

PART I

*Fundamentals*







# The Humanities: An Introduction

## The Humanities: A Study of Values

In the medieval period the word *humanities* distinguished that which pertained to humans from that which pertained to God. Mathematics, the sciences, the arts, and philosophy were humanities: They had to do with humans. Theology and related studies were the subjects of divinity: They had to do with God. This distinction does not have the importance it once did. Today we think of the humanities as those broad areas of human creativity and study that are distinct from mathematics and the “hard” sciences, mainly because in the humanities strictly objective or scientific standards are not usually dominant.

The separation between the humanities and the *sciences* is illustrated by the way in which values work differently in the two areas. A *value* is something we care about, something that matters. Consider, for example, the drinking of liquor: a positive value for some people, a negative value for others. The biologist describes the physiological effects. The psychologist describes the psychological effects. The sociologist takes a poll and tabulates value preferences concerning drinking. These scientists study values, but they are concerned with what “is” rather than what “ought to be.” That is why they can apply strictly scientific standards to their investigations. If they make a value judgment, such as that liquor ought to be banned, they usually will be careful—as scientists—to make it clear that their pronouncements are personal value judgments rather than scientific statements. To humanists, however, the sharp separation between the “is” and the “ought,” between scientific statement and value judgment, is usually not so evident, primarily because the scientific method is not so basic to their work. Most scientists and humanists will agree that we must all make value judgments and that the sciences often provide important information to help us make sound decisions. For example, if biologists discovered that liquor significantly shortens the life span, this discovery would indeed be relevant to a value judgment about banning liquor. However, such

consensus seems to be lacking with respect to the relevance of the humanities to value judgments. Scientists, more than humanists, probably would be dubious about an assertion that novels such as Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* contribute important information for making sound value judgments about the banning of liquor.

The discoveries of scientists—for example, the bomb, the pill, and cloning—often have tremendous impact on the values of their society. Yet some scientists have declared that they merely make the discoveries and that others—presumably politicians—must decide how those discoveries are to be used. It is this last statement that brings us closest to the importance of the humanities. If many scientists feel they cannot judge how their discoveries are to be used, then we must try to understand why they give that responsibility to others. This is not to say that scientists uniformly turn such decisions over to others, for many of them are humanists as well as scientists. But the fact remains that governments—from that of Hitler to that of Churchill, as well as those of such nations as China, Russia, and the United States—have all made use of great scientific achievements without pausing to ask the “achievers” if they approved of the way their discoveries were being used. The questions are, Who decides how to use such discoveries? On what grounds should their judgments be based?

Studying the behavior of neutrinos or ion-exchange resins will not help us get closer to the answer. Such study is not related to the nature of humankind but to the nature of nature. What we need is a study that will get us closer to ourselves. It should be a study that explores the reaches of human feeling in relation to values—not only our own individual feelings and values but also the feelings and values of others. We need a study that will increase our sensitivity to ourselves, others, and the values in our world. To be sensitive is to perceive with insight. To be sensitive is also to feel and believe that things make a difference. Furthermore, it involves an awareness of those aspects of values that cannot be measured by objective standards. To be sensitive is to respect the humanities because, among other reasons, they help develop our sensitivity to values, to what we as individuals place importance on.

There are numerous ways to approach the humanities. The way we have chosen here is the way of the arts. One of the contentions of this book is that values are clarified in enduring ways in the arts. Human beings have had the impulse to express their values since the earliest times. Ancient tools recovered from the most recent Ice Age, for example, have features designed to express an affection for beauty as well as to provide utility.

The concept of progress in the arts is problematic. Who is to say whether the cave paintings (Figure 1-1) of 30,000 years ago in present-day France are less excellent than the work of Picasso (see Figure 1-4)? Such works surely were not made as works of art to be contemplated. To get to them in the caves is almost always difficult, and they are very difficult to see. They must have been made for some practical purpose, such as improving the prospects for the hunt. Yet these works reveal something about the power, grace, and beauty of this kind of animal. These cave paintings function now as works of art. Our species from the beginning instinctively had an interest in making revealing forms.



