorable to Williams, then it can be assumed that

what is (historically and contemporarily considered) literary is what *was* and what *is*

printed (words on a page), and that it is at least somewhat less reliable than good old,

face-to-face inquiry, and as such allows for the New Media associated with a change in

literature to seemingly embrace both of these negatives. This nineteenth-century notion of

literacy has now been directed toward the New Media and its "readers"; since these

readers focus a portion of their interaction on images instead of words they are deemed

"less literate", though this argument will explain why this hardly seems fair.

     Williams has demonstrated that the meanings of literature and literacy have

shifted in response to specific social concerns about the reliability of literature and the

abstract ideas of the "vulgar" and the "elite", the aesthetic, and timeliness over the

centuries. Thus, it's possible for these terms to shift again in response to emergent literary

forms and a world in which class distinctions are now largely monetary and have little to

do with the historical prerequisites of the European aristocracy (and language use in general). These days, the upper (economic) class is as likely to be as "illiterate" in "serious literature" as the uneducated lower class. It is typically the middle-class that earnestly aspires to mastery of the classics and serious literature. So the class foundations upon which these distinctions were made have largely collapsed and become something else. Literacy can no longer be confined to suspect notions of literary merit that reinforce the values and prejudices of a tiny cultural elite. Rather, it now embraces literary forms unimagined in previous generations. Since it is a visual change that is happening, it is, as always, important to know that the aesthetic responses to literature are the driving factor behind what literacy means to New Media. If the aesthetic aspect of aesthetic literature is ignored, it is the same as it once was, literature. There is a more cognitive reaction that needs to come along with literacy in the 21st century, one that interacts with the literature, sees the pictures, chooses a course, enjoys or dislikes what it sees, and ultimately makes a judgment as to its effect on the reader. The aesthetic aspect of the literature can now be used to describe two things simultaneously. According to Williams, "the adjective aesthetic, apart from its specialized uses in discussion of art and literature, is now in common use to refer to questions of visual appearance and effect" (32), and yet, as it evolves even further is now able to be a part of both. The adjective "aesthetic" can be used to describe literature in the specialized sense of beauty and taste and the resulting effects on the reader in a thorough and thought provoking way that words and stories have always done, but it can also describe this new visual aspect to literature. Williams, still in *Keywords,* does have an interesting point about what it was that people were determining, or not determining, to be aesthetic. He says that "a new

category of popular literature or the sub-literary has then to be instituted, to describe the

works which may be *fiction* but which are not *imaginative* or *creative*, which are

therefore devoid of aesthetic interest, and which are not art" (186). This is in reference to

the old definition of literature, as poems and most fiction were not meeting the criteria for

actual literature, and making those who partook in such works illiterate. This idea has

changed, and is solidly different, leading up to, and including, the beginnings of the 21st

century. The change happened when literacy was redefined for the first time, and the

same change is happening now, except with New Media as opposed to the introduction of

"popular literature" or the "sub-literary". Dwight Macdonald talks about how, in 1952, a

certain set of books became the paragon of socially elite "after dinner" literature.

> For $249.50, which is (for all practical purposes) $250, once could buy, in
>
> 1952, a hundred pounds of Great Books: four hundred and forty-three
>
> works by seventy-six authors, ranging chronologically and in other ways
>
> from Homer to Dr. Mortimer J. Adler, the whole forming a mass
>
> amounting to thirty-two thousand pages, mostly double-column,
>
> containing twenty-five million words squeezed into fifty-four volumes.
>
> (135)

These books ushered in a new conversation on what it meant to be literate, and what

works were considered literature. Macdonald points out, however, that "The books were

selected by a board headed by Dr. Robert Hutchins…and Dr. Adler" and "the novelty of

the set and to a large extent it *raison d'etre* is the Syntopicon, a two-volume index to the

Great Ideas in the Great Books" (135). This puts a lot of historical importance on just a

couple shoulders, but it did cause a major shift in what was being read, and why.

Macdonald also references Dr. Hutchins himself, pointing out perhaps the most important idea for this collection of works (and, perhaps, for a major shift in the canonization of certain literatures in the mid-century), quoting "'This set of books,' says Dr. Hutchins in 'The Great Conversation,' a sort of after-dinner speech that has somehow become Volume I of Great Books, 'is the result of an attempt to reappraise and re-embody the tradition of the West for our generation'" (136), which it appears to have done, as many of these works are now unarguably a major part of what is considered canon.

There were only three real criteria for selecting these seminal books, it would seem, and Macdonald highlights them, "the Board seems to have shifted between three criteria that must have conflicted as often as they coincided: which books were most influential in the past, which are now, which ought to be now" (136). Though this has countless potential ramifications, one in particular that Macdonald points out is that "Cicero and Seneca were more important in the past than Plato and Aeschylus but are less important today; in excluding the former and including the later, the Board honored the second criterion over the first" (136). This was an interesting process, and it is even more interesting to see that this selection of works is what really set the standard for literacy in the second half of the 20th century. So, "we now come to the question: Why a set at all? Even if the selection and the presentation were ideal, should the publishers have spent two million dollars to bring out the Great Books, and should the consumer spend $249.50 to own them?" (142-143). Macdonald continues this thought by explaining the opinion of the more fervent Great Books enthusiasts: that "The Books have been preserved for us only through the vigilance of their leaders" (143). Comically enough, Macdonald knows that this form of static, mandated, canonized literature is not

immediately appealing to the masses and notes "that the public bought less than 2,000 sets of the Great Books in 1952 and 1953 while last year they bought twenty-five times as many – this shows that Culture, like any other commodity, must now be "sold" to Americans" (150). It is this creation, and this "selling" of the canon and what it means to be literate that begins the more current debate on what "good literature" is, and how we define what makes someone literate.

Therefore, as aesthetic literature breeds a new literacy, what it means to be literate changes with it, and how people read and how people learn, and most importantly how people d*etermine* what it means to be literate, changes.

Making this connection, Tuman, in *Word Perfect: Literacy in the Computer Age*, asks "how else are we to explain the fact that while we have come to rely more heavily on pictures – at first still but now moving, even pulsating – literacy education has remained fixated on the unadorned, printed text as the embodiment of new experiences" (110)? Tuman thus draws attention to two important themes: the first, the idea that we are now, much more than ever, relying on pictures, and the second, that literacy, and literacy education, has not changed in response to our shift toward the visual. Those two ideas do not seem to fit, nor should they. As Tuman saw two decades ago, and as this thesis is reiterating even now, a change needs to occur. We live in a world where the visual is permeating almost every facet of our lives, and yet, a term as old and as important as literacy really hasn't appeared to take that in to account. He continues on, saying that a change does need to happen, and trusts that "those more open to the possibility that the literacy of the future might be substantially different from the literacy

of the past, more than an extension of a deepening of print" (111), can eventually help

make the shift in literacy that started a long time ago.

It is interesting to note that Tuman's call to update literacy education to include

visual literacy was written in the early 1990s, yet, it seems more urgent than ever.

Tuman states, "We are at the beginning of a new age of multimedia computing. New,

relatively inexpensive computer systems…will soon make it possible to place in the

hands of students tools for editing, combining, and linking hypertextually not just

pictures and words, but video and music as well" (112). A big step for New Media, these

"new" computer systems opened up a huge door to redefining literacy by putting the

ability to have all of these things at the tips of the fingers, to anyone who cared to have

them. If literacy did not need a redefinition before this, for the sake of argument, it was

at this point, when aesthetic literature was there for the taking, and not just there for those

who actively sought it out, that it *needed* the redefinition. In a very powerfully worded

paragraph, Tuman summarizes the heart of his argument. His idea that literacy needs to

be accessible to all sorts of participators precedes my argument for an aesthetic; it is a

more encompassing redefinition that calls out how literature is partaken by two different

kinds of people, the engaged, and the not so engaged. He says that

> print literacy may not be just too difficult but too narrowly focused, too removed
>
> not just from oral language but, in its sole appeal to the imagination, too abstract,
>
> too puritanical, too removed from the full range of sensual experience that life
>
> affords. No one can deny that for the engaged reader the traditional novel
>
> provides a range of imaginative pleasure that many find richer, more enjoyable
>
> than the most lavishly mounted film version – the rub is the adjective *engaged*.

