The Literature Reader

Key Thinkers on Key Topics

EMC
Publications

Edited by Lucy Webster
Editorial assistance: Andrew McCallum
Cover design: © Rebecca Scambler, 2019
Published by English and Media Centre, 18 Compton Terrace, London, N1 2UN
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978-1-906101657

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1 'What is English Literature' is adapted from Robert Eaglestone's book *Literature: Why it Matters* published by Polity Press, 2019

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With thanks also to Emma Barker for comments on the text and to Andrew for his advice on editing.

A note on capitalisation

With the exception of the chapters on Modernism and Romanticism, we have attempted throughout the book to follow the convention of capitalising nouns denoting movements (such as Naturalism) and using lower case first letters for the adjectives derived from these nouns. We recognise there are alternative conventions and that we've probably not managed to be entirely consistent.

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FOREWORD

If you earn your living teaching English Literature or writing literary criticism, you sometimes get asked an unsettling question: 'Do you still read for pleasure?' As if being a critic meant forgetting what it was to enjoy a book. As if there were a chasm between that wonderful experience of being completely taken over by what you read, so that you hardly notice what is going on around you, and the hard-headed business of studying a literary work.

I would answer that there is no such chasm – or that there shouldn't be. The great novelist Vladimir Nabokov declared, 'the beauty of a book is more enjoyable if one understands its machinery, if one can take it apart'. (He said it in a lecture on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, whose concealed ingenuity he had recently discovered with surprise and delight.) All of the contributors to this collection try to do justice to that claim. Leading academic specialists, they know that teachers have lessons to give and students have essays to write and they try to serve those purposes. But they have also written their essays to show how enjoyable it is to re-read a good poem or play or novel. For this is one definition of good literature: books that become better when you re-read them. This is, therefore, the point of good criticism: to take the reader back to what he or she has already read in order to see it afresh, relish it more.

Robert Eaglestone's opening chapter notes that, before you get to any critical approach to literature, 'you study literature by reading a lot'. Good writers have also been good readers, and we should follow in their tracks. Books are made of other books. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* re-imagines Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; *Frankenstein* begins with a memory of Adam's creation in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; Adam in *Paradise Lost* sees his reflection in water like Narcissus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. So, the echoes spread backwards – then forwards again. The essays in this book group literary works first by period, hearing them question and answer each other – and then by genre, where they often influence each other across time. Our critics listen for those echoes.

For most of all, the various and variously exciting essays in this collection all show that we should read with the ear as well as the eye – that literary works are different from other kinds of books because their language is not a means to an end, but a pleasure in itself. It is a pleasure that the essays in this book hope to sharpen.

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LITERATURE – A CONVERSATION ACROSS TIME

In the opening chapter 'What is English?' Robert Eaglestone wrestles with what exactly is this subject we are all doing. What does it mean to do English Literature? He suggests that to do English is to be part of a long and ongoing conversation between people who read, think, talk and write about literature. This collection of essays invites you to join this conversation – not to stand on the edge of the group but to take part: to listen and reflect on what you read, of course, but also to engage actively with the ideas and interpretations in writing and in discussion.

Conversation is a word that crops up across the different essays – and not only in relation to the act of 'doing' English. As Michael Rosen explains, poetry is a conversation: texts speak to each other across time. Read Tim Turnbull's 'Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn' and behind it echoes Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Not only that but (and this is an idea to blow your mind), having read the Turnbull, you will never again read Keats's ode in quite the same way. Doing English we become time-travellers, the texts of the present re-writing the texts of the past.

The conversations between key texts and authors are woven throughout this book. So as well as being part of the conversation in Stephen Donovan's discussion of Modernism, Virginia Woolf also features in Andrew McCallum's exploration of experimental literature, Pamela Bickley's discussion of the twentieth-century novel and Judy Simon's reflections on the critical essay. Such reappearances, each of which shows the individual novel, play or poem in a different light, will both enrich your appreciation of English Literature and challenge your thinking.

So what conversations can you take part in? The first essays in the collection look at some of the broader aspects of doing English, beginning with Robert Eaglestone's questioning of what this means. Judy Simons looks at writing (and reading) essays – the form in which poems, plays and novels have been discussed for centuries. Peter Barry discusses – and problematises – the relationship between a text and its context, while Emma Smith's essay looks at Shakespeare in the light of context, arguing for a complex and sceptical approach.