**FIGURE 1-1**  
Cave painting from Chauvet  
Caves, France.  
(© LeSeuil/Sygma)

Among the numerous ways to approach the humanities we have chosen the way of the arts because, as we shall try to elucidate, the arts clarify or reveal values. As we deepen our understanding of the arts, we necessarily deepen our understanding of values, for that is what the arts are about. We will study our experience with works of arts as well as the values others associate with them. And in the process of doing this we will also educate ourselves about our own values.

Because a value is something that matters, engagement with art—the illuminator of values—enriches the quality of our lives significantly. Moreover, the *subject matter* of art—what it is about—is not limited to the beautiful and the pleasant, the bright sides of life. Art may also include and help us understand the dark sides—the ugly, the painful, and the tragic. And when it does and when we get it, we are better able to come to grips with those dark sides of life.

Art brings us into direct communication with others. As Carlos Fuentes said in *The Buried Mirror*, “People and their cultures perish in isolation, but they are born or reborn in contact with other men and women of another culture, another creed, another race. If we do not recognize our humanity in others, we shall not recognize it in ourselves.”

## Taste

Taste is an exercise in the choice of values. People who have already made up their minds about what art they like or do not like defend their choices as an expression of their taste. Some opera buffs think Italian opera is

uniformly superior to opera in English, French, or German. Others claim that any opera Mozart wrote is wonderful, but all others are impossible. All of us have various kinds of limitations about the arts. Some cannot stand opera at all. Some cannot look at a painting or sculpture of a nude figure without smirking. Some think any painting is magnificent as long as it has a sunset or a dramatic sea or a battle or as long as it is abstract and goes well with the couch. Some people will read any book that deals with horse racing, has a scientific angle, or discusses their current hobby.

The taste of the mass public shifts constantly. Movies, for example, survive or fail on the basis of the number of people they appeal to. A film is good if it makes plenty of money. Consequently, film producers make every effort to cash in on current popular tastes, often by making sequels until the public's taste changes—for example, the *Batman* series (1989, 1992, 1995).

One point our study of the humanities emphasizes is that commercial success is not the most important guide to excellence in the arts. The long-term success of works of art depends on their ability to interpret human experience at a level of complexity that warrants examination and reexamination. Many commercially successful works give us what we think we want rather than what we really need with reference to insight and understanding. By satisfying us in an immediate and usually superficial way, commercial art can dull us to the possibilities of more complex and more deeply satisfying art.

Everyone has limitations as a perceiver of art. Sometimes we defend ourselves against stretching our limitations by assuming that we have developed our taste and that any effort to change it is bad form. An old saying—“Matters of taste are not disputable”—can be credited with making many of us feel very righteous about our own taste. What the saying means is that there is no accounting for what people like in the arts, for beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Thus, there is no use in trying to educate anyone about the arts. Obviously we disagree. We believe that all of us can and should be educated about the arts and should learn to respond to as wide a variety of the arts as possible: from jazz to string quartets, from Charlie Chaplin to Steven Spielberg, from Lewis Carroll to T. S. Eliot, from folk art to Picasso. Most of us defend our taste because anyone who challenges our taste challenges our deep feelings. Anyone who tries to change our responses to art is really trying to get inside our mind. If we fail to understand its purpose, this kind of persuasion naturally arouses resistance in us.

The study of the arts can involve a multitude of factual information. The dates of Beethoven's birth and death and the dates of his important compositions, as well as their key signatures and opus numbers can be verified. We can investigate the history of jazz and the claim of Jelly Roll Morton to have been its “inventor.” We can decide who was or was not part of the Realistic school of painting in mid-nineteenth-century France. We can make lists of the Impressionist painters in late nineteenth-century France and those they influenced. Oceans of facts attach to every art. But our interest is not in facts alone.

For us, the study of the arts penetrates beyond facts to the values that evoke our feelings—the way a succession of Eric Clapton's guitar chords when he plays the blues can be electrifying or the way song lyrics can give us a chill. In other words, we want to go beyond the facts *about* a work

of art and get to the values revealed in the work. How many times have we all found ourselves liking something that, months or years before, we could not stand? And how often do we find ourselves now disliking what we previously judged a masterpiece? Generally, we can say the work of art remains the same. It is we who change. We learn to recognize the values illuminated in such works as well as to understand the ways in which this is accomplished. Such development is the meaning of “education” in the sense in which we have been using the term.

