

**A-LEVEL
ENGLISH
LITERATURE B**

(7717)

Critical anthology

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AQA A-level English Literature B: critical anthology

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Introduction

Welcome to this booklet of critical material. It is designed to be used specifically with Component 3 but will have wider application across the whole of your A-level study of English Literature. Ideas that are contained here will illuminate different ways of reading and thinking about the texts on the examined components and will help you to make connections across texts and genres.

The Critical anthology is a collection of extracts that relate to six different ways of reading literature. The ideas provide a lens, if you like, through which you can look at texts, enabling you to access them from a variety of angles and challenge them if you so choose. We hope you find these readings interesting but most of all we want you to use them to help you form your own ideas and interpretations. A brief explanation of each of these approaches will be given at the start of each section.

The six sections are:

- Ideas about narrative
- Marxist ways of reading
- Feminist ways of reading
- Post-colonial ways of reading
- Ecocritical ways of reading
- Literary value and the canon.

How to use the Critical anthology for non-exam assessment: Theory and Independence

While the Critical anthology can be used to support your reading and studies throughout the whole of your course, it is a specific requirement that you use it in your non-exam assessment. In your non-exam assessment you will need to produce two assignments, one on a prose text and one on a poetry text and you must show evidence of your reading of the Critical anthology in both pieces of work.

It may be that you focus on a single section of the anthology to explore in relation to your prose text and a single section alongside your poetry text. However, you may wish to incorporate ideas from different sections as you grapple with meanings and come to your own conclusions about your chosen texts. It is important though that you see that it is the reading that is, say feminist or Marxist, and not the text itself.

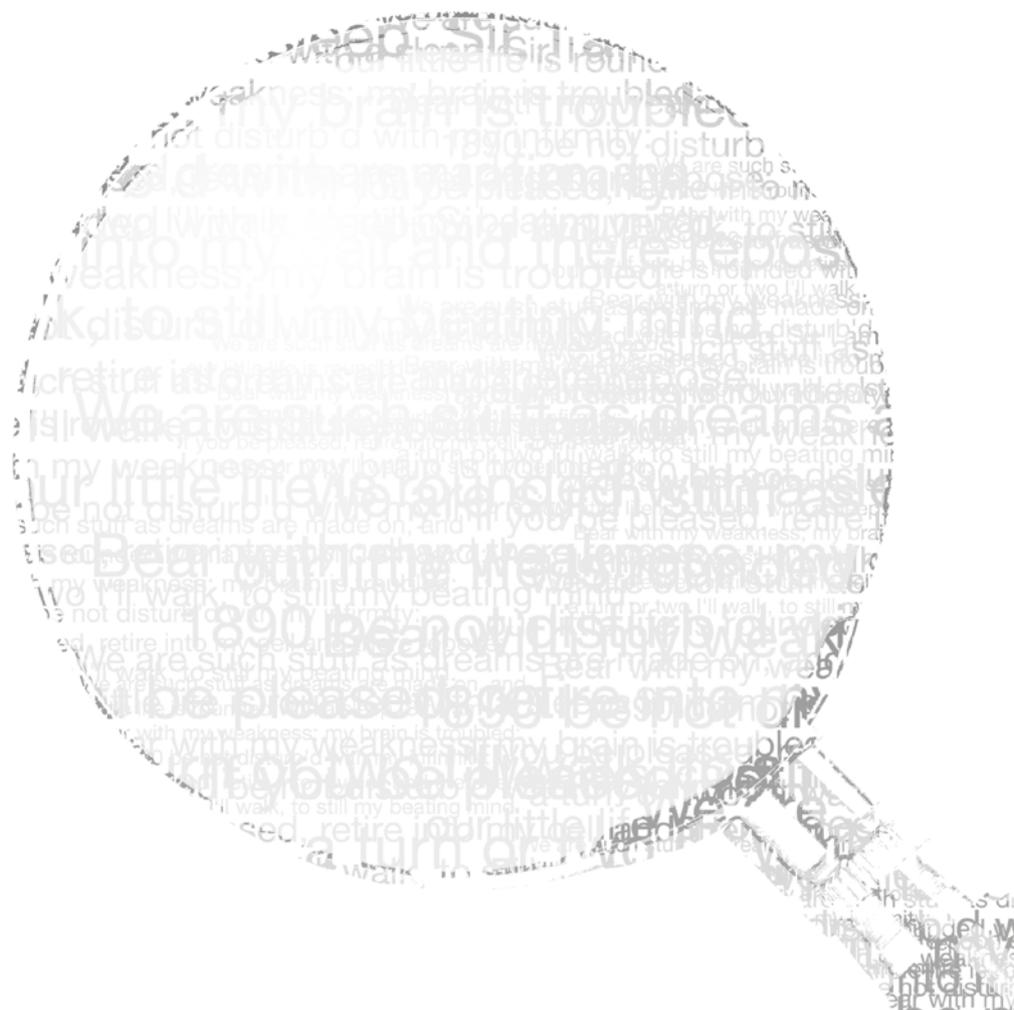
A carefully chosen task, which sets up a debate based on an idea or some ideas from the anthology, is of fundamental importance. Each of your two responses should be between 1250 and 1500 words long. One must be a conventional response but the other could be a re-creative response, accompanied by a commentary, if you wish. The key is that you must show that your work has been informed by critical ideas about literature.

What you will find here is a flavour of six different ways of reading. If you want you can read critical material on the same topics other than that provided in this anthology; the material here will just be a starting point for some of you.

In each section there are some ideas that are accessible and straightforward, and some ideas which are more challenging. Some extracts exemplify critical ideas being applied to a literary text; others provide an idea about how literature can be read that may be a starting point for your own investigations. Whichever parts of the anthology you use should be a springboard from which you can interrogate ways of reading. We hope you will find the ideas here interesting and thought-provoking and that they open up the ways in which you read and think about literature.

Section 1

Ideas about narrative



Section 1

Ideas about narrative

This section contains extracts that explore some of the methods writers use to construct stories. Stories, for many, are seen as being of fundamental importance to human life. Booker begins to explore the idea that there are commonly recurring story types that can be traced throughout all literature. David Lodge has written extensively about narrative, and here there are extracts related to how writers start and end their narratives, how narratives are structured and told, and how time and setting are used within stories. For many readers the characters are the most important and memorable aspect of a story and there are some ideas here about that crucial element of characterisation. In focusing on the story and its structure, some writers also focus on the gaps in the narrative, the parts of the story that are not told. Ideas about narrative gaps are specifically included here as they can be very fruitful areas of investigation and exploration, especially for those students interested in producing re-creative pieces, which often focus on what is silent, missing or not explained in the text.

1.1 Story types

Taken from *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, by C. Brooker:

Imagine we are about to be plunged into a story – any story in the world. A curtain rises on a stage. A cinema darkens. We turn to the first paragraph of a novel. A narrator utters the age-old formula ‘Once upon a time ...’