> To the unengaged reader, the novel (except for the cover and what few
> illustrations it may contain) is without pleasure entirely, is a featureless series of
> identical pages, designed precisely not to catch our eye and hence draw our
> attention away from the meaning conveyed by the words. (127)

Based on this, what needs to change in a redefinition of literacy is the connotation hovering around non-engaged readers; the subtext places these readers (fully capable readers and writers for all intents and purposes) in a different sphere of literacy. To be "highly literate," or not, is a distinction that really shouldn't be happening in this era of New Media. The already vague terminology does not need additional subtle distinctions in terms of a general application, especially now that readers of all sorts can engage in literatures that they find interesting. However, the distinction between those who are "well-read" in the traditional sense, and those who are highly visually literate may continue. Ideally, this distinction will no longer exist as the definition of literacy shifts.

The difficulty with Tuman's assumption is that it claims the lack of visuals is all that prevents "fully capable readers" of entering into complex fiction. Yes, we live in an the age of TLDR (too long; didn't read), but this sort of laziness and lack of intellectual curiosity will not be solved by combing images with texts. This sort of approach to complex plotting, rich characterization, and subtle ideas is a function of laziness and a self-protective reflex against taking in experiences that might challenge one's too-easy worldview.

That's why images appeal not just to those with highly refined aesthetic sensibilities and a cultivated enjoyment of well-written fiction. They appeal especially in social media, where people look at images, feel something visceral, and figure that they

"know" something about the topic of the image because they felt something. This is

great for manipulation. Show someone an image of something that will repel him or her

or make him or her scared and then claim to be the cure for it. People will be convinced

without any need for rhetoric and all its old-fashioned appeals to logic, fair

argumentation, and a comprehensive knowledge of facts and how the world works to

voluntarily want to assume the assertion is a correct one.

Literacy has certainly met a series of obstacles, forks in the road, and changes.

The path has been long, but the future of literacy, and its redefinition, is an aesthetic one,

necessitated by the change in literature itself. Williams, then Tuman, mapped out the

terminology and saw the potential for change, as does Patrick L. Courts. In *Literacy and*

Empowerment: The Meaning Makers, he continues the thought that literature can

facilitate an aesthetic response, and also that literacy doesn't have to encompass any

singular thing. Continuing that theme, Courts furthers the idea of an evolved literacy,

saying that "this literacy involves more than print literacy or the ability to read a text; it

involves the ability to use one's innate linguistic ability to both create and "read" (make

meaning of and through) the surface structures, whether they be oral or graphemic" (3).

The evolution of literacy goes beyond simply being able to read and write - once again

trying to break free of the long standing connotation - and can encompass "literatures" of

several different varieties, be they the print, oral or "graphemic" kind of literature. If, as

literature changes, the label for those who participate in that literature does not change

either, well, the terminology gets even hazier. To get a firmer grasp on the idea of

multiple literacies encompassing one, new literacy, Courts breaks down three of them:

The word *literacy*, then, suggests a state of being and a set of capabilities through which the literate individual is able to utilize the *interior world of self to act upon and interact with the exterior structures of the world* around him in order to make sense of self and other. Print literacy implies the ability to make sense of the world through the process of reading and writing; oral literacy implies the ability to make sense of the world through speaking and listening. Media literacy implies the ability to make sense of the world through a dynamic mixture of visual-audial and sometimes tactile media. (4)

The only way the interior world of self can usefully digest text, images, or some combination of the two in an effort to understand the world and one's place in it is to cultivate the capacity for critical, rational, and informed thought. So, with that, and with all three forms of literacy presented by Courts, the basis for a redefinition takes its most definitive shape. Aesthetic literature and New Media, together, specifically incorporate all three of the literacies mentioned by Courts; the print literacy still exists in many forms, with reading and writing still a large and contributing factor. The oral literacy is slightly harder to nail down, at least in terms of New Media, but as a person participates in New Media, "the ability to make sense of the world through…listening." In *The Waste Land* application by Touch Press for example, they are making use of this second type of literacy. "Media literacy" is undeniably present, as literate participators are taking full advantage of the "visual-audial" and, like an iPad, "tactile media."

If New Media is to take a place next to ink and paper as literature, an even closer look at what is generally considered *good* literature is in order.

So, what is good Literature? It's a big question. The remainder of this chapter will consider this question in relation to New Media. The search for good literature will rely primarily on established notions of the literary "canon" and the editors who compile anthologies of work deemed as "representative" of what Matthew Arnold once called "the best which has been thought and said in the world". As beneficial as looking at every available anthology preface would be, this chapter will focus on a representative cross-section of what has been published in the past twenty years. Each preface will be examined individually, the thoughts of the editor paraphrased, each preface discussed in relation to how literature is viewed, and what literature is considered worthwhile. As each preface is explored, some connections will start to emerge, and what literature means to the people that all but create, or maintain, what is canonical will start to show some sort of trend. The next step is to take up the question of how "good literature" is typically defined in a decent representative of that which was once called the canon: anthologies.

The first preface, that of general editor M.H. Abrams of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 6th Edition* is a good place to start since his ideas paved the way for the others, and at the same time builds a good cornerstone for this thesis. He mentions, with a clear purpose, that

> A vital literary culture, however, is always on the move. Our policy has therefore been to provide periodic revisions that will take advantage of newly recovered or better-edited texts, stay in touch with scholarly discoveries and the altering interests of readers, and keep the anthology within the mainstream of contemporary critical and intellectual concerns.

In preparing this sixth edition, we continue to benefit from the steady flow

of voluntary corrections and suggestions proposed by students, as well as

teachers, who view the anthology with a loyal but critical eye. (i)

In short, Abrams says what most editors' of anthologies say: what literature is doing is

moving on, and the importance of this observation is monumental to New Media and the

redefinition of literacy. Though he does not mention New Media, his thoughts on the

"altering interests of readers" is worth mention. The codex through which anthologies

are disseminated certainly precludes the academic study of New Media and the worth is

determined through the progressive thoughts on what the future holds, and how that

stacks up with the concept of New Media now. What is almost universally done when

compiling an anthology is a mixture of having to look back, and having to look forward.

In hopes that literature does not stagnate, this process needs to start adding more weight

to looking forward. Input on what was only improves what is, and does not allow for any

useful growth towards the future, yet an in-depth look at what is happening, the process

of change that has to naturally occur as our technology changes and our learning changes,

will certainly help provide the growth that is needed. If readers are changing, and what

readers are reading is changing, then what is determined to be good literature will likely

have to change as well. So, what good literature is, and what good literature will be, is a

discussion that can incorporate New Media and bridge that to what is available, what is

deemed important, and what could happen; a redefinition of literacy.

Now, New Media cannot be incorporated conventionally, and as such presents a

costly investment in the dissemination of literature that works on the codex format. It

would take a drastic change of attitude (hopefully propagated in this text), and a similarly

drastic change in the way texts are disseminated and accessed for New Media to be studied alongside traditional literature in English Departments. This idea of Abrams' also sheds some light on why academe has been so slow to embrace New Media as literature. Its relative infancy makes its cultural impact difficult to assess; are there texts that can claim to speak to a generation? Is there a Shakespeare to be found among the producers of New Media? Does it have sufficient possibilities for shaping our culture – morally or intellectually? It is within these questions that we claim the value of the "classics," and it is within the relatively cheap, and definitely convenient anthologies that these "classic" works are available to students. There is light at the end of the tunnel for New Media, however. What used to feel like an insurmountable expanse can now be bridged. Just as whiteboards replaced chalkboards, and smart boards replaced whiteboards, computers, e-readers, and tablets are becoming commonplace. For instance, *Business Insider* details the growth of tablets, saying "Tablets are the fastest ramping computing device in history. Shipments have grown from a relatively paltry 17 million shipments in 2010, to 65 million shipments in 2011, and are on pace to hit 122 million in 2012" (1). This trend not only helps further establish New Media in everyday life, but is the catalyst that encourages others to begin adapting, especially anthologies, to a new kind of literacy and its aesthetically founded consumption by students and non-students alike.