## Responses to Art

Our responses to art usually involve processes so complex that they can never be fully tracked down or analyzed. At first, they can only be hinted at when we talk about them. However, further education in the arts permits us to observe more closely and thereby respond more intensely to the content of the work. This is true, we believe, even with “easy” art, such as exceptionally beautiful works—for example, the Raphael (see Figure 14-14), Giorgione (see Figure 2-17), Cézanne (see Figure 2-4), and O’Keeffe (see Figure 4-13). Such gorgeous works generally are responded to with immediate satisfaction. What more needs to be done? If art were only of the beautiful, textbooks such as this one probably would never find many users. But we think more needs to be done, even with the beautiful. We will begin, however, with three works that obviously are not beautiful.

The Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *Echo of a Scream* (Figure 1-2) is a highly emotional painting—in the sense that the work seems to demand a strong emotional response. What we see is the huge head of a baby crying and, then, as if issuing from its own mouth, the baby himself. What kinds of *emotions* do you find stirring in yourself as you look at this painting? What kinds of emotions do you feel are expressed in the painting? Your own emotional responses—such as shock; pity for the child; irritation at a destructive, mechanical society; or any other nameable emotion—do not sum up the painting. However, they are an important starting point, since Siqueiros paints in such a way as to evoke emotion, and our understanding of the painting increases as we examine the means by which this evocation is achieved.

### PERCEPTION KEY

#### *Echo of a Scream*

1. Identify the mechanical objects in the painting.
2. What is the condition of these objects? What is their relationship to the baby?
3. What are those strange round forms in the upper right corner?
4. How might your response differ if the angular lines were smoothed out?
5. What is the significance of the red cloth around the baby?
6. Why are the natural shapes in the painting, such as the forehead of the baby, distorted? Is awareness of such distortions crucial to a response to the painting?



**FIGURE 1-2**  
David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Echo of a Scream*. 1937. Enamel on wood, 48 × 36 inches (121.9 × 91.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Edward M. M. Warburg. (Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, New York. Art © Estate of David Alfaro Siqueiros/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

Study another work, very close in temperament to Siqueiros's painting: *The Eternal City* by the American painter Peter Blume (Figure 1-3). After attending carefully to the kinds of responses awakened by *The Eternal City*, take note of some background information about the painting that you may not know. The year of this painting is the same as that of *Echo of a Scream*: 1937. *The Eternal City* is a name reserved for only one city in the world—Rome. In 1937 the world was on the verge of world war: fascist Italy and Germany against the democratic nations of Europe and the Americas. In



**FIGURE 1-3**  
Peter Blume, *The Eternal City*. 1934–1937. Dated on painting 1937. Oil on composition board, 34 × 47½ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund (574.1942). (Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, New York. Art © Estate of Peter Blume/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

the center of the painting is the Roman Forum, close to where Julius Caesar, the alleged tyrant, was murdered by Brutus. But here we see fascist Blackshirts, the modern tyrants, beating people. In a niche at the left is a figure of Christ, and beneath him (hard to see) is a crippled beggar woman. Near her are ruins of Roman statuary. The enlarged and distorted head, wriggling out like a jack-in-the-box, is that of Mussolini, the man who invented fascism and the Blackshirts. Study the painting closely again. Has your response to the painting changed?

#### PERCEPTION KEY

Siqueiros and Blume

1. What common ingredients do you find in the Blume and Siqueiros paintings?
2. Is your reaction to the Blume similar to or quite distinct from your reaction to the Siqueiros?
3. Is the effect of the distortions similar or different?
4. How are colors used in each painting? Are the colors those of the natural world, or do they suggest an artificial environment? Are they distorted for effect?
5. With reference to the objects and events represented in each painting, do you think the paintings are comparable? If so, in what ways?
6. With the Blume, are there any natural objects in the painting that may suggest the vitality of the Eternal City? Any natural objects that may suggest the indestructibility of the Eternal City?