On the face of it, so limitless is the human imagination and so boundless the realm at the storyteller’s command, we might think that literally anything could happen next. But in fact there are certain things we can be pretty sure we know about our story even before it begins.

For a start, it is likely that the story will have a hero, or a heroine, or both: a central figure, or figures, on whose fate our interest in the story ultimately rests; someone with whom, as we say, we can identify.

We are introduced to our hero or heroine in an imaginary world. Briefly or at length, the general scene is set. The purpose of the formula ‘Once upon a time ...’, whether the storyteller uses it explicitly or not, is to take us out of our present place and time into that imaginary realm where the story is to unfold, and to introduce us to the central figure with whom we are to identify.

Then something happens: some event or encounter which precipitates the story’s action, giving it a focus. In fact, the opening of the story is governed by a kind of double formula: ‘Once upon a time there was such and such a person, living in such and such place ... then, one day, something happened’.

We are introduced to a little boy called Aladdin, who lives in a city in China ... then one day a Sorcerer arrives, and leads him out of the city to a mysterious underground cave. We meet a Scottish general, Macbeth, who has just won a great victory over his country's enemies ... then, on his way home, he encounters the mysterious witches. We meet a girl called Alice, wondering how to amuse herself in the summer heat ... then suddenly she sees a White Rabbit running past, and vanishing down a mysterious hole. We see the great detective Sherlock Holmes sitting in his Baker Street lodgings ... then there is a knock at the door, and a visitor enters to present him with his next case.

This event or summons provides the 'Call' which will lead the hero or heroine out of their initial state into a series of adventures or experiences which, to a greater or lesser extent, will transform their lives.

The next thing of which we can be sure is that the action which the hero or heroine are being drawn into will involve conflict and uncertainty, because without some measure of both there cannot be a story. Where there is a hero there may also be a villain (on some occasions, indeed, the hero himself may be the villain). But even if the characters in the story are not necessarily contrasted in such black-and-white terms as 'goodies' and 'baddies', it is likely that some will be on the side of the hero or heroine, as friends and allies, while others will be out to oppose them.

Finally, we shall sense that the impetus of the story is carrying it towards some kind of resolution. Every story which is complete, and not just a fragmentary string of episodes and impressions, must work up to a climax, where conflict and uncertainty are usually at their most extreme. This then leads to a resolution of all that has gone before, bringing the story to its ending. And here we see how every story, however mildly or emphatically, has in fact been leading its central figure or figures in one of two directions. Either they end, as we say, happily, with a sense of liberation, fulfilment and completion. Or they end unhappily, in some form of discomfiture, frustration or death.

To say that stories either have happy or unhappy endings may seem such a commonplace that one almost hesitates to utter it. But it has to be said, simply because it is the most important single thing to be observed about stories. Around that one fact, and around what is necessary to bring a story to one type of ending or the other, revolves the whole of their extraordinary significance in our lives.

One of the few general texts ever to have been written on stories was Aristotle's *Poetics*, left unfinished well over 2000 years ago. It was Aristotle who first observed that a satisfactory story – a story which, as he put it, is a 'whole' – must have 'a beginning, a middle and an end'. And it was Aristotle who, in the context of the two main types of stage play, first explicitly drew attention to the two kinds of ending a story may lead up to.

On the one hand, as he put it in the *Poetics*, there are tragic stories. These are stories in which the hero or heroine's fortunes usually begin by rising, but eventually 'turn down' to disaster (the Greek word *catastrophe* means literally a 'down stroke', the downturn in the hero's fortunes at the end of a tragedy). On the other hand, there are, in the broadest sense, comedies: stories in which things initially seem to become more and more complicated for the hero or heroine, until they are entangled in a complete knot, from which there seems no escape. But eventually comes what Aristotle calls the *peripeteia* or 'reversal of fortune': the knot is miraculously unravelled (from which we get the French word *dénouement*, meaning literally an 'unknotting'). Hero, heroine or both together are liberated; and we and all the world can rejoice.

This division holds good over a much greater range of stories than might be implied just by the terms 'tragedy' and 'comedy'. Indeed, with qualifications, it remains true right across the domain of storytelling. The plot of a story is that which leads its hero or heroine either to a 'catastrophe' or an 'unknotting'; either to frustration or to liberation; either to death or to a renewal of life. And it might be thought that there are almost as many ways of describing these downward and upward paths as there are individual stories in the world. Yet the more carefully we look at the vast range of stories thrown up by the human imagination through the ages, the more clearly we may discern that there are certain continually recurring general shapes to stories, dictating the nature of the road which the hero or heroine may take to their ultimate destination.

Brooker, C. (2004) *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, London: Continuum, pp 17–19.

1.2 Structure

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

The structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character. The effects of a novel's structure, however, are experienced not in space but over time – often quite a long time. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, for instance, which Coleridge thought had one of the three greatest plots in literature (the other two were both plays, *Oedipus Rex* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*), runs to nearly 900 pages in the Penguin edition. It has 198 Chapters, divided into eighteen Books, the first six of which are set in the country, the next six on the road, and the final six in London. Exactly in the middle of the novel most of the major characters pass through the same inn, but without meeting in combinations which would bring the story to a premature conclusion. The novel is packed with surprises, enigmas and suspense, and ends with a classic Reversal and Discovery.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, p 216.

1.3 Beginnings

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

For the reader, however, the novel always begins with that opening sentence (which may not, of course, be the first sentence the novelist originally wrote). And then the next sentence, and then the sentence after that ... When does the beginning of a novel end, is another difficult question to answer. Is it the first paragraph, the first few pages, or the first chapter? However one defines it, the beginning of a novel is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined. It should therefore, as the phrase goes, “draw us in”.

A novel may begin with a set-piece description of a landscape or townscape that is to be the primary setting of the story, the *mise-en-scène* as film criticism terms it: for example, the sombre description of Egdon Heath at the beginning of Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*, or E. M. Forster’s account of Chandrapore, in elegant, urbane guide-book prose, at the outset of *A Passage to India*. A novel may begin in the middle of a conversation, like Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*, or Ivy Compton-Burnett’s idiosyncratic works. It may begin with an arresting self-introduction by the narrator, “Call me Ishmael” (Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*), or with a rude gesture at the literary tradition of autobiography: “... the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it” (J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*). A novelist may begin with a philosophical reflection – “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*), or pitch a character into extreme jeopardy with the very first sentence: “Hale knew they meant to murder him before he had been in Brighton three hours” (Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*). Many novels begin with a “frame-story” which explains how the main story was discovered, or describes it being told to a fictional audience. In Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* an anonymous narrator describes Marlow relating his Congo experiences to a circle of friends sitting on the deck of a cruising yawl in the Thames estuary (“And this also,” Marlow begins, “has been one of the dark places of the earth”). Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* consists of a deceased woman’s memoir, which is read aloud to guests at a country-house party who have been entertaining themselves with ghost stories, and get, perhaps, more than they bargained for. Kingsley Amis begins his ghost story, *The Green Man*, with a witty pastiche of *The Good Food Guide*: “No sooner has one got over one’s surprise at finding a genuine coaching inn less than 40 miles from London – and 8 from the M1 – than one is marvelling at the quality of the equally English fare ...” Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller* begins, “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*.” James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* begins in the middle of a sentence: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.” The missing fragment concludes the book: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the” – thus returning us to the beginning again, like the recirculation of water in the environment, from river to sea to cloud to rain to river, and like the unending production of meaning in the reading of fiction.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 4-5 and pp 7-8.