Then there are conversations on the novel, poetry and drama. Jenny Stevens explores the novel's rise in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while Pamela Bickley looks at the diverse ways in which it developed through the twentieth century and up to the present day. Critic and short story writer Chris Power looks at the development of the short story form from the nineteenth century to the present day. Poets from Anglo Saxon times to the twenty-first century join the conversation in Michael Rosen's celebration of English poetry and ways of reading it. The Romantic poets take centre stage in Malcolm Hebron's discussion of this revolutionary and influential movement. Sean McEvoy discusses the influence of

European theatre in reinvigorating and shaping British and Irish drama in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Nicolas Tredell faces the *isms* head on, discussing the importance of key critical movements (Romanticism, Modernism, Leavisism, Structuralism and Poststructuralism) and how each changed the way we approach both reading and writing. The significance of Modernism is explored by Stephen Donovan who begins by outlining this seismic shift in art, sculpture and architecture, before moving on to look at modernist literature.

Two chapters broaden our horizons beyond (mainly) British literature: Leila Kamali explores postcolonial literature and questions what it means for older texts to be read from the perspective of Postcolonialism, while Nicolas Tredell provides a sweeping overview of American literature from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

For a long time considered too disreputable, too popular and too exciting to merit study, genre fiction – Gothic, dystopian and crime – is now a central feature of university and A Level courses. Novelist Andrew Hurley explores the Gothic through the lens of his own novels *The Loney* and *Devil's Day*, while Nathan Waddell focuses his discussion of key dystopian texts through the concept of freedom. Christopher Pittard traces our fascination with crime in literature from the nineteenth-century 'Newgate Novels' onwards, revealing the ways in which even the most subversive postmodern novels are in conversation with the classic texts of the past.

While many of the essays explore the ways in which writers have sought to challenge, subvert and develop the form in which they write, Andrew McCallum revels in texts with experiment at their heart: from eighteenth century classics to computer-generated poetry.

On the whole the essays take a broadly chronological approach, some providing a broad sweep and others taking a slice through the topic, exploring it from a particular angle. Each essay provides you with a taste of the subject – a conversation starter to grab your interest, to give you a way into thinking, reading, writing and talking about it. All the writers provide a short list of further reading suggestions and questions or prompts to help you take further the ideas raised in relation to the texts you are studying and those you are reading for pleasure.

Who are our contributors? There are many academics and teachers, a poet, a short story writer and a novelist – all are experts in their field. Find out more about who they are and what else they have written in their biographies on pages 175.

There's no set order to the essays – dip into whichever conversation takes your fancy. And remember, you too are part of this conversation, not only as a listener and reader but as a thinker, talker and writer. Don't hold back – plunge in!

Lucy Webster, Editor

THE CRITICAL ESSAY

Judy Simons

Introduction

This chapter briefly surveys some key moments in the history of essay writing and considers how modern approaches to texts have helped to shape and establish a new tradition of literary criticism. How far is the essay a reflection of its time and how viable are recent, cutting-edge interpretations of classic texts?

The essay is a formidable weapon in the critical armoury, whether it takes the form of an academic journal article, a book review, or a chapter in an edited collection such as this one. It is also a fundamental part of the student toolkit, a mandatory task set for examinations and coursework. So the chapter also explores what a critical essay means for today's students and what are its essential components. It closes with a glance at the evolution of the essay in the digital age.

What is a critical essay?

An essay is a compact and self-contained thesis on a specific topic. That definition, however, does not even come close to capturing the vitality of the form nor the challenges that confront an essayist. Whether you are a student or professional critic, the challenge remains the same: how can your analysis help to elucidate or re-vision a work of literature? Not only that but how can it do so in 1500, 2000 or 5000 words? For a central feature of the essay is that it is short. It requires discipline to marshal relevant points into a compelling argument and to do it within a strict word limit that allows little space for digression. At the same time, the essay offers real opportunities to the enquiring mind: the opportunity to reflect on what literature means, to engage in active discussion with other similarly curious readers, to understand and sift received critical opinion, and to probe in depth a literary text to formulate a personal view.