Before going on to the next painting, which is quite different in character, we should pause to make some observations about what we have done. With added knowledge about its cultural and political implications — what



**FIGURE 1-4**  
 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*.  
 1937. Oil on canvas, 11 feet  
 6 inches × 25 feet 8 inches.  
 (Photo © Erich Lessing/Art  
 Resource, New York. Art ©  
 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/  
 Artists Rights Society [ARS],  
 New York)

**FIGURE 1-5**  
 Pablo Picasso, *Composition  
 Study (Guernica study)*. 1937.  
 Pencil on white paper,  
 9½ × 17¾ inches. (Photo cour-  
 tesy Museo Nacional Centro  
 de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.  
 © 2003 Estate of Pablo  
 Picasso/Artists Rights Society  
 [ARS], New York)



we shall call the background of the painting—your responses to *The Eternal City* may have changed. Ideally they should have become more focused, intense, and certain. Why? The painting is surely the same physical object you looked at originally. Nothing has changed in that object. Therefore, something has changed because something has been added to you, information that the general viewer of the painting in 1937 would have had and would have responded to more emotionally than viewers do now. Consider how a fascist, on the one hand, or an Italian humanist and lover of Roman culture, on the other hand, would have reacted to this painting in 1937.

A full experience of this painting is not one thing or one system of things but an innumerable variety of things. Moreover, “knowledge about” a work

of art can lead to “knowledge of” the work of art, which implies a richer experience. This is important as a basic principle, since it means that we can be educated about what is in a work of art, such as its shapes, objects, and *structure*, as well as what is external to a work, such as its political references. It means we can learn to respond more completely. It also means that artists such as Blume sometimes produce works that demand background information if we are to appreciate them fully. This is particularly true of art that refers to historical circumstances and personages. Sometimes we may find ourselves unable to respond successfully to a work of art because we lack the background knowledge the artist presupposes.

Picasso’s *Guernica* (Figure 1-4), one of the most famous paintings of the twentieth century, is also dated 1937. Its title comes from the name of an old Spanish town that was bombed during the Spanish Civil War — the first aerial bombing of noncombatant civilians in modern warfare. Examine this painting carefully.

## PERCEPTION KEY

*Guernica*

1. Distortion is powerfully evident in this painting. How does its function differ from that of the distortion in Blume’s or Siqueiros’s paintings?
2. Describe the objects in the painting. What is their relationship to one another?
3. Why the prominence of the lightbulb?
4. There are large vertical rectangles on the left and right sides and a very large triangle in the center. Do these shapes provide a visual order to what would otherwise be sheer chaos? If so, how? As you think about this, compare one of many studies Picasso made for *Guernica* (Figure 1-5). Does the painting possess a stronger form than the study? If so, in what ways?
5. Because of reading habits in the West, we tend initially to focus on the left side of most paintings and then move to the right, especially when the work is very large. Is this the case with your perception of *Guernica*? In the organization or form of *Guernica* is there a countermovement that, once our vision has reached the right side, pulls us back to the left? If so, what shapes in the painting cause this countermovement? How do these left–right and right–left movements affect the balance of the painting? Note that the painting is over twenty-five feet wide.
6. The bull seems to be totally indifferent to the carnage. Do you think the bull may be some kind of symbol? For example, could the bull represent the spirit of the Spanish people? Could the bull represent General Franco, the man who ordered the bombing? Or could the bull represent both? To answer these questions adequately do you need further background information, or can you defend your answers by referring to what is in the painting, or do you need to use both?
7. The bombing of Guernica occurred during the day. Why did Picasso portray it as happening at night?
8. Which are more visually dominant, human beings or animals? If you were not told, would you know that this painting was a representation of an air raid?