1.4 Endings

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

“Conclusions are the weak points of most authors,” George Eliot remarked, “but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation.” To Victorian novelists endings were apt to be particularly troublesome, because they were always under pressure from readers and publishers to provide a happy one. The last chapter was known in the trade as the “wind-up”, which Henry James sarcastically described as “a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks.” James himself pioneered the “open” ending characteristic of modern fiction, often stopping the novel in the middle of a conversation, leaving a phrase hanging resonantly, but ambiguously, in the air: “‘Then there we are,’ said Strether.” (*The Ambassadors*)

As Jane Austen pointed out in a metafictional aside in *Northanger Abbey*, a novelist cannot conceal the timing of the end of the story (as a dramatist or film-maker can, for instance) because of the tell tale compression of the pages. When John Fowles provides a mock-Victorian wind-up to *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (in which Charles settles down happily with Ernestina) we are not deceived, for a quarter of the book remains to be read. Going on with the story of Charles’s quest for Sarah, Fowles offers us two more alternative endings – one that ends happily for the hero, and the other unhappily. He invites us to choose between them, but tacitly encourages us to see the second as more authentic, not just because it is sadder, but because it is more open, with the sense of life going on into an uncertain future.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, p 224.

1.5 Time

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

The simplest way to tell a story, equally favoured by tribal bards and parents at bedtime, is to begin at the beginning, and go on until you reach the end, or your audience falls asleep. But even in antiquity, storytellers perceived the interesting effects that could be obtained by deviating from chronological order. The classical epic began *in medias res*, in the midst of the story. For example, the narrative of the *Odyssey* begins halfway through the hero’s hazardous voyage home from the Trojan War, loops back to describe his earlier adventures, then follows the story to its conclusion in Ithaca.

Through time-shift, narrative avoids presenting life as just one damn thing after another, and allows us to make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events. A shift of narrative focus back in time may change our interpretation of something which happened much later in the chronology of the story, but which we have already experienced

as readers of the text. This is a familiar device of cinema, the flashback. Film has more difficulty in accommodating the effect of “flashforward” – the anticipatory glimpse of what is going to happen in the future of the narrative, known to classical rhetoricians as “prolepsis”. This is because such information implies the existence of a narrator who knows the whole story, and films do not normally have narrators. It is significant that in this respect the film of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was much less complex and innovative than the novel on which it was based. The film told the story in straightforward chronological order, whereas the novel is remarkable for its fluid handling of time, ranging rapidly back and forward over the span of the action.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 74–75.

1.6 Setting

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

The sense of place was a fairly late development in the history of prose fiction. As Mikhail Bakhtin observed, the cities of classical romance are interchangeable backcloths for the plot: Ephesus might as well be Corinth or Syracuse, for all we are told about them. The early English novelists were scarcely more specific about place. London in Defoe’s or Fielding’s novels, for instance, lacks the vivid visual detail of Dickens’s London. When Tom Jones arrives at the capital in search of his beloved Sophia, the narrator tells us that he

was an entire stranger in London; and as he happened to arrive first in a quarter of the town, the inhabitants of which have very little intercourse with the householders of Hanover or Grosvenor Square (for he entered through Gray’s Inn Lane) so he rambled about for some time, before he could even find his way to those happy mansions, where Fortune segregates from the vulgar those ... whose ancestors being born in better days, by sundry kinds of merit, have entailed riches and honour on their posterity.

London is described entirely in terms of the variations of class and status in its inhabitants, as interpreted by the author’s ironical vision. There is no attempt to make the reader “see” the city, or to describe its sensory impact on a young man up from the country for the first time. Compare Dickens’s description of Jacob’s Island in *Oliver Twist*:

To reach this place, the visitor has to penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets, thronged by the roughest and poorest of the waterside people ... The cheapest and least delicate provisions are heaped in the shops; the coarsest and commonest articles of wearing apparel dangle at the salesman’s door, and stream from the house-parapet and windows ... he walks beneath tottering housefronts projecting over the pavement, dismantled walls that seem to totter as he passes, chimneys half-crushed, half-hesitating to fall, windows guarded by rusty iron bars that time and dirt have almost eaten away, every imaginable sign of desolation and neglect.

Tom Jones was published in 1749; *Oliver Twist* in 1838. What intervened was the Romantic movement, which pondered the effect of *milieu* on man, opened people's eyes to the sublime beauty of landscape and, in due course, to the grim symbolism of cityscapes in the Industrial Age.

Martin Amis is a late exponent of the Dickensian tradition of urban Gothic. His fascinated and appalled gaze at the post-industrial city mediates an apocalyptic vision of culture and society in a terminal state of decay. As with Dickens, his settings often seem more animated than his characters, as if the life has been drained out of people to re-emerge in a demonic, destructive form in things: streets, machines, gadgets.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 57–58.

1.7 Narrators

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

Unreliable narrators are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell. An unreliable “omniscient” narrator is almost a contradiction in terms, and could only occur in a very deviant, experimental text. Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest.

The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. This need not be a conscious, or mischievous, intention on their part. The narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel is not an evil man, but his life has been based on the suppression and evasion of the truth, about himself and about others. His narrative is a kind of confession, but it is riddled with devious self-justification and special pleading, and only at the very end does he arrive at an understanding of himself – too late to profit by it.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 154–155.

1.8 Characterisation

Taken from *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, by H. Porter Abbott:

Ever since the distinction between *character* and *action* in narrative was first introduced over two thousand years ago, theorists have tended to give priority of importance to one or the other. For Aristotle, it was quite clear that the action (“the incidents of the story”) took precedence over character:

Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing.

For Leslie Stephen, writing in England at the end of the nineteenth century, the balance was just the reverse. The great object of narrative action was the revelation of character. Stephen was a man of his time and place, and became in 1881 the first editor of England's *Dictionary of National Biography*, whose founding was itself highly symptomatic of this shift in emphasis. The first of its kind, the DNB was the narrative equivalent of England's National Portrait Gallery, for in Stephen's words, a biography "should be a portrait as reveals the essence of character."