But why should anyone attempt a defence of Macbeth's motivation or try to dissect Virginia Woolf's technique in *Mrs Dalloway*? If, as the counter argument goes, a novel, play or poem is a form of entertainment, then why cannot it be enjoyed on its own terms? The excitement that good literature engenders comes from an instinctive response to the power of language. Reading constitutes an intellectual, spiritual or emotional adventure, which can take many different forms. At its most straightforward, this can be discovering who committed the murder in an Agatha Christie novel or re-living the anguish of the Great War alongside Wilfred Owen's unsung heroes. Readers are moved to tears, horror-struck or determine on life-changes as a result of books. A critical essay, which requires meticulous scrutiny of an author's ideas and technique, intervenes in this

POETRY – A CONVERSATION ACROSS TIME

Michael Rosen

Any poem we may be reading or listening to is not ‘alone’. It exists in many traditions or cultures:

i. Those of its making
ii. Those belonging to those reading or hearing the poem
iii. Those that the maker of the poem has adopted and adapted to make the poem.

Three terms are useful here. At the time of the poem’s making, the poem exists *synchronically* in a culture of other poems being produced along with the broader cultures and society where this writing and performing is taking place. It exists *diachronically*, as the poet has drawn on historical traditions of poetry and attitudes to poetry. We might also say that when we read or listen to poems from previous eras, we are ‘receiving’ these *anachronistically*, that is: out of their time.

Defining a shifting genre

Poets use language to give value to how we live, whilst at the same time giving value to language itself. Being precise about this, in terms of defining characteristics of poetry, is extremely difficult: there are always exceptions, and there are many other forms which use poetic methods. Ultimately, poetry is an agreement between practitioners and audience, between poets and readers, poetry-performers and listeners in specific times and places that what is going on *is* poetry. The historical and contemporary thread of poetry is made up of thousands of these agreements. These become exposed at moments of change. One key moment in this history came in the nineteenth century when poets across the world started to break with the regularity of traditional verse, writing ‘free verse’ and ‘prose poetry’. The fact that sufficient numbers of poets and audiences agreed that a good deal of this new poetry being produced was still poetry – despite its appearing to break all the rules previously used to define the genre – meant that the definition of poetry shifted and expanded.

This places poetry as a form of ‘discourse’, a very varied way for us to talk to each other and no matter what the ‘rules’ appear to be, these are in reality conventions and the making and breaking of them are in the hands of the users and receivers.

SHAKESPEARE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emma Smith

Looking at any work of literature in its historical context is an obvious readerly strategy. Clearly, the writer and his or her first audiences shared a set of cultural expectations that were historically specific, and we can be guilty of anachronistic thinking if we are not attentive to differences between then and now. On the other hand, the definition of a literary work worthy of our attention might precisely be that it transcends its own historical moment to speak to quite different ages and cultures. A classic, as Italo Calvino put it, 'is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say': a work, by definition, that is not limited to the period that produced it.

In this chapter, I want to add some complexity to the implied relationship between Shakespeare and his original historical context by asking some questions that are applicable when we consider any literary work historically. In particular I want to extend the vocabulary we have available for articulating aspects of this relationship of literature with its historical context. I want to suggest moving away from simple verbs suggesting a passive connection – words such as reflect, mirror, demonstrate, show, map, affirm – towards more argumentative verbs – such as interrogate, contradict, problematise, undermine, complicate, evade, reimagine. This more active vocabulary can help give us a more nuanced sense of the literary text as both a product of its historical situation and, crucially, something that is in certain ways independent of, or at an angle to, that situation.

What follows focuses around a few key reminders:

1. Shakespeare wrote entertainment, not documentary
2. Shakespeare's plays draw on previous literary texts as much as – or even more than – they do on real life
3. Shakespeare's plays are often part of contemporary debates, rather than separate from them
4. The theatre in the early modern period was not primarily realist
5. Shakespeare's plays have developed new, significant meanings in their long afterlife on stage and in criticism.

MODERNISM

Stephen Donovan

This chapter provides an overview of Modernism, a movement lasting from around 1890 to 1945 whose influence on all forms of cultural production has been pervasive and enduring. It offers a definition of Modernism in literature, an account of its historical origins, and an explanation for why Modernist writing differs so spectacularly from its nineteenth-century predecessors. Two short case studies consider how Modernist writers responded to the impact of World War One and new philosophical and scientific ideas. The chapter concludes with a consideration of how the scope of Modernism has been re-evaluated in recent years, and suggests examples for further reading on the critical approaches and resources for research that are now driving Modernist studies.