In the *Norton Anthology of World Literature 3rd edition* General Editor Martin Puchner adds another stone on the path to re-defining literacy by doing just what needs to be done. He looks at what is happening, what is intimidating readers, what the reader

wants, or even needs, to be able to appreciate the good literature contained within an anthology. He says that:

> The mere presentation of an anthology--page after page of unbroken text-- can feel overwhelming to anyone, but especially to an inexperienced student of literature. To alleviate this feeling, and to provide contextual information that words might not be able to convey, we have added hundreds of images and other forms of visual support to the anthology. Most of these images are integrated into the introductions to each major section of the anthology, providing context and visual interest. (3)

With this, Puchner hits the nail on the head by noticing the current climate of readers of literature. He, through the anthology, is able to at least try to make an attempt at making an aesthetic impact. Literature needs to evolve, and, like previously mentioned, it needs to adapt to the reader, not the other way around. It is relieving to see that Puchner asks "Hasn't literature lost some of its luster for us, who are faced with so many competing media and art forms? Like no other art form or medium, literature offers us a deep history of human thinking" (13). Most people are more likely to engage in entertainments in which someone else has created the images for them. If literature must compete with other parts of culture, it will lose the battle. Martin realizes this, and others need to as well. He notices that literature is like nothing else when presenting thought, it is the pinnacle from which history and human thought may best be viewed. And with that knowledge he knows that his anthology, the thing he is presenting to the world as good literature, needs to compete, it needs to change, and it needs to make literature relevant in a modern era. To do this it needs to be altered in such a way that it is freed from the

codex and transformed into a multi-modal digital experience. It is a beautiful first step, and a wonderful example of forward thinking in regards to literature.

It isn't just Puchner and Abrams that are aware of the need to for change. Paul Lauter, as the editor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature 5th Edition* and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature 6th edition* wants to look at literature in a special way. When the first *Heath Anthology* was in the works, Lauter says, they "had in mind *change* – change in the definition of what constituted 'American Literature' and change, too, in approaches to teaching it" (xiii). The result, or (and) foundation, of this change is also grounded in a changing literature. "Such advances are now facts of academic and scholarly life. Today's students can, and mostly do, study a range of writers unimaginable even to visionary professors twenty-five or thirty years ago" (xiii). But it isn't just sheer volume that is changing. Lauter continues: "What we perhaps did not adequately perceive was how the process of change, once begun, would lead to further opportunities and new challenges" (xiii). This is where the future of literature comes in to play. As literature changes and more and more becomes available, and as other outside forces fight for attention, literature needs to adapt in order to contend with not just media and art, but with its own, continuously growing self. With that being the case, the *Heath Anthology* incorporates what it has to in order to contend with this issue. It includes several means through which the literature can grow. Lauter tells the reader of the preface that "the *Instructor's Guide* [for the anthology] is also accompanied by a unique new instructor CD-ROM with images, downloadable teaching material, and other easily adapted resources designed to bring new energy to teaching with the *Heath*" (xiv). Much like Puchner and the *Norton*, Lauter wants to expand the effectiveness of his

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anthology to compete with the other forms available to a modern world. The aesthetic

inclusions, the CDs and the extra materials are even further enhanced by the *Heath*'s

continual use of "the anthology's helpful Web site at http://college.hmco.com/lauter5e"

(xiv). As was the case, and will be the case, the people who need to cater literature to an

increasingly crowded market are taking the literature and spearheading the evolution of

New Media. Lauter says that "we want to urge our colleagues and students to shape

approaches to less well-known authors that help fulfill the promise of a curriculum that is

truly excellent, truly diverse, and truly informed" (xiv). This shaping of approaches is an

important response to New Media, a response that will most definitely, as Lauter wants,

create diversity.

And so, Lauter states that "another major goal of the *Heath Anthology* has been to

broaden our understanding of what constitutes the 'literary'. On the one hand, we want to

provide students with a large selection of well-known texts whose literary power and

cultural relevance had been established by generations of critics and readers" (xvii), yet,

there is also a need to incorporate new forms of literature, forms like "…a number of

graphic narratives by Art Spiegelman, Lynda Barry, and others. In addition, each volume

includes a glossy insert of paintings, photographs, book jackets, and documents that

illuminate the culture of each historical period" (xviii). To include forms of New Media

like CD's, websites, graphic novels, and aesthetic guides, ranging from paintings and

photographs to book jackets and documents is exactly what literature needs to do to make

a re-definition of literacy viable. Even if some of the more technical vehicles of New

Media need time to become more affordable, and therefore more readily available to

students in academic settings, it would appear that definitions of literature and literacy are beginning to change in response to the emergence of New Media.

Even though specific stories may not come in a form with pictures or websites with every anthology, the pattern continues amidst the most popular. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature 6th Edition*'s General Editor Nina Baym might not have fancy full-color inserts in the 2002 edition of the best selling American anthology, but the *Norton* knows that it needs to keep up if it wants to keep producing useful and applicable anthologies. Baym says in her preface "editors have worked closely with teachers who assign the book and, through these teachers, with the students who use it" (xvii). It is with this idea, if the system works, that literature can change most actively. More recently, in the 2011 8th edition, Norton has created and included a companion website to work side by side with the physical text. It includes:

- Over 1000 Illustrations
- Over 300 Explorations to stimulate critical thinking and generate paper topics
- Hundreds of Annotated Links to related sites
- Cross-references to the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*
- Connections with the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*
- Comprehensive Search
- The Norton Online Archive, a searchable electronic library of over 150 literary texts and downloadable audio files, annotated by the editors, to supplement the *Norton Anthology*

- Seamus Heaney's introduction to his new verse translation of *Beowulf* (wwnorton.com)

This website introduces a very reassuring look at the direction a highly recognizable name in anthologies is going. Good literature doesn't mean anything if it doesn't have a readership. As teachers and students provide publishers with feedback on their reading preferences and habits, that which the academic publishing establishment defines as literature can, and should, begin to reflect the emergence of stories created in New Media. As Baym asserts, "canons are not fixed," they "emerge and change" (xvii). This is monumentally important, since with this one idea New Media gains by leaps and bounds, and any solid, timeless definition of "good literature" takes a mortal blow. What is good literature? Well, it might not be that simple.

A divergence, thanks to *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama 9th Edition* edited by X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, leads the conversation down a slightly different path. In the preface to the introduction the two editors' of this edition focus their view on literature toward the physical act of reading. It is with this idea that the conversation about good literature and redefining literacy can deviate from change, and instead look at reading itself, instead of what is being read. Talking about how to read literature Kennedy and Gioia say that "we assume that appreciation begins in delighted attention to words on a page" (xlv), and continue that sentiment with "it is wrong to read a literary work by any light except that of the work itself" (xlv). This is an interesting idea if this thesis wants to hinge a redefinition on an aesthetic trend, but the information from chapter 1 helps solidify that this idea is the hinge. If we, as readers, are to determine literature good, and in effect be able to redefine literacy, it is this look at

how to read literature, and how to appreciate it, that will help readers make the determination, to help form the new definition. What Kennedy and Gioia want this book to accomplish is to "introduce… students to the appreciation and experience of literature in its major forms" (xlix). To appreciate literature, it has to be read as the text itself and derive its "goodness" from that, but the phrase "many forms" leaves the door open for New Media, which this thesis argues, is definitely a major form. Books, therefore, "should not only be informative and accurate but also lively, accessible, and engaging" (xlix). This is what literature needs to be, if it is to evolve, and as New Media continues to grow, its presence in literature and literacy will grow as well. Author Michael Chabon says in the preface to *The Best American Short Stories 2005*, which he also edited that year, "I would like to propose expanding our definition of entertainment to encompass everything pleasurable that arises from the encounter of an attentive mind with a page of literature" (xiv). With that proposition Chabon continues with what was being brought up by Kennedy and Gioia, and what this thesis wants to highlight; that literature is entertainment, but, within that same category, literature is encompassing, literature is important and literature is what a literate person participates in.

