subjective adj. 1.a. Proceeding from or taking place within a person’s mind such as to be unaffected by the external world. b. Particular to a given person; personal.

Many different forms of critical theory focus on the text, the circumstances surrounding the text, or the author, without acknowledging the subjective nature of literature. New Criticism proclaims that the “essential components of any work of literature, whether lyric, narrative, or dramatic, are conceived to be words, images, and symbols, rather than character, thought, and plot” (Abrams 246). New Historicism “is grounded on the concepts that history itself is not a set of fixed, objective facts, but, like the literature with which it interacts, a text which needs to be interpreted” (249). Psychological criticism “deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the state of mind and the structure of personality of the individual author” (263). In these forms of critical theory, the response of the reader is less important than the author, the text, and whatever symbolism might be found in the text. While ignoring the importance of reader-response may be justified in academia, it also holds true that without the reader, the need for literature would not exist.

What specific properties lend value to literature? Though style and structure are important components and should not be completely disregarded, the meaning of the text is dependent upon the individual reader, and as such, is
highly subjective. In her essay, *Contingencies of Value*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith states, “the value of a work – that is, its effectiveness in performing desired/able functions for some set of subjects – is not independent of authorial design, labor, and skill . . . that what may be spoken of as the ‘properties’ of the work – its ‘structure,’ ‘features,’ ‘qualities,’ and of course, its ‘meaning’ – are not fixed, given, or inherent in the work itself but are at every point the variable products of some subject’s interaction with it” (Richter 148). This brings up an interesting point: if the reader’s interaction with the text proves to be less than what the reader expected or wanted, does it negate the value of the text as literature? And does the educational and cultural background of the reader have any kind of effect on this process? Smith believes it does:

. . . there are many people in the world who are not – or are not yet, or choose not to be – among the orthodoxly educated population of the West: people who do not encounter Western classics at all or who encounter them under cultural and institutional conditions very different from those of American and European college professors and their students. The fact that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare do not figure significantly in the personal economies of these people, do not perform individual or social functions that gratify their interests, *do not have value for them*, might properly be taken as qualifying the claims of transcendent universal value made for such works. (Richter 152)

Taken at face value, this passage demonstrates a sort of literary elitism, where those readers without the necessary cultural and educational background could not possibly be expected to give a favorable interpretation of canonical works. At the same time, different “educated” readers can be expected to give varying
interpretations of any work in question. The subjectivity of literature is what allows this to happen.

The next question, then, is do we care? Why do some works of literature disappoint, while others enthrall? And what mechanism allows this to happen? Reader-response criticism attempts to answer some of these questions by allowing that “matters that had been considered by traditional critics to be features of the work itself are dissolved into an evolving process, consisting primarily of diverse kinds of expectations and the violations, deferments, satisfactions, and restructurings of expectations, in the flow of a reader’s experience” (Abrams 268). We bring our inherent selves to each work we read, and our lives and experiences dictate the interpretive responses we will have to a particular text.

In his essay, The Art of Fiction, Henry James takes this one step farther by stating, “Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of ‘liking’ a work of art or not liking it: the most improved criticism will not abolish that primitive, that ultimate test” (Richter 443). Thus the question, “do we care?” is translated to a more base, more human, “do we like it?” Contemporary criticism fails to address this crucial question. If we “like” a particular literary work, we are more likely to want to pursue it, to interpret it, to experience it. If we dislike it, it has the potential to negatively affect our perceptions of similar works, and makes us hesitant to expend the energy necessary to provide an
interpretation. We, as readers, choose what we read based not only on our cultural and educational backgrounds, but also on our individual, highly subjective preferences – because we “like” it.

Why do we care? Why do we like a particular work and not another? Obviously, the answers to these questions will vary widely among different readers, depending upon what they receive from the work itself. Some readers may find an affinity with a character or situation while other readers may find an emotional echo in the tone or language. One reader may seek an elusive sense of spirituality and another reader may appreciate stark realism. Whatever the answer, it is clear that is highly subjective. In my case, the answering question would be, “does it provide me a means to escape?”

In a literary sense, I define escapism as the text’s ability to transport the reader out of his/her present reality and into the temporal reality of that text. I seek to understand and experience that other reality, not vicariously, but as an active participant. In this sense, then, escapism is not just a function of the text itself, but a partnership between the text and the reader. The text must provide the means of escape and the reader must be willing to give up the present to realize the potential of escapism. This brings up the question, “is it possible to give up the present?” While it is perhaps not possible to do this entirely, on all levels, I do believe that it is possible on some levels. When one “tunes out,” she is giving up the conscious present, while still retaining the present at other, more
unconscious levels. I feel the same holds true for literary escapism. While the
unconscious present provides the foundation of life experiences on which the
structure of interpretation is built, the conscious mind is experiencing the “reality”
of the text.

When one of the crucial elements, either the willingness on the part of the
reader or the means provided by the text, is missing, complete escapism is
difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Once achieved, though, the delicate
balance that is the foundation of escapism answers the question, “do we care?”
with an emphatic “yes.”

Works Cited