A third position is that character and action are inseparable. Stephen's contemporary, Henry James, argued that no one could learn the art of novel writing by learning first to make characters and second to devise the action. Characters and action were, finally, indistinguishable, "melting into each other at every breath":

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? ... It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time it is an expression of character.

It is hard to deny the logic of this. Insofar as the incidents involve people, how those incidents play out is driven by the nature of the people involved. Characters, to put this in narratological terms, have *agency*; they cause things to happen. Conversely, as these people drive the action, they necessarily reveal who they are in terms of their motives, their strength, weakness, trustworthiness, capacity to love, hate, cherish, adore, deplore, and so on. By their actions do we know them.

Porter Abbott, H. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 123–124.

1.9 Flat and round characters

Taken from *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, by H. Porter Abbott:

E. M. Forster introduced the term *flat character* to refer to characters who have no hidden complexity. In this sense, they have no depth (hence the word "flat"). Frequently found in comedy, satire, and melodrama, flat characters are limited to a narrow range of predictable behaviors. Examples can be found throughout the novels of Dickens, flattened further by refrains (*motifs*) like "Barkis is willin" that sum the character up. The philosopher Henri Bergson speculated that we laugh at such characters because they represent a reduction

of the human to the mechanical. Whether he was right about this or not, such characters do seem to exist on the surface of the story, along with objects and machines. There are no mysterious gaps to fill since what you see is what you get. They declare themselves in their motifs, as if to say – to borrow a motif from Popeye the Sailor man (another flat character) – “I yam what I yam.”

Forster’s counter term to flat characters was *round characters*. Round characters have varying degrees of depth and complexity and therefore, in Forster’s words, they “cannot be summed up in a single phrase”. In Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, for example, the round central character takes apart Popeye’s signature motif, “I yam what I yam,” using it to evoke his own conflicted relationship with his African-American cultural heritage, of which yams are both a powerful symbol and an actual component. The pun of “yam” and “I am” is in turn one small component in a complex web of conflicting ideas, feelings, and values out of which we, along with the Invisible Man, try to put together an understanding of his character. It is the interest of this sort of complexity that has led many critics to rank round characters above flat ones. And though flat characters can be awfully funny, and satire can provide focus and bite by reducing a target to a flat character, the complexity of round characters seems closer to the way people really are.

Porter Abbott, H. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 126–127.

1.10 Narrative gaps

Taken from *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, by H. Porter Abbott:

Narratives by their nature are riddled with gaps. Even if we come as close as we humanly can to avoid underreading and overreading, we still have to fill things in if we are to make sense of the narratives we read or see.

That night we lay on the floor in the room and I listened to the silk-worms eating. The silk-worms fed in racks of mulberry leaves and all night you could hear them eating and a dropping sound in the leaves.

In these first two sentences of Hemingway’s short story “Now I Lay Me”, a number of gaps open up. Where are we? Why are we lying on the floor? What do silk-worms sound like when they eat? What is a “dropping sound”? Is it like the sound of rain? Why can’t or won’t the narrator shut out the sound of the silk-worms? If he (is it a he?) listens “all night”, why is he staying awake?

As we read, the narrative discourse gives us some guidance for filling in these gaps. We learn that the narrator is recalling a time when he was convalescing “seven miles behind the lines.” From a few historical markers and the fact that his orderly is an Italian who was conscripted when he returned home, we infer that these “lines” are the Italian front during World War I. We infer from the fact that they “were lying on blankets spread over straw,” that the narrator and his orderly are in a makeshift ward in a structure (a house? a barn?) appropriated for the purpose. But much of these inferences, insofar as we build them in our minds, are constructed from what we know or imagine of houses or barns in Italy in the second decade of the twentieth century. We never receive any more information on the sound of silk-worms eating (except that it is different from that of guns in the distance), so if this gap is going to be filled in, we must use what we know, or imagine, about the sounds of things dropping on leaves.

And why can't he sleep? We learn a reason for this in the next two sentences:

I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back.

This explains why he knows that the silk-worms feed all night. But it also helps us, by inference, to account for why he may listen to them obsessively – because they help block out the more distant sound of the guns. As for the specific nature of his wounds when he was “blown up”, this gap remains wide open. We do learn, with regard to the immediate impact of that event, that his soul went out of his body and then came back again, but for most of us we are again forced to do some filling in since few of us have had this experience.

The reading of narrative is a fine tissue of insertions like this that we make as we move from point to point. And though this can often lead to overreading, it also gives the experience of narrative much of its power. In other words, the energy narrative draws on is our own. Wolfgang Iser, who wrote at length about the gaps in narrative, put it this way: “it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism.” But it is also worth underscoring at this point that we have little clear understanding of what exactly the mind does when it reads. And if filling in gaps is one of the ways the mind makes narrative “dynamic”, another way is to limit this filling in – not to go too far. When Satan is described in *Paradise Lost*, rising from the burning lake in hell, Milton gives an indication of his immensity by strategically limiting the information he gives us:

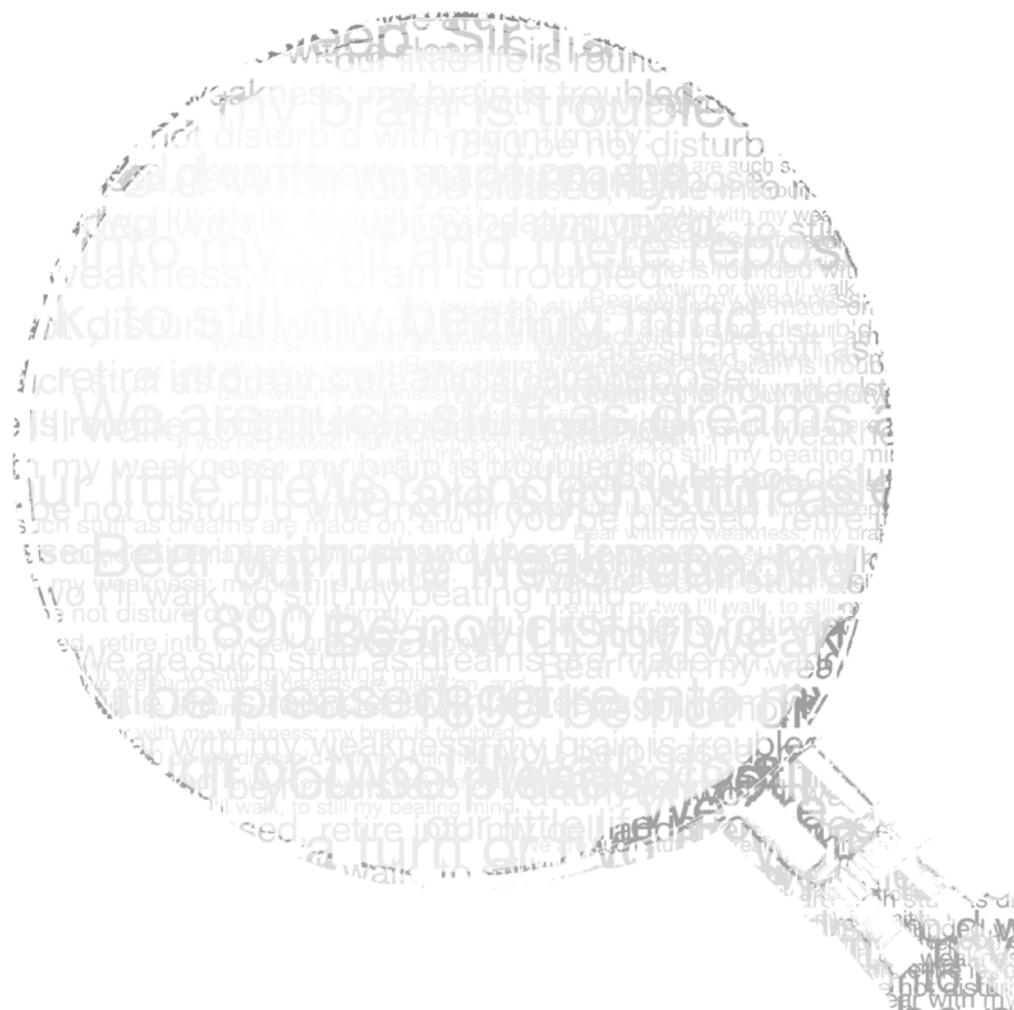
Then with expanded wings he steers his flight
Aloft, incumbent on the dusky Air
That felt unusual weight (I, 225–7)