Despite an apparent naiveté regarding the emergent forms of literature, this group of editors and publishers help make the case for New Media without ever having intended to do so. The academic publishing establishment continues to call for change, insist on the importance of pleasure, etc., and in this way foresee a need for the shift in what is considered academic literature, and, more generally, literature.

As this chapter comes to a close it will shift to some ideas from literary theory. Using literary theory this chapter can approach, and hopefully tie up, a few loose ends

regarding literature in general. Jonathan Culler in *Literary Theory A Very Short Introduction* responds to the question of literature, saying

> But 'What is literature?' might also be a question about distinguishing
>
> characteristics of the works known as literature: what distinguishes them
>
> from non-literary works? What differentiates literature from other human
>
> activities or pastimes? Now people might ask this question because they
>
> were wondering how to decide which books are literature and which are
>
> not, but it is more likely that they already have an idea what counts as
>
> literature and want to know something else: are there any essential,
>
> distinguishing features that literary works share? (20)

Literature, as a term, seems to carry some sort of unearned connotation, but Culler goes

on, explaining "literature" as a convention that has existed for thousands of years, and

then attempts to clarify that "literature", as it is seen now, is much more recent. He takes

it back only 200 years, to the early 19th century. Before that, he writes, the term was

associated with "writings" or "book knowledge" and that according to more

contemporary western sensibilities it is much more closely associated with "imaginative

writing" (21). He even goes so far as to say, "It is tempting to give it up and conclude that

literature is whatever a given society treats as literature" (21-22). Giving up, though,

would not be beneficial to anyone. Literature has to have some sort of denotative

meaning for "good" literature to exist, which is necessary for a new definition of literacy

to exist. Culler defines literature as an "aesthetic object" when he says that

> Literature has been seen as a special kind of writing, which, it was argued,
>
> could civilize not just the lower classes but also the aristocrats and the

middle classes. This view of literature as an aesthetic object that could

make us 'better people' is linked to a certain idea of the subject, to what

theorists have come to call 'the liberal subject,' the individual defined not

by a social situation and interests but by an individual subjectivity

(rationally and morally) conceived as essentially free of social

determinants. (Culler 37)

And so, while casually name-dropping literature in with the aesthetic, a discovery is

made where good literature may be little more than this "aesthetic object". A connection

between the literature and the individual within this aesthetic object highlights an

overarching topic in this discussion. Individuals are not entirely free of social

determinants. They are, to a large extent, socially determined. Their labor, their class,

gender, race, and various powerful discourses shape them into who they are. Literature,

which is a product of these over-determined individuals, is likewise contingent – a

representation and a product of these forces. For this reason, there isn't some

transcendent canon; rather there are texts that reflect the various social determinants of

their historical moment. This is another iteration, then, of assertions made earlier:

because literature is embedded in history and socially determined, that which we define

as literature can change as various social and historical forces reshape that which we call

the literary. Literature, then, is not, according to Culler, "essentially free of social

determinants", and neither are the participators "blank slates", who, completely

unaffected by social factors, can be variably swayed by the context of a book to conform

to its ideas. Though books may or may not have this numinous power to ennoble or

enlighten us, the aesthetic properties still exist. Even still, good literature is partly what

the readers of anthologies make it out to be, it's what is engaging and beneficial to them as active participators in the literature, ranging from *Moby Dick* to *The Amazing Spider-Man*. The other part is still a cultural term that transcends individual experience and taste, and is determined by the collective experiences and tastes of scholars, critics, editors, and other expert readers, all of whom carry a considerable amount of social authority.

As the look at good literature unfolds, its connection to the aesthetic principles behind New Media almost naturally appears. In a way similar to that of this thesis, Culler makes a connection between what literature is, and how there is an aesthetic trend connected to literature. He reflects on what he has noticed about literature and says that

> The features of literature discussed so far [Literariness outside of literature, Treating texts as literature, Conventions of literature, The nature of literature] may be brought together under the general heading of the aesthetic function of language. Aesthetics is historically the name for the theory of art and has involved debates about whether beauty is an objective property of works of art or a subjective response of viewers, and about the relation of the beautiful to the true and the good. (32)

Therefore, aesthetically speaking "to consider a text as literature is to ask about the contribution of its parts to the effect of the whole but not to take the work as primarily destined to accomplishing some purpose, such as informing or persuading us" (33).

Essentially, "a good story is tellable, strikes readers or listeners as 'worth it'. It may amuse or instruct or incite, can have a range of effects, but you can't define good stories in general as those that do any one of these things" (Culler 33). In the same way as

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these "good stories", defining good literature is not just a case of saying it can do any one good thing, but good literature can't exist without active, literate readers to propagate and legitimize it.

Terry Eagleton says that "value-judgments would certainly seem to have a lot to do with what is judged literature and what isn't – not necessarily in the sense that writing has to be 'fine' to be literary, but that is has to be *of the kind* that is judged fine: it may be an inferior example of a generally valued mode" (9). Here Eagleton clarifies that the judgment of literature, even good literature, might center on "value judgments," but despite having some sort of generally accepted "mode" it is judged behind and beyond by the reader of literature, exemplified here when he goes on to say that "value-judgments are notoriously variable" (9), and "the value-judgments by which [literature] is constituted are historically variable," that "they refer in the end not simply to private taste, but to the assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others" (14). This is important; it says that literature is a power play. It may be influenced by individual taste, but the most solid grounding it has is with what the powerful group says it is. Hopefully there is not a group of people trying to inhibit the literary qualities of New Media; however, there are institutions that adhere strongly to the established canon. But, if anthologies begin to listen to their readers, and if change begins happening within the canon, as it appears to be happening, New Media can make its way in and, with that, good literature can be what is useful and important, especially if that means adapting through technology and comics. A redefinition of literacy can only happen if a redefinition can happen to literature.

The pathway that leads to change is outwardly linear, beginning with the codex itself, and is dependent, therefore, on the progression to the literature itself, all the way to the definition of literacy. This definition develops further with the introduction of New Media and perpetuates the need, and establishes the foundation for, a re-evaluation of literacy.

Chapter 3:

The Call For Technological Literacy

"If we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow."

- John Dewey

As this argument continues, space will be dedicated to the application of the New Media and the extended ideas of literacy. Everything that has been said, or will be said, would serve little purpose without legitimate application. Literature is changing. So what? The realm of literacy has expanded. Why does it matter? The answers to these questions exist in multiple areas, but none more than in education. The importance of these ideas in education is two-fold. First, the implementation of New Media in a classroom is as important as it is inevitable, and understanding the progression and the application should prove instrumental. Second, the classification of students and the general populace as literate expands with the redefinition. Literature is growing to incorporate New Media, and as the definition of literature expands and grows, that same redefinition develops a space for more literate participators, participators who need to be recognized.

The push for incorporating mediated literature in the classroom is not a new concept, but it is a concept that is becoming infinitely more feasible. Comic books and graphic novels have never presented much more of a financial burden than a typical trade paperback, but legitimacy issues have hampered their chances as stacks of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Of Mice and Men* gather dust, paid for a decade ago by a teacher who had to pay for them herself. Even as this mediated literature becomes more readily

recognized, the time and effort involved in buying new books and building new lesson plans outweighs the potential benefits of the new books. This is a fact that needs to change; a new way to think about literacy is like a threshold to the future of education, a way to get aesthetic literature in to the classroom. More technical versions of the New Media – tablets, e-readers, websites, videogames – can themselves get incorporated with moderate cost, much like computers or smart boards, tablets or e-readers can be a one time investment for extended periods of time, allowing teachers to formulate class time to incorporate New Media.