Definition

Modernism is largely a retrospective label. In 1927, Robert Graves and Laura Riding published *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* in which they discussed recent work by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle (‘H.D.’), e.e. cummings, and other contemporary poets writing in English. Yet the term was used only rarely during these years. In their own lifetimes, Modernist writers were more likely to identify with a ‘little’ magazine, a literary manifesto, a publishing house, or one of the period’s ephemeral sub-groupings, such as Wyndham Lewis’s Vorticism or Amy Lowell’s Imagism. Even so, they were united in seeing themselves as part of a broader movement in the arts that was committed to making a radical break with mainstream culture. ‘I am *modern*,’ insisted Joseph Conrad in 1902, ‘and I would rather recall Wagner the musician and Rodin the sculptor [...] and Whistler the painter [...]. They too had to suffer for being ‘new.”

By their very nature, avant-garde and experimental writers have always considered themselves subversive, radical, and countercultural. But Modernist writers were unique, both in the kind of ‘new’ which they advocated and in its historical impact. Modernist works in any medium are also surprisingly easy to identify when set alongside their late-nineteenth-century equivalents.

Take the fine arts, for example. Pierre-Auguste Cot’s *La Tempête* (1880) is an oil painting of two classical nymphs sheltering under a cloak, while Sybil Andrews’s *The Gale* (c.1930) is a woodcut cartoon of two men leaning into umbrellas against parallel lines of swirling raindrops. Both images have the roughly same subject-matter, but where Cot has portrayed the nymphs with near-photographic realism, Andrews has created an abstract geometric pattern of interconnected bodies, umbrellas, and clouds.

THE NOVEL IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

Pamela Bickley

Introduction

During the twentieth century the novel established itself as a vibrant and essential part of modern culture. The great novelists of the nineteenth century had undoubtedly paved the way, developing flexible narrative structures to address significant issues of the day, while exploring the inner lives of their protagonists. The Victorian legacy modelled realist fiction: a believable and coherent world proceeding according to rational notions of cause and effect; characterisation which, equally, seems consistent and credible; above all, perhaps, plots that progress towards an acceptable and just closure. By the end of the twentieth century, the novel had evolved in radical and challenging ways, both in content and form. Hybridity is perhaps the defining concept: contemporary fiction can engage with urgent social and moral issues or it can evoke one individual's distinctive interior world. Context might be the seemingly unremarkable world of the everyday or it might be an alternative, fantastical universe. Language might be heightened and poetical or brutal and demotic; structure might be sequential or fragmented. Late twentieth-century novels retain an ability to shock and disturb, indeed, to divide public opinion: James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* won major literary awards but, at the same time, were seen as deliberately courting outrage and controversy.

This chapter will focus on British and Irish fiction with some reference to American writing.

Modernism

The innovative creativity of twentieth-century fiction derives, first, from the radicalism of the great writers of Modernism: Conrad, Woolf, Joyce and, later, Beckett. From the earliest years of the twentieth century, D.H. Lawrence was dismantling Victorian notions of propriety, experimenting with symbolism as a way of denoting character, concluding his novels in open-ended ways. *Women in Love* (1921) inherits Victorian traditions of writing about a society through key families, class, work and relationships. But Lawrence approaches sexuality with a new frankness: sexual relations outside marriage do not incur the inevitable downfall of the heroine; sexual relations between men are proposed as part of a more complete human experience of love. And the end of the novel resists conventional closure: Ursula and Birkin experience shared passionate love, but

DECLARATION AND DREAM: AMERICAN LITERATURE 1776-2018

Nicolas Tredell

Introduction

The USA is a nation founded on a literary text: the Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776. This is not primarily a piece of fiction, poetry or drama, though it has elements of all three; it was born in the heat of revolution against the British crown, to justify an act of treason punishable by execution; as Benjamin Franklin, himself a prolific author, was said to have remarked to his fellow-signatories: 'We must all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately.'

Words were crucial in cementing this unity. The Declaration is a stirring piece of rhetoric that offers a vision of human nature in striking formulations – perhaps most notably, its assertion of a human right to 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' – and a series of indictments of the Old World, as represented by Britain.

The idea that words define a nation persists in American culture. Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the Declaration of Independence, and later became the third President of the United States, might not have liked the literary style of the 45th President in Twitter mode; but both use language in the idiom of their time, adapted to their envisaged audiences, to try to construct and reinforce an idea and narrative of a nation.

The Declaration of Independence is also the founding document of the American Dream, although the phrase itself does not seem to appear in print until 1931 in James Truslow Adams's book *The Epic of America*. Even in the Declaration, however, two forms of otherness already shadow the Dream: one from the Old World, one from the New. The Old World otherness is that of Britain, the colonial power; the New World otherness is that of Native Americans. The final item in the Declaration's denunciation of Old World iniquities combines these two threatening others: 'the present King of Great Britain', George III, has 'endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.'