Had he told us that Satan was 100 feet in length, had a wingspan of 85 feet, and weighed roughly 8 tons, Milton would not have communicated the same sense of immensity that he does in these three lines. He gains by leaving out, by suggesting and not specifying. Satan does not fly, but “steers his flight”, like a ship; he is weighted with low ‘u’ sounds, “incumbent on the dusky Air”; and even the air, normally so unfazed by everything and anything, “felt unusual weight”. As in a bad dream, we don’t see but rather feel the satanic hugeness of this creature. Satan arouses awe to the degree that the reader does not fill in the descriptive details about him. So here is another interesting complication in the field of narrative. If narrative comes alive as we fill in its gaps, it also gains life by leaving some of them unfilled. In the art of narrative, less can be more.

Porter Abbott, H. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 83–85.

Section 2

Marxist ways of reading



Section 2

Marxist ways of reading

In this section you will see writers looking at texts from a specific political perspective: one which focuses on the struggles between social classes and the struggles between those who oppress and those who are oppressed and between those who have power and those who do not. This particular way of reading literature is based on the theories of Karl Marx who believed that Western capitalist economic systems were designed to increase the wealth of the rich, while oppressing and suppressing the poor. Marxist critics tend to believe that literature is the product of the writer's own class and cultural values and that literary texts are themselves products of a particular ideology. The Marxist critic is a reader who keeps in mind issues of power, work, oppression and money, and in focusing on what the text reveals of the author's values and social context, Marxism questions whether the text supports the prevailing social and economic system or undermines it.

2.1 The politics of class: Marxism

Taken from *Literary Theory: The Basics*, by H. Bertens:

To discuss Marxism in the early twenty-first century may well seem strangely beside the point. After all, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, one self-proclaimed Marxist regime after the other has been forced to consign itself to oblivion. And the officially Marxist political parties that for a long time were a serious force in Western Europe have either disappeared or have become politically marginal. However, Marxism as an intellectual perspective still provides a wholesome counterbalance to our propensity to see ourselves and the writers that we read as completely divorced from socio-economic circumstances. It also counterbalances the related tendency to read the books and poems we read as originating in an autonomous mental realm, as the free products of free and independent minds.

Marxism's questioning of that freedom is now a good deal less sensational than it was in the 1840s and 1850s when Karl Marx (1818–1883) began to outline what is now called Marxist philosophy, although it is still controversial enough. When he noted, in the 'Foreword' to his 1859 *Towards a Critique of Political Economy*, that the 'mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life', the Victorian upper class, if aware of this line of thought, would have been horrified, and certainly by the conclusion that followed: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness'.

What does it mean that the 'mode of production' conditions 'the general process of social, political, and intellectual life'? If people have heard about Marxism they usually know rather vaguely that Marxism is about how your social circumstances determine much, if not all, of your life. This seems reasonable enough. If you work the night shift in your local McDonald's, for instance, you are unlikely to fly business class to New York City for a week in the Waldorf Astoria or to bid on the next Rembrandt for sale. But this sort of determinism

is perfectly compatible with the idea that we are essentially free. Certain politicians would tell you to get out of the night shift, to get an education, to get rid of your provincial accent, to buy the right outfit, and to start exuding self-confidence. In other words, you have options, like everybody else, and all you have to do is to make the right choices and start moving up that social ladder.

This is not what Marx had in mind. Marxist theory argues that the way we think and the way we experience the world around us are either wholly or largely conditioned by the way the economy is organised. Under a medieval, feudal regime people will have thought and felt different from the way that we think and feel now, in a capitalist economy – that is, an economy in which goods are produced (the ‘mode of production’) by large concentrations of capital (old-style factories, new-style multinationals) and then sold on a free, competitive market. The *base* of a society – the way its economy is organised, broadly speaking – determines its *superstructure* – everything that we might classify as belonging to the realm of culture, again in a broad sense: education, law, but also religion, philosophy, political programmes, and the arts. This implies a view of literature that is completely at odds with the Anglo-American view of literature that goes back to Matthew Arnold. If the way we experience reality and the way we think about it (our religious, political, and philosophical views) are determined by the sort of economy we happen to live in, then clearly there is no such thing as an unchanging human condition. On the contrary, with, for instance, the emergence of capitalism some centuries ago we may expect to find a new experience of reality and new views of the world. Since capitalism did not happen overnight we will not find a clean break but we certainly should find a gradual transition to a new, more or less collective perspective. The term ‘collective’ is important here. If the economic ‘base’ indeed determines the cultural ‘superstructure’, then writers will not have all that much freedom in their creative efforts. They will inevitably work within the framework dictated by the economic ‘base’ and will have much in common with other writers living and writing under the same economic dispensation. Traditional Marxism, then, asserts that thought is subservient to, and follows, the material conditions under which it develops. Its outlook is *materialist*, as opposed to the *idealist* perspective, whose claim that matter is basically subservient to thought is one of the fundamental assumptions of modern Western culture: we tend to assume that our thinking is free, unaffected by material circumstances. In our minds we can always be free. Wrong, says Marxism, minds aren’t free at all, they only think they are.