Cynthia L. Selfe opens up her book, written in 1999, *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*, by informing the reader "this is a book written for teachers of English studies, language arts, and composition. It is about literacy, but it is also about technology" (xix), and continues, illustrating the importance of technology in the classroom, saying, "Literacy alone is no longer our business. Literacy and technology are. Or so they must become" (3). Selfe presents us with an interesting state of being; fourteen years ago she noticed a need for technology in the classroom, and now the need continues, to an even larger extent;

> Who would have predicted that English studies, composition, and language arts teachers at the beginning of the twenty-first century would be so desperately needed? And needed not only for our expertise with language and literacy studies but for the attention we pay – as humanist scholars, teachers, and citizens – to the complex set of social, political, educational, and economic challenges associated with technology. But here we are. (4)

The need comes in force with the advent of more mediated literature, and as technology

becomes a part of every day life, and more affordable – more so now than ever before –

the need for teachers of English studies, composition, and language arts is all the more

apparent. Much like the need for literacy to incorporate this technology, teachers need to

embrace *cultural literacy* to its fullest extent; only then would the redefinition be

possible.   It shouldn't be a hard sell; Selfe even puts it plainly, stating, "for teachers,

literacy instruction is now inextricably linked with technology" (5). Literacy is becoming

reliant on technology as technology becomes more prevalent, which is why New Media is

in need of closer recognition, and why the definition for literacy needs to grow to

encompass it. The important distinction between a mediated language arts classroom and

a technologies classroom is the interaction with the New Medias and the aesthetic

literature, those things that help create literate students in the 21st century. The ability to

interact with the literature is ever more present in today's classrooms, and the benefits are

readily seen:

> For money strapped school, technology can be a boon for students to visit
>
> places virtually and learn about a variety of new and meaningful topics
>
> that interest them. Teachers can use technology not only to inspire and
>
> motivate but also to create meaningful learning experiences where
>
> students learn by immersing themselves in-depth in topics they are
>
> studying. Some examples of such use include WebQuests, Multimedia
>
> presentation, and computer based laboratory in in science classes.
>
> (Sharma, 15-16)

With a redefinition of literacy, the implementation of New Media as a type of literature is essential in learning, as well as the construction of a new type of literature for a time when New Media is a part of everyday life.

For a staggering twenty years, "since 1993, an official national project to expand technological literacy has been launched in America's schools, homes, and workplaces, changing the ways in which both literacy educators and the publics they serve think about, value, and practice literacy" (5). In 1993 technological devices such as tablets or e-readers were still science fiction, personal computers were not a classroom mainstay, and even then there were those who saw the need for literacy to take technology under its wings. This trend is not going away either; quite the contrary. Technology has been edging its way in to schools for decades, and more and more, as more technologically specific competencies emerge, and as schools begin implementing large portions of technological curriculum standards, the need for the population to be literate under the redefinition becomes much more crucial. If these implementations are changing how people "think about, value, and practice literacy", then the implementation needs to be universally categorizable.

In Anne Haas Dyson's book *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture, and Classroom Literacy* she spends the majority of her time using popular culture and children's interests to form an interactivity with literacy that is fun, easily accessible, and effective. Students get to become familiar with comic book heroes, use the visual, as well as the written aspects of the comics, and create stories of their own. In effect, the students get to participate with the literature, and are gaining important skills in the process. Their understanding of, and their participation with, the literature

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can measure their literacy.   I mention this in conjunction with the technological idea above to reaffirm the multiple aspects of New Media in the classroom. New Media encompasses the whole range of aesthetic literature that can be found between comics and computers. Dyson's ideas let students get the opportunity to engage with visual literature, and this engagement allows for the students to foster their literacy as they participate and utilize pictures as well as words to create new meanings that they may not have been able to make otherwise, all while expanding their knowledge of the literature and possibly even encouraging their literacy at the same time.

New Media and literacy are ever more intrinsically linked, a trend that is sure to endure, and will continue to be a large factor in the lives of students and non-students alike. An education that incorporates New Media and that embraces the redefinition of literacy can prepare students for the mediated world that is becoming exponentially more reliant on technology and visual stimulation. Gayle H. Gregory and Lin Kuzmich in *Differentiated Literacy Strategies for Student Growth and Achievement in Grades 7-12* preface the rest of their book saying that "the future belongs to those of our students who attain the empowering level of literacy to reinvent themselves over a lifetime" (x). To attain those skills in literacy the students need to be educated in the literature that they will encounter, and, as they grow older, there will be a need for students to be familiarized with New Media. Therefore, the classification for literacy needs to incorporate that knowledge. Gregory and Kuzmich look to the 1991 SCANS report to reinforce the importance of the use of technology when teaching students, saying, "twenty-first-century literacy requires more from our students than a basic ability to read, write, speak, and listen. According to the landmark SCANS report (U.S. Secretary of

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Labor, 1991), there are five competencies that twenty-first-century workers must learn from their schools" (xv). These five competencies are:

1. Identification, organization, planning, and allocation of resources

2. Working with others

3. Acquiring and using information

4. Understanding complex interrelationships

5. Working with a variety of technologies

The importance of technological literacy in school-aged students is tantamount to New Media and the redefinition of literacy. Gregory and Kuzmich section off the important key points of technological literacy, starting with a definition. They say that it is the process of "using reading, writing, speaking, and listening in multimedia venues to create products and demonstrations of learning" (139). With the addition of a visual participation in the literacy it can encompass even more, especially now. They explain its purpose: "Multidimensional thinking and production through access, use, and creation employing technology-based tools and strategies" (9), and finally point out the critical factors involved with the implementation of technological literacy:

- Questioning authenticity: Applying criteria to establish author and Web site credibility; detecting assumptions, purpose, and clarity (139)

- Searching for information: Using the nature and structure of Web-based information to find what is needed; demonstrate dimensional or embedded thinking and solve problems (139)

- Media orientation: Determining the best method of conveying meaning and presenting the product (139)

- Production: Using computer-based and other multimedia production to

   demonstrate literacy competencies and produce products to convey

   meaning, solutions, and adaptations (139)

- Demystifying directions: Understanding and using directions in

   multiple forms and verbal or written construction of sequential steps

   for use of technological and other tools and processes (139)

It is amazing to see these implementation methods, created twenty-two years ago,

providing a cornerstone for New Media and an aesthetic reshaping of electronic literacy.

As the decades pass, all of this, and more, become more crucial to the learning process

for future, active, members of our modern society. In 2014 Bahador Sadeghi, Ramin

Rhamany, and Eskandar Doosti discovered in their article *L2 Teachers' Reasons and

Perceptions for Using or Not Using Computer Mediated Tools in Their Classroom* that:

> the majority of teachers generally agreed with all items that represent
>
> positive attitudes towards the use of computers in teaching practice (the
>
> mean score for all these items were above 4 that corresponds to 'agree'
>
> and 'strongly agree'). This is while those items that discourage the use of
>
> computers in classroom and teaching activities elicited disagreement or a
>
> neutral position from the participants. (667)

The five methods listed speak rather well for themselves, as does the rather

overwhelming modern approval of computer use in the classroom, but a sixth may be

necessary for our even more modern classrooms. "Active participation" should include

an engagement and an understanding, on the part of the student, of a mediated text, which

should shape more fully their literacy in the constantly progressing 21st century where

computers and tablets are easily finding their ways in to classrooms, and gladly being used by the teachers in these modern classroom. Gregory and Kuzmich noticed a trend, stating, "learning to search for information in a Web-based environment is a distinct form of literacy that is recent and evolving" (16). Here they see a divergent form of literacy themselves, that of browsing and searching for information on the Internet. It seems a rudimentary skill to most now, but that "literacy" had to be taught, and was but a step in the changing mediated world that would continue faster and faster for the next twenty years. And it's working too. They confidently state, "we could certainly cite the benefits of technological literacy for each student subgroup or population and find confirming data" (159). This is unconcealed lauding of the teaching of technological literacy, and as technological literacy joins itself in the redefinition of literacy, it finds a home, not separated from the regal associations of literacy as a whole. Many institutions are certainly recognizing the importance of technology, and this recognition is exactly what New Media and literacy need now and in the future. With the recognition should come acceptance of New Media, and the acceptance of New Media should, inevitably, lead to the redefinition of literature and literacy. The tools and the materials are there, now it is time for terminology and proper implementation.

