As I approach the final semester of my college education, I finally understand the study of literature. As an English major, a reader/writer/poet who has spent a great deal of time reading the works of others and writing about them, I am reminded of something I have heard my father, a teacher, say repeatedly about the modern American attitude toward education. "Nobody learns just to learn," he observes sadly, pointing out the way in which students often view particularly higher education as some kind of training ground for a career. I know exactly what he means. Every time someone asks me what I plan to do with a degree in English, I am reminded of the inquisitive student who interrupts a classroom lecture to ask in earnest "Is this going to be on the test?" or the equally deplorable "Do we have to know this?" The clear message in these questions is that nobody wants to waste their precious time learning something that won't immediately benefit them in some way. The majority of students insist on expediency and efficiency in education. Our goal-oriented society has resulted in a student that retains necessary information in short-term memory long enough to regurgitate onto an exam, pass the course, grab a degree, get a job, make money, prosper. Next.

Occasionally, however, there comes the English major--the enigmatic, bookworm type, who puzzles his classmates by carrying fiction while they tote science, mathematics, and Business. They examine this strange creature, fascinated by one who displays such a blatant disregard for wealth and success. They poke this animal, wondering why he would live this way, and what possible good can come from poetry. And once in a while, the prodding and gawking gets to him. The English major is forced to reexamine his "goals," to recall what inspired such a daring and experimental approach to learning. Quite simply, the answer lies in the obvious categorical heading of Humanities that English falls under. If others train for careers, learning practical skills with "real world" implications, then the Humanities student simply learns about being human. He attempts to recognize universal experience and reflect it in art. As ambitious as that may sound, I find my pursuit of English studies to be quite useful in my own life. Let me explain.

One year ago, my wife and I separated. When she left, she took with her (according to mutual agreement) all of the furniture and household amenities, leaving me with only the barest essentials. For several weeks afterward, I returned home to my modest quarters that contained no more than a mattress, my work desk and my books, and one small stand on which to place a stereo. I must confess that in the near month before my parents rescued me, supplying me with a dispossessed sofa, love seat, and T.V. (What do you mean you don’t have a television?), I accomplished much more in my work and studies than ever before.

I came to realize in that period the true definition of necessity. Though my wife had retained the comforts of modern living that one gets used to, I found I could still satisfy my basic human needs within the five empty rooms of my apartment. I was reminded of my reading of Thoreau's *Walden*, and his experimental living in the woods that invited the criticism and skepticism of
many of his contemporaries. Inspired, I embraced the challenge. With only a roof over my head, a place to sleep, all the fast food I could stomach at my disposal, and some much needed uninterrupted time in which to work, I imagined myself a modern day Transcendentalist. I had been granted the highly unlikely occasion to practice my human skills. Faced with the absence of modern comfort, I realized my own reliance on such extraneous furnishings, and the hard fact that others live much worse each day. I knew that all I needed was there before me. I had simply never imagined life without these luxuries.

Yet, once they were gone, and I was left in the cavernous echo of my now too large apartment, I was blissfully undaunted. I lay down each night on my thin mattress, bundled myself in the warmth of the comforter I was allowed to keep, and slept soundly, drifting off to peaceful classical melodies rather than The Late Show. The satisfaction of romantic survival, and the knowledge gained through literature that I was not alone, filled me with extraordinary calm.

My odd reaction could be attributed to any number of factors. The separation itself, following months of quarreling, could have brought a sense of relief; the ample time I now had to work very diligently contributed greatly to my lack of stress, even the solitude lent itself nicely to a period of much needed reflection. Whatever the reason, I did not panic or wonder anxiously what I was going to do. When stripped virtually of everything, everything that is that constitutes a normal standard of living, I survived. I was forced to embrace a part of humanity that many poets and writers I had studied for a long time entered into willingly and purposefully in order to realize something of the human condition.

In that moment, faced with unusual circumstances, I found that I had been armed first by the romantic notion that I was indeed a “suffering artist,” and, secondly, the warm comfort of knowing my misery had company. Surely, all human predicament has been experienced before and written about, vividly depicted by an artist so compelled to share his discovery with fellow human beings who share his pain. Now, while hovering over a pizza box on my living room floor, listening to soothing music on the radio, I felt that I had earned a place as a poet, as a human being with experience and understanding.

Though I now know why some of us choose to study literature and poetry, it is difficult to explain to someone who has not experienced literary empowerment firsthand. In terms of “Do I have to know this?” my answer is a resounding “yes.” “Will this be on the test?” Daily. The test is daring to live in a world where sometimes it seems that all is lost. Love, friendship, sadness, grief, even contentment are better understood in the context of a heartfelt poem or story. Thoreau’s Walden romanticized my isolation; however, it may have been Updike’s Rabbit or Edith Wharton’s sad portrayal of cold in Ethan Frome that brought me to that state.

Poetry and literature are so passionate as to inspire the reader in spite of himself. I can no more control the effects they may have on me, than I can the way in which I react. They are practical guidelines, manuals of living. They can hurt or heal, create or destroy. When one has a better understanding, though, the experience is wonderfully enlightening. And I need to know. I use them everyday.