Capitalism, Marxism tells us, thrives on exploiting its labourers. Simply put, capitalists grow rich and shareholders do well because the labourers that work for them and actually produce goods (including services) get less – and often a good deal less – for their efforts than their labour is actually worth. Labourers have known this for a long time and have organised themselves in labour unions to get fairer deals. What they do not know, however, is how capitalism *alienates* them from themselves by seeing them in terms of production – as production units, as objects rather than human beings. Capitalism turns people into things, it *reifies* them. Negotiations about better wages, no matter how successful, do not affect (let alone reverse) that process. Marx saw it clearly at work in his nineteenth-century environment

in which men whose grandfathers had still worked as cobblers, cabinetmakers, yeoman farmers, and so on – in other words, as members of self-supporting communities who dealt directly with clients and buyers – performed mechanical tasks in factories where they were merely one link in a long chain. However, this process of reification is not limited to labourers. The capitalist mode of production generates a view of the world – focused on profit – in which ultimately all of us function as objects and become alienated from ourselves.

Bertens, H. (2001) *Literary Theory: The Basics*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 81–83.

2.2 Marxist literary criticism: general

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

In fact, though, Marx and Engels themselves did not put forward any comprehensive theory of literature. Their views seem relaxed and undogmatic: good art always has a degree of freedom from prevailing economic circumstances, even if these economic facts are its ‘ultimate determinant’. Thus, Engels, writing to the English novelist Margaret Harkness in April 1888, tells her that he is ‘far from finding fault with you for not having written a point-blank socialist novel... The more the opinions of the author remain hidden the better the work of art’. As cultured and highly educated Germans, Marx and Engels had that reverence for ‘great’ art and literature which was typical of their class, and there is an obvious desire in such pronouncements to emphasise the difference between art and propaganda.

All the same, Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer’s social class, and its prevailing ‘ideology’ (outlook, values, tacit assumptions, half-realised allegiances, etc.) have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So instead of seeing authors as primarily autonomous ‘inspired’ individuals whose ‘genius’ and creative imagination enables them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would usually not admit. This is true not just of the *content* of their work but even of *formal* aspects of their writing which might at first seem to have no possible political overtones. For instance, the prominent British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton suggests that in language ‘shared definitions and regularities of grammar both reflect and help constitute, a well-ordered political state’ (*William Shakespeare*, 1986, p.1). Likewise, Catherine Belsey, another prominent British left-wing critic, argues that the form of the ‘realist’ novel contains implicit validation of the existing social structure, because realism, by its very nature, leaves conventional ways of seeing intact, and hence tends to discourage critical scrutiny of reality. By ‘form’ here is included all the conventional features of the novel – chronological time-schemes, formal beginnings and endings, in-depth psychological characterisation, intricate plotting, and fixed narratorial points of view. Similarly, the ‘fragmented’, ‘absurdist’ forms of drama and fiction used by twentieth-century writers like Beckett and Kafka are seen as a response to the contradictions and divisions inherent in late capitalist society.

However, it is probably true to say (as Ken Newton does, p. 244, *Theory into Practice*) that traditional Marxist criticism tends to deal with history in a fairly generalised way. It talks about conflicts between social classes, and clashes of large historical forces, but, contrary to popular belief, it rarely discusses the details of a specific historical situation and relates it closely to the interpretation of a particular literary text.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 158–150.

2.3 What Marxist critics do

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

1. They make a division between the ‘overt’ (manifest or surface) and ‘covert’ (latent or hidden) content of a literary work (much as psychoanalytic critics do) and then relate the *covert* subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle, or the progression of society through various historical stages, such as, the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. Thus, the conflicts in *King Lear* might be read as being ‘really’ about the conflicts of class interest between the rising class (the bourgeoisie) and the falling class (the feudal overlords).
2. Another method used by Marxist critics is to relate the context of a work to the social-class status of the author. In such cases an assumption is made (which again is similar to those made by psychoanalytic critics) that the author is unaware of precisely what he or she is saying or revealing in the text.
3. A third Marxist method is to explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which ‘produced’ it. For instance, *The Rise of the Novel*, by Ian Watt, relates the growth of the novel in the eighteenth century to the expansion of the middle classes during that period. The novel ‘speaks’ for this social class, just as, for instance, Tragedy ‘speaks for’ the monarchy and the nobility, and the Ballad ‘speaks for’ the rural and semi-urban ‘working class’.
4. A fourth Marxist practice is to relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is ‘consumed’, a strategy which is used particularly in the later variant of Marxist criticism known as cultural materialism.
5. A fifth Marxist practice is the ‘politicisation of literary form’, that is, the claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstance. For instance, in the view of some critics, literary realism carries with it an implicit validation of conservative social structures: for others, the formal and metrical intricacies of the sonnet and the iambic pentameter are a counterpart of social stability, decorum, and order.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 167–168.

2.4 Marxist criticism: an example

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

As an example of Marxist criticism we will take chapter five, on *Twelfth Night*, in Elliot Krieger's *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's comedies* (1979). As it is discussed here, the example mainly shows the first of the five Marxist critical activities just listed. The play centres on the love between the Duke Orsino and the Lady Olivia. His love is extravagantly and persistently expressed but she at first rejects him, having dedicated herself to a period of protracted mourning for her dead father. Subsequently she falls in love with Viola, a young noblewoman who is temporarily disguised as a man and acting as his servant and go-between (under the name Cesario). Olivia is also loved by her steward, the strict and punctilious Malvolio, who is tricked by her uncle, Sir Toby Belch, into believing that his love for her is returned.

The essay begins by citing the dominant critical view of the play, which is that it presents various extremes of self-indulgence (such as Orsino's wallowing in fantasies of romantic love and Toby Belch's self-abandonment to physical appetites) and contrasts these with an extreme puritanism and resistance to pleasure, as seen in Malvolio. The play is seen as recommending a balance and decorum in which these extremes are avoided and proper human fulfilment becomes possible. Krieger points out that this ignores the question of class in the play: when 'order' is restored at the end, the aristocratic characters suffer no particular ill effects, while Malvolio's fate is much more severe, yet Malvolio's self-interest differs from the obviously narcissistic pre-occupations of Orsino and Olivia and the egoistic revelry of Sir Toby *only* because decorum forbids one of his rank to 'surfeit on himself'. Thus 'only a privileged social class has access to the morality of indulgence'. Indeed, by definition, 'the members of the ruling class find their identities through excessive indulgence in appetite'.