As we move further in to the future we can begin to see the effects of the implementation methods introduced in the early to mid '90's. Introducing her collaborative effort *Media Literacy: Transforming Curriculum and Teaching*, edited by Gretchen Schwarz and Pamela U. Brown, Schwarz writes in *Overview: What is Media Literacy, Who Cares, and Why?* that "the media literacy movement may have remained dormant if not for the rapid penetration of personal computers into homes, school, and the

work place in the 1990s and the proliferation of media influences, especially those targeted specifically to young people" (9-10). It was the quick, and immersive, application of New Media that helped propel the media literacy movement, and it was the media literacy movement that ushered in the need for a broader sense of literacy. With an implementation that starts with young people the redefinition can allow for a specifically literate populace as New Media continues to evolve. Without the redefinition the terminology itself can stagnate, a seemingly small problem with some large repercussions. Without a properly labeled sense of literacy, literacy education can branch and become infinitely more convoluted, but with a more secure definition it can progress much more smoothly.

Carlos E. Cortes, in his article "How the Media Teach" notices a trend associated with media in general, appropriately making an "in school/out of school" connection to New Media. He says, "The mass media teach whether or not media makers intend to or realize it. And users learn from the media whether or not they try or are even aware of it…media serve as informal yet omnipresent non-school textbooks" (55). This furthers the application idea by showing the immense ripple effect media in general can have. Whether a redefinition happens or not, Cortes shows us that media will continue to be an omnipresent learning experience. The tricky part here is whether or not that is a good thing. Without a redefinition it is much more likely to gain a negative connotation; a subversive way to get information to people for example. Slightly better, but still not great, this pattern could be less subversive, but not nearly as effective as it could be.

In "Media Literacy and the K-12 Content Areas" Renee Hobbs establishes media as a type of literacy valuable for in the classroom, pointing out that "an increasing

number of literacy scholars and practitioners recognize that films, websites, television programs, magazines, newspapers, and even popular music are 'texts', and as such, they communicate and carry meaning to 'readers'" (80). This statement is an especially good example of where new terminology could expand the argument. With a broader sense of literacy, and an accepted realm of New Media, these "texts" and "readers" could be "literature" and "the literate." These changes should make the idea feel stronger, and more effective, which is what the redefinition of literacy should do. If it can be assumed that "practitioners" includes teachers, then what is said by Hobbs would affect students. Adding a stronger *denotative* meaning to the sentiment could open up the discussion around New Media as well as students - in regards to scholars/practitioners – and would be of particular interest to the current discussion.

James Berlin in "Students (Re)Writing Culture", outlines a course utilizing New Media, stating that "this course focuses on reading and writing the daily experiences of culture, with culture considered in its broadest formulation. It thus involves encounters with a wide variety of texts, including advertising, television, and film" (281). Students, by participating in a course like this, are purposely being presented with "texts" that don't fit in with the old definition. Though equally as valuable, without the proper understanding of these "texts", and what it means to be literate, this course could seem exponentially less productive than it actually is. Once the students understand that New Media can be representative of literature, and that being a "reader" infers literacy, the importance of the practice skyrockets. If these things can be done, then Berlin's course has much larger social implications, and helps further literacy.

To begin wrapping up this call for technical literacy, Elizabeth Thoman and Tessa Jolls note that "today information about the world around us comes to us not only through words on a piece of paper, but more and more through the powerful images and sounds of our multimedia culture" (180). The existence of New Media is undeniable, but the acceptance within our culture is what will make literacy evolve, and Thoman and Jolls notice that the evolution is happening, and it is on a large scale. Whether it is noticed or not, information is coming at us from many directions, and our culture is changing accordingly.

This aesthetic and technical growth is so important that Gregory and Kuzmich have to explain that "students who do not have this access and exposure to technological literacy in our schools will not achieve the needed level of literacy to function in our technological era" (159), and that "technological literacy prepares us for the twenty-first century by helping us all become more knowledgeable and adaptive life-long learners" (159). Those words are the cement that holds New Media and literacy together. It is life-alteringly important for students to learn to participate in New Media, and to be socially literate is to be effective in this participation. Aesthetics, New Media, and literature are the blocks that create the foundation of what literacy means in the twenty-first century, and that foundation can prepare and accommodate its participators in the aesthetic and technological world they live in.

Practical steps to heed these calls are more needed than ever. Previous chapters have thoroughly introduce a New Media and its effects on literature and literacy, and as this mediated progression continues and necessitates a call for technological literacy, the

applications in the classroom and the growing number of literate participators in, and out, of these classrooms will be needed increasingly more.

Chapter 4:

Comics and Graphic Novels and Tablets, Oh My

*"Comics are unlike any other medium in that they use both visual and written storytelling to convey their meaning which gives them an awe-inspiring level of power and a unique manner in which to **use** that power"*

- Rodney Manchester

Literary examples of this new genre are quickly making their home in every day life. A close look at a couple of these will show ways in which New Media not only feature the complexity and social significance of traditional literature, but also require additional critical and analytical skills to work with the interplay between image and text. The aesthetics of reading, and how the same terms apply to New Literature, demonstrates that the same skills (and new ones) are required to read a graphic novel as are required to read conventional "serious literature."

The final concepts in John Sutherland's *How Literature Works: 50 Key Concepts* unsurprisingly take on the change in literature this thesis has been establishing. He goes back in time to show a now accurate look into the future (present). He opens up his chapter on e-books saying

> If a poll had been taken in the mid-1960's as to who, currently, was
> the purveyor of the biggest ideas around, the winner, in all
> probability, would have been Marshall McLuhan. In the *Gutenberg
> Galaxy* (his groundbreaking monograph), McLuhan argued that the
> Western world, after five centuries, was exiting from print culture into

something entirely new. What that 'new' might be he did not

precisely define. Instead he focused on the means by which new

culture would be delivered. We are living in an era when those

systems are changing faster, and more radically, than ever before

(196).

This idea exemplifies the direction in which the way we access information is going:

away from print. Since the 1940's, when a "computer" took up 1,500 square feet and

weighed 50 tons, the technical, and visual, culture has been moving at lightning speed.

This has influenced culture in more ways than can even be addressed, but its effect on

how a person *participates* with the culture is moving away from a simple codex and

towards a highly visual medium. Sutherland uses a picture to prove the point, saying, "a

photograph is hot – its message is ambiguous. The reader, however, has to do the work

to make a comic or a cartoon meaningful" (197). This same ambiguity is what makes the

visual so valuable to what is considered "literate." The vague restraints that are adhered

to words are nowhere to be found when it comes to images.

In the same way that the visual can open up the possibilities for literacy, the

digital options are very promising. The codex can transcend the physical space of the

page and expand in its new ethereal freedom. It now encompasses not just the codex, but

the visual and the entirety of technological openness as well. A prime example is the e-

book, a device that exemplifies most of the general terminology surrounding mediated

literature. "In fact the e-book is much more than a book. Among other things, it's an

archive. Not a library book, but a book library. Secondly, it is a device for receiving and

transmitting texts, not merely delivering them" (Sutherland, 199).

Sutherland shows off his prescience once again, having noticed in his work that "the e-book has daunting potential. In the very near future it will, for example, allow sound tracks – as in movies. Or voice-over (what does Ian McEwan's voice sound like, reading his own work?). Illustration can be added" (199). E-books, and more noticeably, tablets, have since embraced these abilities, and have used them to good effect.

Additionally, comic book contributions have been firmly engrained in culture. Characters such as Batman, or Superman, are known the world over. This is thanks, in part, to the films and merchandise, but their origins, in *Detective Comics* and *Action Comics*, respectively, are still popular and have been produced serially for more than 75 years. Some of this attributed stigma comes from a generally misconstrued outlook. A contributor to the website comicbookmovie.com notices "It…doesn't help the medium's cause that there is a culture and perception that 'comics are for children" (Barklay). Though this may be true in particular instances, and it is arguably less so now, this is hardly the case 100% of the time. Comics can appeal, and do appeal, to a large age demographic, in form and content (longer issues, more morally ambiguous context, shaper, more realistic images). "The diversity of the medium, not just artistically, but in the writing as well, means that comics can be so innovative" (Barklay). Serialized comic books are not the only medium through which physical examples of New Media are shown. In an even more adult oriented category is the graphic novel.