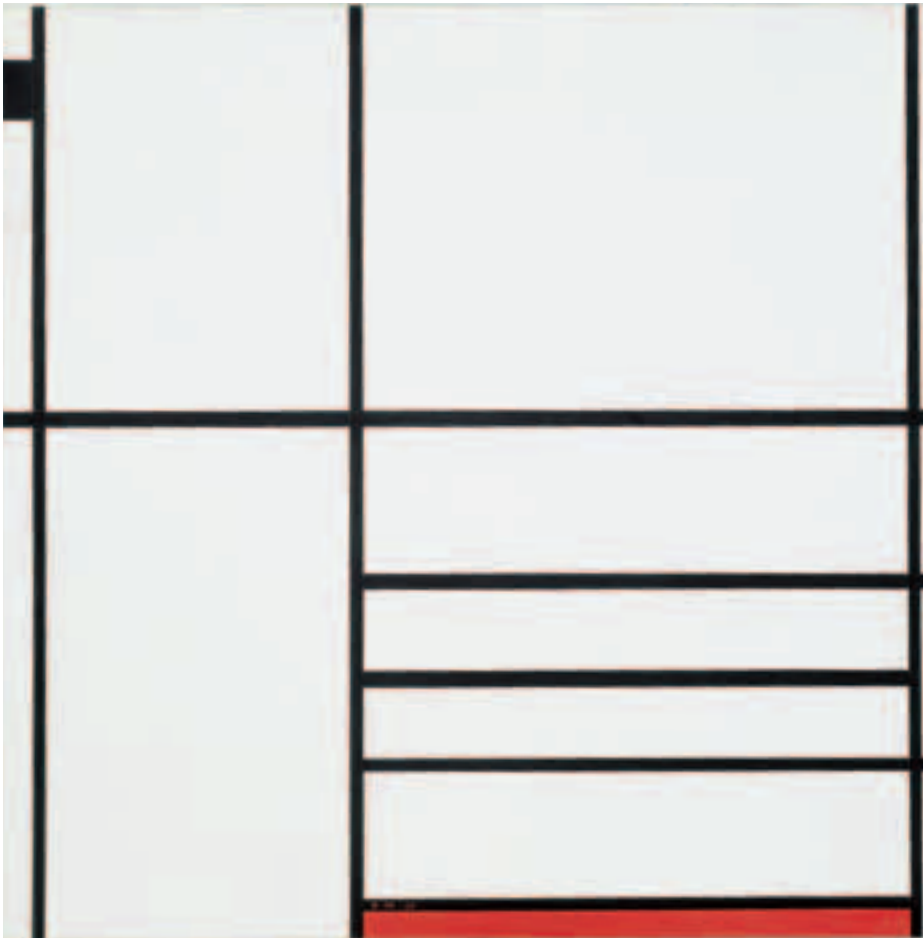
9. Is the subject matter—what the work is about—of this painting war? Death? Suffering? Fascism? Or some kind of combination?
10. Does *Guernica* take on more meaning for you after viewing the images of the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001? Would the bull, for example, with its implacable coldness, be associated perhaps with terrorism?
11. If Picasso were alive, do you think it likely that he would paint that horror?

The next painting (Figure 1-6) was completed in 1936 by Piet Mondrian, a very influential Dutch painter. Mondrian — with the strikingly new style of *Composition in White, Black, and Red* — became a household name. Despite the nonrepresentational character of such works, their bold colors and the apparent simplicity of design had popular appeal after a fairly short time.

#### PERCEPTION KEY

#### *Composition in White, Black, and Red*

1. If you were to comment on “distortion” in this painting, what would that imply about what the painting represents? What is represented in the painting?
2. How would your responses differ if all the black areas were repainted orange? Would the balance of the painting be distorted?
3. Suppose the horizontal black line running across the width of the painting were raised nearer to the top. Would the balance of the painting be disturbed?
4. Suppose the little black rectangle at the upper left-hand corner were enlarged. Would the balance of the painting be disturbed? How important is visual balance in this work?
5. There is no frame around this painting. Do you think there should be?
6. Do you need any historical background to appreciate this work? Is what we have said about world conditions in 1937 irrelevant to this painting? Soon after that date, Mondrian’s country, Holland, partially destroyed itself by opening its dikes in an attempt to keep Hitler out. Does this fact influence the way you look at this painting?
7. Does the painting evoke strong responses in you? Do you have more difficulty articulating your responses to it than to the paintings by Siqueiros, Blume, and Picasso? If so, how is this to be explained?
8. Suppose the Mondrian were hung with its vertical lines not parallel to the lines of the wall. Would you need to straighten it? If *Echo of a Scream* were crooked on a wall, would you feel as compelled to straighten it? Explain.
9. Is it true that the painting by Mondrian is more like music than the paintings by Siqueiros, Blume, and Picasso?
10. Mondrian wanted to paint universal paintings, “pure realities” common to all people: the square; the rectangle; the vertical and the horizontal; the primary colors red, yellow, and blue; spatial relationships; features that every human being continually experiences. He wanted to make us more sensitive to these general features, independent of objects and events. Do you think Mondrian succeeded?