Each of the members of the aristocratic class, he continues, has a private 'secondary world'. For Sir Toby it is the unfettered world he reaches by drink, for he 'forces everyone to care for him while using the enforced incompetence of drunkenness and the willed oblivion of time in order to protect himself from the possibility of caring for others'. Likewise, Olivia protects herself from the needs of others by retreating into a private world of bereavement, and Orsino into a wholly subjective world of love obsession in which everything becomes 'an adjunct of, and accompaniment to, the Duke's psychological condition'. In these 'privatised' 'second worlds', each becomes, not part of a community, but 'one self king'. Viola, too, attempts to retreat into one of these second worlds, but though she is actually aristocratic, the disguise she adopts enables her to choose a temporary non-aristocratic status ('I'll serve this duke'), and she thus becomes 'an object within the second worlds of Orsino, Olivia and Sir Toby', someone they assume is available for their use or manipulation.

Within the world of the servants in the play, there is much emphasis on 'aspiration': the new servant Cesario/Viola displaces Valentine and Curio from their positions of privileged access to Duke Orsino, and in Olivia's household there is a constant struggle for prime position between Maria (another of the servants) and Malvolio. Both, in fact, aim to marry into the family, which Maria eventually achieves by marrying Sir Toby as a reward for her decisive humiliation of Malvolio. Krieger therefore sees her as a significant element in the play:

Maria is hardly a proto-bourgeoise, in that her aspiration supports and confirms rather than challenges the continued validity of aristocratic privilege, but with her abilities to separate self from vocation, to express self apart from imposed duty, and to earn by her actions advancement in social degree, only Maria in *Twelfth Night* indicates the bourgeois and Puritan emphasis on independence, competition, and the association of stature with merit.

In contrast, Malvolio is much less of a representative of any kind of change in the social order, since he has an extreme reverence for all the trappings of aristocracy, and attributes the circumstances which, he thinks, have made possible his own elevation to the aristocracy to 'fortune' and his 'stars'. Thus, fortune in the play is a force, like 'nature' which is often an alibi or a rationalisation of inherited aristocratic privilege. For the Marxist critic, then, the play demonstrates the gulf which exists between masters and servants and manifests something of the state of mind that is characteristic of each class. The Marxist feature of this essay is the way it introduces the notion of social class into interpretations of the play: this is its special 'intervention' into the large body of critical writing on the play, in which the topic is never raised. Very little indeed is said in the essay about the specifics of the precise historical moment in which it was written: rather, a subtle and original reading is woven round the generalised notions of social-class conflict, class privilege, and aspirations towards what would now be called upward social mobility.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 168–170.

2.5 Marxist criticism

Taken from *Literary Terms and Criticisms*, by J. Peck and M. Coyle:

What a critic says about a book depends to a large extent upon the ideas he or she brings to the text. Sometimes these premises are undeclared or vague, but the Marxist critic is very clear about the stance from which he or she writes: the text has to be read in the light of an all-informing philosophy. It has to be seen in relation to a Marxist view of history, in which the idea of class struggle is central; the connections between literature and the economic structure of society in which it was written must be made evident.

This does not, however, produce a uniform critical response: Marxist criticism is lively and varied, and, despite the collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe, still evolving.

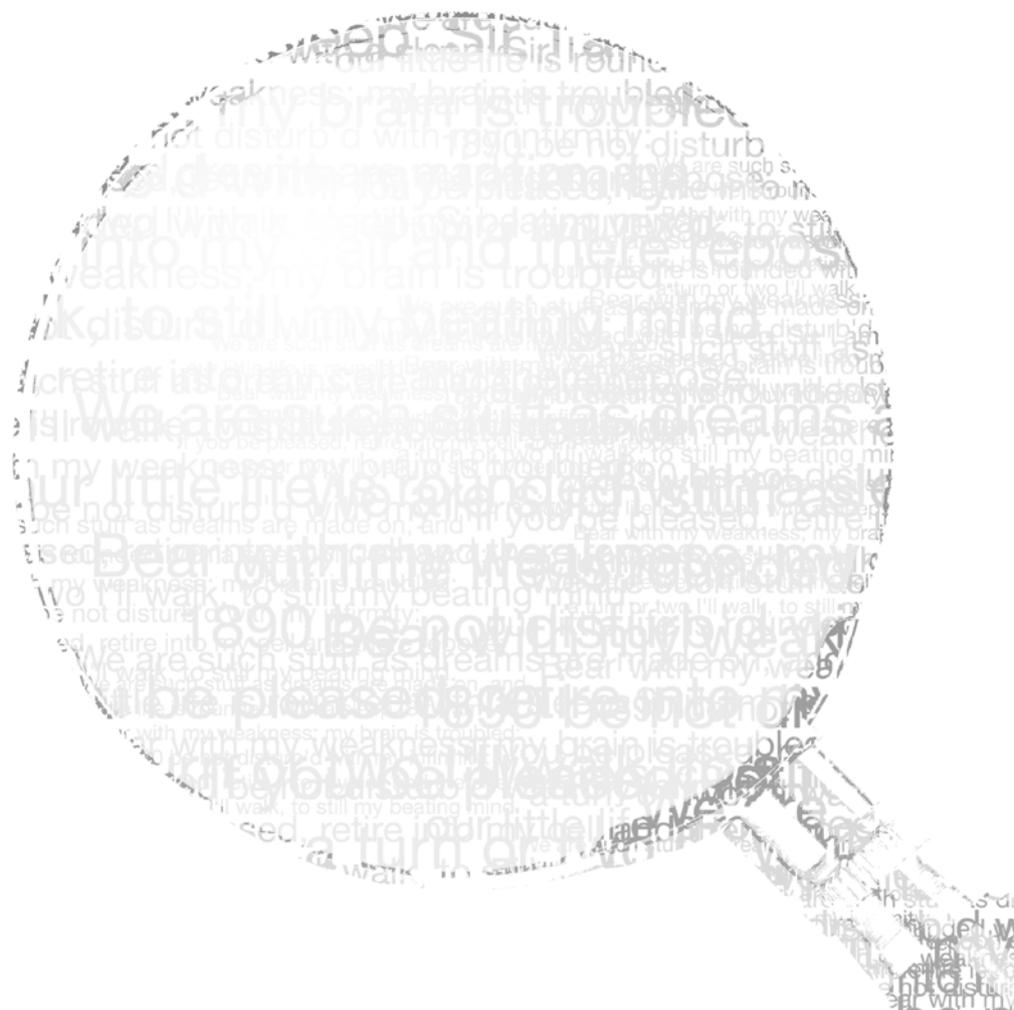
A crude Marxist might simply dismiss all literature as a bourgeois luxury in which middle-class authors write about their middle-class problems. Such a response, however, has not been widely expressed since the 1930s. Indeed, Marxist critics have often revealed a reverence for art, feeling that, through literature, the writer can stand apart and see the faults of society. The method of much traditional Marxist criticism has been to reconstruct a view of the past from historical evidence, and then to demonstrate how accurate a particular text is in its representation and understanding of this social reality. Not surprisingly, Marxists, such as the best-known Marxist critic, George Lukács, have always been most interested in the realistic novel, which presents a suitably full picture of society. There is, in fact, nothing particularly contentious about much Marxist criticism. F. R. Leavis and the American New Critics focused more on the text than anything else, but there has always been a form of criticism in which the text is seen in context. Traditional Marxist criticism is simply one way of relating the text to a view of the social reality of the time in which it was written. A very accessible, and influential, example of such criticism is Raymond Williams's *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970).