The classification itself, the "graphic novel", says much for their purpose. The term has worked its way into the lexicon to mean a very specific thing; a larger comic book, but when broken down, the two words explain a lot about what graphic novels want to accomplish. A graphic novel is purposefully a novel. It is large, it tells a

complete story, and it appeals to a more mature audience. The graphic portion of a graphic novel only serves to add to the overall immersiveness of the experience. The previously mentioned *Maus* is a perfect example of a graphic novel, but so is Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, a deeply political, hyper-violent take on "super heroes." Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is a work of non-fiction. In *Persepolis* Satrapi writes her own autobiography, but uses images to compliment the dialog. The effect of her work is highly praised, and is yet another fantastic example of why graphic novels have literary potential.

Graphic novels require a very similar set of skills when compared to a novel. The addition of the visual, as mentioned in earlier chapters, adds yet another way through which the work can be processed. It does not detract from the work but, ideally, contributes to what it is trying to accomplish.

The addition of this aesthetic medium, be it to a comic book, a graphic novel, a tablet, an e-reader, or any other New Media enhances the literature, and not only adheres to a new look at literacy, but also requires a unique set of skills to be able to appreciate the "text", and participate in it fully. It is from this idea that the redefinition of what it means to be literate grows. As the availability of New Media grows, and as the population of participators in this new medium grows, a way to classify a proficiency with these things becomes apparent and necessary.

Chapter 5:

Re-Redefining Literacy

"Comics are a gateway drug to literacy"

- Art

Spiegelman

The goal, to this point, was to create a path to a new definition of literacy.

Literacy, as a term, has seen lots of attention, and the time has come to link together all of

the history, the aesthetic theory, the New Media, and the literature in general in to a

whole new way of describing what it means to be literate. If the reader can accept New

Media, its connection with aesthetic theory, and how it fits in with "good literature," then

the actual shift in literacy should not come as much of a shock, or even seem that

obscure. Literacy, in the process of this redefinition, encompasses what can be called a

cultural literacy. It's a process and an aptitude, it needs to grow, it needs to change and it

needs to create something new for anyone who participates in it. It's an evolution not

just of the book, but an evolution of the way one thinks about literacy. Ira Shor and

Caroline Pari, in "Critical Literacy in Action: Writing Words, Changing Worlds"

introduce the beginnings of the discussion on *cultural literacy* by explaining *critical

literacy*. *Critical literacy* is the crossroads at which we will find, in one direction,

acceptance, and the other, denial. *Cultural literacy* is, in a way, the direction towards the

good. Therefore, they begin by saying; "critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in

an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self development" (1).   The same

sentiment is continued by Anderson and Irvine, who define *cultural literacy* as "learning

to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as

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historically constructed within the specific power relations" (qtd. In Shor and Pari, 1).

Basically, "*literacy* is understood as social action through language use that develops us inside a larger culture" (Shor and Pari, 1), therefore, helping students develop cultural literacy will empower them to analyze critically the media that play such an important role in shaping them.

According to Christina T. Gibbons and Robin Varnum in their introduction to *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, the changes New Media are working on our notions of what it means to be literate were inevitable. As they discuss the journey comics have taken over time they note that in history "the balance of power between words and images which, after the invention of the printing press, shifted in favor of the word, seems now to be shifting in favor of the image" (ix). The shift that is happening may be the shift that was happening and will continue to happen. The printing press certainly reshaped literature, as well as literacy. Now, with the introduction of literary art combining words and pictures, comics – and other mediated literatures – are rapidly redefining our notions of literature and changing literacy practices. Comics by themselves were seemingly not enough it would seem. Despite the prevalence of comics during the past 100 years, the codex dominated traditional notions of literacy until very recently. The tipping point seems to have been widespread access to the Internet. Over the last 30 years, personal computers have slowly became household staples. Over the past 10 years, cell phones, e-readers and tablets, and other New Media have emerged and started influencing more and more of what we read, what we interact with, how we get our stories, our news, our entertainment and as they did so changed the way we understand all of them. The effect of the visual on a reader/participator can really create a whole

new experience. As Gibbons and Varnum point out "images seem more direct, more attractive, and more seductive than written texts" (ix), potentially drawing in even larger numbers of literate users. Myron C. Tuman in *A Preface to Literacy: An Inquiry into Pedagogy, Practice, and Progress* says that "over the last twenty years the word 'literacy' has unquestionably had lofty connotations, but its denotation seems to have been increasingly broadened to refer to the wide range of skills, verbal or otherwise, that enable people to do what they want" (169). If the term "literacy" continues to carry the connotation it has had in the past as New Media emerges in fuller force, the measure of what it means to be literate will remain static. It is this increasingly broad denotation that needs to be at the forefront of the advent of a redefinition of literacy. If, as Tuman suggests, this definition is beginning to include multiple skills, why can't it also include visual? Kevin Melrose explains that "taking into account the Bookscan figures supplied…by the CBR columnist Brian Hibbs, numbers-cruncher John Jackson Miller estimates that print sales in North America of comic books and graphic novels reached $715 million in 2012, a high not seen since 1993 or 1994" (Comicbookresources.com). In other words, the audience for comics continues to grow. Simply put, "comics is one of the most popular and pervasive media forms of our increasingly visual age" (Gibbons, Varnum ix), and with the addition of even more recent forms of New Media a redefinition of literacy is truly required. Literacy doesn't have to *change* from this redefinition, but has to *grow* to accommodate New Media, to accommodate a new generation of literate people, to accommodate an aesthetic trend that has been going on for decades and to include all of these things within it in a way that does not limit, but opens up possibilities for literacy in general.

David Barton sheds some light on why re-redefining literacy is such an involving task. In *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* he aptly points out that "looking for a precise definition of literacy may be an impossible task; the idea that complex concepts are susceptible to dictionary-like definitions is probably a myth" (18), but there is the much greater possibility of a "theory of literacy", or a way to communicate what we mean by literacy in a way that will effectively encompass all of the possible definitions (18). I believe that it is in this iteration of "literacy" that a "theory of literacy" can be adequately related. With New Media and the applications of aesthetic theory, literacy can mean something more specific; it can reference an individual's ability to participate in literature, as opposed to having to comprehend literature. New Media creates a medium, a medium which includes all sorts of literature that almost any individual can share in, allowing the aesthetic response, in conjunction with understanding, to determine what literacy is. A great deal of words have been said, but a relatable example that can sum up a large percentage of them is that "except for those occasions when we recite the alphabet, we are not conscious of letters when we speak" (Corbett, 137). It's weird to think about, but the aesthetic nature of our literacy starts with words and letters, and as New Media becomes more prominent, it is just an extension of what was an aesthetic literacy, to some extent, to begin with. Now that aesthetic can describe the language as well as the physical representation of literature there are significantly more ways in which a reader can appreciate the work visually, and just as importantly, enjoy what it has to say.

Once more in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* James Paul Gee asks "so why should we think of literacy more broadly?" (17). This is

where an expansion of the terminology surrounding literacy truly starts, and Gee, in

reference to video games, but equally applicable to all New Media, gives two very good

reasons to start with. Putting it very briefly, the first reason is that "language is not the

only important communicational system. Images, symbols, graphs, diagrams, artifacts,

and many other visual symbols are significant, more so today than ever" (17). All of

these visual elements inform one's understanding, and as such form a type of learning

that goes beyond the simple use of words by using visuals to enhance the information.