This sense of perceived threats from the Old World and from indigenous and neighbouring inhabitants will persist in American culture and literature.

THE GOTHIC AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Andrew Michael Hurley

Introduction

The first Gothic novel is generally considered to be Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and while it reads like a five-part Shakespearean tragedy full of political intrigue, destructive lust, paranormal divination and bloody vengeance, it was an attempt to create a new mode of writing. Walpole's aim was to 'blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern', or in other words to fuse the fantastical medieval adventure that readers of the day would have expected from a 'Gothic' tale and the realist novel of the type being written by Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson.

His literary experiment was subsequently taken up by Clara Reeve in *The Old English Baron* (1778), a work she considered to be the 'literary offspring' of *The Castle of Otranto*. However, she is critical of the success of Walpole's hybridisation. In her opinion he fails to contain his story within the 'verge of probability', making the events too outlandish to be wholly effective.

It may be a fair assessment. Any realism in Walpole's novel is quickly overrun by the supernatural and sensational. The story begins with Manfred, the Prince of Otranto, looking forward to the wedding of his son and heir, Conrad, to Isabella of Vincenza. Yet before the nuptials commence, Conrad is crushed to death by a giant helmet, awakening spirits in the castle and an ancient curse. Anxious to hold onto power, Manfred tries to persuade Isabella to wed him instead, even though he is already married. She refuses and, helped by the noble peasant, Theodore, makes her escape through the secret passageways and subterranean caverns of the castle. Thus, Walpole establishes some of the staples of Gothic horror: the mouldering aristocratic pile, fulfilled prophecies, restless spirits, uncanny doublings, the virginal damsel and her monstrous pursuer.

These images were repeated and developed in the Gothic novels which followed, notably Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). But the Gothic was already being redefined and would develop again under Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, John Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge into a framework for describing the relationships between the physical world and the inner landscapes of the emotions. In contrast to the often-theatrical romps of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) develops the form into one that is fit for a serious

CONTRIBUTORS

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Christopher Pittard is senior lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Portsmouth, and course leader for the MA in Victorian Gothic. His books include *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes* (2019), *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction* (2011) and *Literary Illusions: Performance Magic and Victorian Literature* (forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press). He has published widely on Victorian literature, including in *Studies in the Novel*, *Victorian Periodicals Review, 19*, *Victoriographies*, and *Clues: A Journal of Detection*.

Chris Power's short story collection *Mothers* was published in 2018. He has written for the BBC, the *Guardian*, *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New Statesman*. His fiction has appeared in *Granta* and *The White Review*, and been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. He lives in London.

Michael Rosen is a writer, performance poet and broadcaster. He presents BBC Radio 4's *Word of Mouth*, as well as regularly presenting documentary programmes for BBC Radio 4 and BBC Radio 3, including the Sony Gold Award-winning *On Saying Goodbye*. He has published in the region of 200 books for children and adults, including *The Sad Book* with Quentin Blake, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* with Helen Oxenbury and *What is Poetry?* on writing poetry. He was Children's Laureate 2007-2009 and is currently Professor of Children's Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London.

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Jenny Stevens has taught English at both undergraduate and secondary level. She currently combines part-time teaching with academic writing and editing. Her publications include *Faith, Fiction and the Historical Jesus* (2010), a study of the mid-to-late Victorian novel; she is co-author of *Essential Shakespeare* (2013) and *Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama* (2016) and is currently working on Shakespeare adaptation for a forthcoming Arden publication.

Nicolas Tredell is a writer and lecturer who has published 20 books and around 400 essays and articles in the UK and USA on authors from Shakespeare and Milton to Zora Neale Hurston and Zadie Smith, and on key issues in literary and film theory. He has made a range of contributions to *emagazine* and to emagclips, and has given talks at a variety of schools and other venues. He is Consultant Editor of Macmillan International's Essential Criticism series, which now runs to 88 volumes. He formerly taught literature, drama, film and cultural studies at Sussex University.

Nathan Waddell is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Literature at the University of Birmingham, where he teaches and researches twentieth-century culture. He is the author of three books – *Modern John Buchan* (2009), *Modernist Nowheres* (2012), and *Moonlighting: Beethoven and Literary Modernism* (2019) – and has edited an essay collection on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. He's currently editing *The Cambridge Companion to 'Nineteen Eighty-Four'*.