**FIGURE 1-6**  
Piet Mondrian, *Composition in White, Black, and Red*. 1936. Oil on canvas, 40¼ × 41 inches (102.2 × 104.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Advisory Committee. (Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/ Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, New York. Art © 2003 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust/ Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

## STRUCTURE AND ARTISTIC FORM

The Mondrian obviously is very different from the other paintings in subject matter. (In Chapter 4 we will analyze the subject matter of the Mondrian and abstract painting generally.) The responses you have when you look at it are probably quite different from those you had when you were viewing the other paintings, but why? You might reply that the Mondrian is pure form, an entirely *sensuous* surface. Unlike the other paintings, no objects or events are represented. And yet this painting can be very exciting. Pure form—the interrelationships of lines, colors, textures, light, and shapes—can catch and hold our attention. Most of us have the capacity to respond to pure form even in paintings in which objects and events are portrayed. Thus, responding to *The Eternal City* may involve responding not just to an interpretation of fascism taking hold in Italy but also to the sensuous surface of the painting. This is certainly true of *Echo of a Scream*; if you look again at that painting, you will see not only that its sensuous surface is interesting intrinsically but also that it deepens our

response to what is represented. Painters must structure their paintings, although few painters call attention to the structure the way Mondrian does. But, because we often respond to pure form without even being conscious that it is affecting us, it is of first importance that the painter make the structure interesting.

The composition of any painting can be analyzed because any painting has to be organized: parts have to be interrelated. Moreover, it is important to think carefully about the composition of individual paintings. This is particularly true of paintings one does not respond to immediately—of “difficult” or apparently uninteresting paintings. Often the analysis of structure can help us gain access to such paintings so that they become genuinely exciting.

PERCEPTION KEY

*The Eternal City*

1. Sketch the basic shapes of the painting.
2. Do these shapes relate to each other in such a way as to help reveal the obscurity of fascism? If so, how?

*Artistic form* is a composition or structure that makes something—a subject matter—more meaningful. The Siqueiros, Blume, and Picasso reveal something about the horrors of war and fascism. But what does the Mondrian reveal? Perhaps just the sensuous? For us, structures or forms that do not give us insight are not artistic forms. Some will argue the point. This major question will be pursued throughout the text. Hang on!

## PERCEPTION

We are not likely to respond sensitively to a work of art that we do not perceive properly. What is less obvious is what we referred to previously—the fact that we can often give our attention to a work of art and still not really perceive very much. The reason for this should be clear from our previous discussion. Frequently, we need to know something about the background of a work of art that would aid our perception. Anyone who did not know who Christ was or what fascism was or what Mussolini meant to the world would have a difficult time making much sense of *The Eternal City*. But it is also true that anyone who could not perceive the composition of Blume’s painting might have a completely superficial response to the painting. Such a person could indeed know all about the background and understand the symbolic statements made by the painting, but that is only part of the painting. From seeing what Mondrian can do with line, color, texture, space, and shape, and their relationships, you can understand that the formal qualities of a painting are neither accidental nor unimportant. In Blume’s painting, the form acts in such a way as to focus attention and organize our perceptions by establishing the relationships between the parts.

Composition is basic to all the arts. To perceive any work of art adequately, we must perceive its structure. Examine the following poem—“l(a)” —by e. e. cummings. It is unusual in its form and its effects.

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This poem looks at first like a strange kind of code, like an Egyptian hieroglyph. But it is not a code — it is more like a Japanese haiku, a poem that sets a scene or paints a picture and then waits for us to get it. And to “get it” requires sensitive perception.

**PERCEPTION KEY**

“l(a”

1. Study the poem carefully until you begin to make out the words. What are they?
2. One part of the poem refers to an emotion; the other describes an event. What is the relationship between them?
3. Is the shape of the poem important to the meaning of the poem?
4. Why are the words of the poem difficult to perceive? Is that difficulty important to the poem?
5. Does the poem evoke an image or images?
6. With the emphasis on letters in the poem, is the use of the lowercase for the poet’s name fitting?
7. Once you have perceived the words and imagery of the poem, does your response change? Compare your analysis of the poem with ours, which follows.