Now that computers can generate a symbol or a graph almost immediately, the effect is

equally as immediate; what would have required something wholly different only 20

years ago could now be presented visually. As it does this it changes who can, in certain

cases (mostly those who couldn't before), participate in the literatures that have emerged

during this discussion of New Media and literacy. These new means of presentation do

not diminish the importance of language, but add to it. The second reason Gee mentions

is that "even print literacy is multiple" (17), all sorts of literature are created in different

ways, and "each… has its own rules and requirements" (18). If literature is capable of

being created in different ways, and if what is considered literature is looked at broadly

enough, then what it means to be literate has to rely on these different forms. But, being

"literate" – no matter how we define the term – is in some way different than simply

being able to decode letters to read – or to look at pictures to gather the basics of plot and

characterization. In both cases, what we mean by literacy is something more specialized:

a well-trained and fully informed *critical* literacy is what we respect. That's why comics

have a bad rap. Twelve year olds can and do enjoy *The Amazing Spider-Man* and need

no specialized knowledge, training, or vocabulary to enjoy their experiences. However, a

college student, to be respectably literate in New Media cannot simply say, "Spider-Man is cool." S/he must have a sophisticated palette of critical terms and concepts in order to discuss intellectually respectable ideas relevant to Spider-Man. Otherwise, they should probably just get a Star Trek costume and assume they'll be living in their mom's basement well into old age. This cliché exists for a reason: what is respectable is intellectual rigor and creative engagement, not mere, passive enjoyment. Visual literacy requires even less initial skill than basic literacy. This is why it has been slow to gain acceptance in academic circles.

As we looked at what is considered "good literature" in chapter 2, it was hard not to see that much of what is considered canonical is considered to be so because of institution, and the tradition is hard to break. As literature changes, so should what is looked at and studied, and as that happens, literacy can change as well. Literacy, as a term, needs to encompass the changes, the additions, and the effects on the reader in order for it to gain any speed towards its redefinition.

The aesthetic aspect of new literacy is the main focus however, and as more New Media incorporate visuals, the application of aesthetic theory, by the reader, influences the definition as a whole. Wolfgang Iser in his *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* discusses aesthetic response as part of the text saying that "it is called aesthetic response because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings in to play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus" (x). When Iser wrote this in the late 1970s, New Media had barely made an impact. And this was long before the advent of e-readers and personal computers, but the link he makes with reading and the response by the reader is just as

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capable of an evolution as the form, and the term, itself. The imaginative faculty not

withstanding, the reader, in the course of an aesthetic response, has to adjust, but what if

the adjustment has already happened? Undoubtedly the differentiation will come along

with New Media, and with that comes a much more literal aesthetic response to the

literature. It is important to understand that the application of New Media does not make

literacy less important as a skill. It certainly can be argued that the addition of the visual

limits the imaginative portion of the reading experience, but what is important, as far as

literacy is concerned, is that a kind of critical engagement with the "text" still occurs, and

with fewer inhibitions. The participators will get to, even still, project their own

response, aesthetically and intellectually, on the work. The images encourage the reader

to develop his or her own aesthetic taste. The phrase "don't judge a book by its cover" is

a particularly adept way of describing the aesthetic nature of New Media. As someone

who is familiar with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, it was strange to see the iPad version

and its, for lack of a better term, creative liberties; such as modified text, branching

storyline, and interactive visuals. Readers tend to create their own mental images of the

story and the new presentation can be, undoubtedly, jarring. Even still, the interactive

element is fascinating and illuminating, and the visual can create an impressively

immersive experience. It was exactly the sort of thing that could encourage literacy and

promote thinking and conversation. This experience is what stands out the most in visual

literature, and is what could be a driving force in the redefinition of literacy. It still

allows for imagination, and yet it helps create something more at the same time. It opens

the literature up to conversation, it opens it up to interpretation, and it lets the readers

project their own aesthetic response, literally, to the literature. The only real concern

here is that taste can influence the reception of a work that non-visual literature may not. Examples include instances such as the text on the digital ink screen of a popular e-reader resembling the familiar pages of paper, but the design of the e-reader itself may contribute to the initial taste of the reader, even though the text itself may still be one of the readers' most beloved stories. Even the tastes I have seen reflected in gamers over my almost decade-long employment at GameStop vary wildly, and in almost every instance taste sways the gamer either towards or away from the game, regardless whether the game's actual content is what they want. Issues like these are, sadly, inevitable, but New Media is still young. As literacy changes, and as visual literature and New Media in general solidify themselves further within the culture, the literate population will find what it is they like, and what it is they do not like, very much like they do with literature as it was. Not everyone likes *Pride and Prejudice*, and not everyone will enjoy the art in the graphic novelization of *The Hobbit.*

Personal taste will definitely influence, by definition, the aesthetic response of the reader of visual literature. But these same responses are what make the discussion of the literature, traditional or new, much richer in terms of accessibility and readability. Even still, the emergence seen in literature from words to words *and* images is not a strange evolution for something like language. Richard Kostelanetz tracks "time and space, action and thought" through the ages and starts forming a basis for New Media and aesthetic literature; in *Visual Literature Criticism* he says that

> once time and space, action and thought, became captured in writing,
>
> literature inevitably became involved with material substances: ink, pen,
>
> papyrus, stone, paper, etc. Literature remains a communication of the

logical and expressive power of language, but to varying degrees it is also

a vehicle for communication of uniquely visual qualities. (11)

It doesn't exactly make it all the way to visual literature, per se, but Kostelanetz sees just

where things are heading, in language, and in literature. The visual potential is there, is

growing, and is very important to the literature. He doesn't stop there, however.

Kostelanetz continues to notice the aesthetic trend and eventually links the effect of

literatures' "uniquely visual qualities" with the New Media that is becoming so prevalent.

With the advent of New Media, then, "printed literature is becoming electronic literature:

nonphysical, alphanumeric symbols mixed with other images that are displayed as light

and can be stored, distributed, and enjoyed anywhere at any time" (11). Even without

pictures, literature is becoming something wholly new, and as ink and paper slowly

decline, this electronic literature is making an impact on what literature looks like, and at

the same time opens up a lot of possibilities as to how the literature is presented. It no

longer has to be static; it can change. There is undoubtedly the appeal of utilizing the

ease and online capabilities of an e-reader to read whatever, whenever, or to have a

bookshelf sitting next to you on the nightstand. But the true freedom comes in the

possibilities afforded by this medium that allow the reader to participate; to take notes, to

add graphics, or even go so far as to edit, presuming the appropriate technology, the text

to their liking. It would be hard to say that literature in one way or another has not had its

own visual component, be it the words themselves, the page layout, or even the

imagination of the reader, and as such "visual literature obviously incorporates the use of

traditional symbols for visible language, but the important point is this: "visual literature

begins where language leaves off; it extends mankind's abilities to identify, describe,

analyze, evaluate, and extoll the eneffable" (Kostelanetz 15). No matter what, literature has undeniable visual potential, and as New Media takes hold, it gradually opens up the possibilities of literature and helps create a new way of looking at literacy. If the aesthetic trend continues, literacy will have to keep changing to accommodate it, and that is why the definition of literacy must change, it has to open up to what is happening within literature and language as a whole.

Lastly, there is a major flaw in the way literacy works as it is, here presented by Adrian T. Bennett. He points out that:

> It is commonplace that literacy skills are differentially distributed among classes and ethnic groups in U.S. society. But it might be suggested that both the forms and the social uses of literacy are intricately bound up with modes of thinking, reasoning, and understanding which help to mediate between vested political and economic interests on the one hand and the daily practices of persons on the other, with the ongoing result that unequal structures of power are rationalized and reproduced even by those who are disadvantaged by these very structures. (14)

Put another way, the critical understanding, and use of, information is power. It has always been thus. The better educated have, generally, fared better economically and socially than the less well educated. Visual literacy won't change this dynamic; those with sophisticated abilities to critically appraise and use visuals will still have more value – and get paid better and enjoy higher status – than those who simply like pictures and think they know about things simply because they've seen pictures of them. But with a redefinition of literacy this would become less problematic by opening up literacy as a

more unified structure of measurement, one that is less likely to form divisions and more likely to be able to incorporate all types of literacy as "literate". Ideally, structure in general would be eliminated by the specifying of a term that does have its own power over all kinds of social aspects. It would help limit the destructive connotations, as well as the social implications with one change. Though convoluted and vague, literacy can isolate individuals as well as groups within its implicated terminology, and so, a redefinition for the 21st century could put a clean end to that problem.

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