In this poem a word is interrupted by parentheses: “l one l iness” — “loneliness” — a feeling we have all experienced. Because of its isolating, biting power, we ordinarily do not like this feeling. Then, inside the parentheses, there is a phrase, “a leaf falls,” the description of an event. In poetry such a description is usually called an image. In this poem the image illustrates the idea, or theme, of loneliness, melding the specific with the abstract. But how is this melding accomplished? First of all, notice the devices that symbolize or represent oneness, an emblem of loneliness. The poem begins with the letter “l,” which in the typeface used in the original poem looks like the number “one.” Even the parenthesis separating the “a” from the “l” helps accent the isolation of the “l.” Then there is the “le,” which is the singular article in French. The idea of one is doubled by repetition in the “ll” figure. Then cummings brazenly writes “one” and follows it by “l” and then the ultimate “iness.” Furthermore, in the original edition the poem is number one of the collection. Second, notice how these representations of oneness are wedded to the image: “a leaf falls.”



**FIGURE 1-7**  
Diagram of e. e. cummings’  
“l(a.)”

As you look at the poem, your eye follows a downward path that swirls in a pattern similar to the diagram in Figure 1-7. This is merely following the parentheses and consonants. As you follow the vowels as well, you see curves that become spirals, and the image is indeed much like that of a leaf actually falling. This accounts for the long, thin look of the poem. Now, go back to the poem and reread it. Has your response changed? If so, how?

Of course, most poems do not work in quite this way. Most poems do not rely on the way they look on the page, although this is one of the most important strategies cummings uses. But what most poets are concerned with is the way the images or verbal pictures fit into the totality of the poem, how they make us experience the whole poem more intensely. In cummings’ poem the single, falling, dying leaf—one out of so many—is perfect for helping us understand loneliness from a dying person’s point of view. People are like leaves in that they are countless when they are alive and together. But like leaves, they die singly. And when one person separates himself or herself from the community of friends, that person is as alone as the separate leaf.

## Abstract Ideas and Concrete Images

“l(a)” presents an abstract idea fused with a concrete image or word picture. It is concrete because what is described is a physical event—a falling leaf. Loneliness, on the other hand, is abstract. Take an abstract idea: love, hate, indecision, arrogance, jealousy, ambition, justice, civil rights, prejudice, revenge, revolution, coyness, insanity, or any other. Then link it with some physical object or event that you think expresses the abstract idea. “Expresses” here means simply making us see the object as portraying—and helping us understand—the abstract idea. Of course, you need not follow cummings’ style of splitting words and using parentheses. You may use any way of lining up the letters and words that you think is interesting.

In *Paradise Lost* John Milton describes hell as a place with “Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of death.” Now, neither you nor the poet has ever seen “shades of death,” although the idea is in Psalm 23, “the valley of the shadow of death.” Milton gets away with it because he has linked the abstract idea of shades of death to so many concrete images in this single line. He is giving us images that suggest the mood of hell just as much as they describe the landscape, and we realize that he gives us so many topographic details in order to get us ready for the last detail—the abstract idea of shades of death.

There is much more to be said about poetry, of course, but on a preliminary level poetry worked in much the same way in the seventeenth-century England of Milton as it does in contemporary America. The same principles are at work: Described objects or events are used as a means of bringing abstract ideas to life. The descriptions take on a wider and deeper significance—wider in the sense that the descriptions are connected with the larger scope of abstract ideas, deeper in the sense that because of these descriptions the abstract ideas become vividly focused and more meaningful. Thus cummings’ poem gives us insight—a penetrating understanding—into what we all must face: the isolating loneliness of our death.

The following poem is highly complex: the memory of an older culture (simplicity, in this poem) and the consideration of a newer culture (complexity). It is an African poem by the contemporary Nigerian poet Gabriel Okara; and knowing that it is African, we can begin to appreciate the extreme complexity of Okara’s feelings about the clash of the old and new cultures. He symbolizes the clash in terms of music, and he opposes two musical instruments: the drum and the piano. They stand for the African and the European cultures. But even beyond the musical images that abound in this poem, look closely at the images of nature, the pictures of the panther and leopard, and see how Okara imagines them.

### PIANO AND DRUMS

When at break of day at a riverside  
 I hear jungle drums telegraphing  
 the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw  
 like bleeding flesh, speaking of  
 primal youth and the beginning,  
 I see the panther ready to pounce,  
 the leopard snarling about to leap  
 and the hunters crouch with spears poised;  
 And my blood ripples, turns torrent,  
 topples the years and at once I’m  
 in my mother’s lap a suckling;  
 at once I’m walking simple  
 paths with no innovations,  
 rugged, fashioned with the naked  
 warmth of hurrying feet and groping hearts  
 in green leaves and wild flowers pulsing.  
 Then I hear a wailing piano  
 solo speaking of complex ways  
 in tear-furrowed concerto;  
 of far-away lands  
 and new horizons with  
 coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,  
 crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth  
 of its complexities, it ends in the middle  
 of a phrase at a daggerpoint.  
 And I lost in the morning mist  
 of an age at a riverside keep  
 wandering in the mystic rhythm  
 of jungle drums and the concerto.

#### PERCEPTION KEY

#### “Piano and Drums”

1. What are the most important physical objects in the poem? What cultural significance do they have?
2. Why do you think Okara chose the drum and the piano to help reveal the clash between the two cultures? Where are his allegiances?

Such a poem speaks directly to legions of the current generation of Africans. But consider some points in light of what we have said earlier. In order to perceive the kind of emotional struggle that Okara talks about—the subject matter of the poem—we need to know something about Africa and the struggle African nations have in modernizing themselves along the lines of more technologically advanced nations. We also need to know something of the history of Africa and the fact that European nations, such as Britain in the case of Nigeria, once controlled much of Africa. Knowing these things, we know then that there is no thought of the “I” of the poem accepting the “complex ways” of the new culture without qualification. The “I” does not think of the culture of the piano as manifestly superior to the culture of the drum. That is why the labyrinth of complexities ends at a “daggerpoint.” The new culture is a mixed blessing.

Ideas about Africa and slavery, for most of us, tend to be rather general. It is hard to get a fix on the horror of slavery. Now read this powerful poem by Maya Angelou.

### AFRICA

Thus she had lain  
 sugarcane sweet  
 deserts her hair  
 golden her feet  
 mountains her breasts  
 two Niles her tears.  
 Thus she has lain  
 Black through the years.

Over the white seas  
 rime white and cold  
 brigands ungentled  
 icicle bold  
 took her young daughters  
 sold her strong sons  
 churched her with Jesus  
 bled her with guns.  
 Thus she has lain.

Now she is rising  
 remember her pain  
 remember the losses  
 her screams loud and vain  
 remember her riches  
 her history slain  
 now she is striding  
 although she had lain.

#### PERCEPTION KEY

“Africa”

The word *lain* is used four times and is the final word. What effect is produced by this usage? As you think about this, substitute other words. How does this change the poem?

We have argued that the perception of a work of art is aided by background information and that sensitive perception must be aware of form, at least implicitly. But we believe there is much more to sensitive perception. Somehow the form of a work of art is an artistic form that clarifies or reveals values, and our response is intensified by our awareness of those revealed values. But how does an artistic form do this? And how does this awareness come to us? In the next chapter we shall consider these questions, and in doing so we will also raise that most important question: What is a work of art? Once we have examined each of the arts, it will be clear, we hope, that the principles developed in these opening chapters are equally applicable to all the arts.

## Summary

Unlike scientists, humanists generally do not use strictly objective standards. The arts reveal values; other humanities study values. Artistic form refers to the structure or organization of a work of art. Values are clarified or revealed by a work of art. Judging from the most ancient of artistic efforts, we can assert that the arts represent one of the most basic of human activities. They satisfy a need to explore and express the values that link us all together. By observing our responses to a work of art and examining the means by which the artist evokes those responses, we can deepen our understanding of art. Our approach to the humanities is through the arts and our taste in art connects with our deep feelings. Yet our taste is continually improved by experience and education. Background information about a work of art and increased sensitivity to its artistic form intensify our responses.

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## Internet Resources

### ART MUSEUMS AND EXHIBITS

[http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Museums\\_\\_Galleries\\_\\_and\\_Centers](http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Museums__Galleries__and_Centers)

### ART ON THE INTERNET

<http://www.art.net/>

### ARTSOURCE

<http://www.ilpi.com/artsource/welcome.html>

### BRITISH MUSEUM

<http://www.British-Museum.ac.uk/>

### BROWSE THE ARTS

<http://wwar.com/browse.html>

### FRENCH CAVE PAINTINGS

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/chauvet/en/index.html>

### METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

<http://www.metmuseum.org/>

### MODERN MUSEUM OF ART

<http://www.moma.org/>