At the same time, we should recognise that, although the essence of Marxist criticism is a concern with material living conditions, the Marxist critic must consider more theoretical questions about the ideology of texts and the function of art in society. Such concerns have been sharpened with the advent of structuralism. Whereas traditional criticism – even traditional Marxist criticism – has always stressed the fullness and coherence of literary texts, structuralism draws attention to the constructed nature of the literary text; structuralism prompts questions about the nature and function of a text, and more recent Marxist criticism has inevitably taken account of structuralism. The two critics who have been most influential in developing theoretical Marxist thinking about literature have been Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey. Macherey stresses the gaps in a text, arguing that the reader can see what the text is hiding from itself. Althusser sees texts as incomplete and contradictory as their ideology runs into difficulties. Both critics are essentially saying that the issues raised in a text are too complex for the author – or the ideological code of the period in which the text was written – to control and contain. A critical approach this can lead to is one in which the Marxist critic looks searchingly at the contradictions and problems inherent in bourgeois culture, exploring the text to see the way in which ideological values prove inadequate or incomplete or disruptive. This might appear a dismissive approach to literature, and handled crudely it might well be, but it can also prove a rewarding way of exploring both literature and history, making a connection between the text and the world.

Peck, J. and Coyle, M. (1994) *Literary Terms and Criticisms*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 176–177.

Section 3

Feminist ways of reading



Section 3

Feminist ways of reading

While there are many different types of feminist criticism, in this section you will see writers who focus on the struggles women face in society and the ways these struggles are reflected and questioned (or not reflected and not questioned) in literature. Texts are read in a way that critically explores the male-centred nature of civilisation and therefore the phallogentric nature of much literature. Feminist critics consider different gender representations within texts but also question whose voices are heard and whose attitudes and values are assumed within the text. Gender issues are clearly central to those who write about literature through a feminist lens. Texts are often criticised for focusing on male protagonists while women have marginal roles. Feminist critics often reposition the focus and either sympathise with the oppression of women or celebrate the attempts of women to assert themselves. Some feminist critics use ideas from feminist literary criticism to read the text in a way that is counter to the commonly accepted reading.

3.1 Feminism

Taken from *Literary Theory: The Basics*, by H. Bertens:

Most critics now believe that it is impossible to cordon off neatly a given field of interest or study from the rest of the world. For better or for worse, everything seems somehow related to everything else. With regard to the social position of women, and therefore also with regard to the field of female writing, that view is to a large extent due to the feminist movement that began to gain momentum in the course of the 1960s. Paradoxically, even Marxism, with its wide-ranging historical theorising, had largely ignored the position of women. With hindsight, this oversight is all the more incomprehensible since some of its key concepts – the struggle between social classes, the blinding effects of ideology – might have been employed to analyse the social situation of women.

The feminist movement, then, put socio-historical circumstances as a determining factor in the production of literature firmly on the map. Feminism was involved right from the beginning in literary studies, and for good reasons. Kate Millett's trailblazing *Sexual Politics* of 1970, for instance, devotes long chapters to the attitudes towards women that pervade the work of prominent twentieth-century authors like D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930) and Henry Miller (1891–1980). Both were held in high regard by many critics for their daring and liberating depictions of erotic relations. Millett, however, showed that the attitude of their male characters towards women was not so emancipated at all: most of the male characters that she examined – and especially those of Miller – were denigrating, exploitative, and repressive in their relations with women. Feminism saw very clearly that the widespread negative stereotyping of women in literature and film (we can now add rock videos) constituted a formidable obstacle on the road to true equality. At least as important

is that in the work of the male writers she discusses Millett finds a relationship between sex and power in which the distribution of power over the male and female partners mirrors the distribution of power over males and females in society at large. In other words, in terms of power, acts that we usually think of as completely private turn out to be an extension of the public sphere. The private and the public cannot be seen as wholly separate – on the contrary, they are intimately linked. Since this is the case, Millett argues, the private sphere is, just like the public realm, thoroughly political: it is a political arena where the same power-based relations exist as in the public world. Feminism and feminist criticism are profoundly political in claiming that the personal and the political cannot be separated. They are also political in the more traditional sense of trying to intervene in the social order with a programme that aims to change actually existing social conditions.

The first type of feminist criticism asks questions of the following kind. What sort of roles did female characters play? With what sort of themes were they associated? What are the implicit presuppositions of a given text with regard to its readers? (Upon closer inspection many texts clearly assume that their readers are male – just like those commercials in which fast cars are presented by seductive young women.) Feminist critics showed how often literary representations of women repeated familiar cultural stereotypes. Such stereotypes included the woman – fast car or not – as an immoral and dangerous seductress, the woman as eternally dissatisfied shrew, the woman as cute but essentially helpless, the woman as unworldly, self-sacrificing angel, and so on. Much of the research involved naturally focused on the work of male authors, but female writers, too, came under close scrutiny and were regularly found to have succumbed to the lure of stereotypical representations. Since the way female characters were standardly portrayed had not much in common with the way feminist critics saw and experienced themselves, these characters clearly were *constructions*, put together – not necessarily by the writers who presented them themselves, but by the culture they belonged to – to serve a not-so-hidden purpose: the continued social and cultural domination of males.

If we look at the four examples I have given we see immediately that female independence (in the seductress and the shrew) gets a strongly negative connotation, while helplessness and renouncing all ambition and desire are presented as endearing and admirable. The message is that dependence leads to indulgence and reverence while independence leads to dislike and rejection. The desired effect – of which the writer clearly need not be aware – is a perpetuation of the unequal power relations between men and women.

Bertens, H. (2001) *Literary Theory: The Basics*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 94–95 and pp 97–99.

3.2 Feminism and feminist criticism

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the ‘woman’s movement’ of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. In this sense the woman’s movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature, so that feminist criticism should not be seen as an off-shoot or spin-off from feminism which is remote from the ultimate aims of the movement, but as one of its most practical ways of influencing everyday conduct and attitudes.

The concern with ‘conditioning’ and ‘socialisation’ underpins a crucial set of distinctions, that between the terms ‘feminist’, ‘female’, and ‘feminine’. As Toril Moi explains, the first is ‘a political position’, the second ‘a matter of biology’, and the third ‘a set of culturally defined characteristics’. Particularly in the distinction between the second and third of these lies much of the force of feminism (see Moi’s essay in *The Feminist Reader*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore) ...

... The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of ‘socialisation’, since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine’s choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these.

Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effect went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural ‘mind-set’ in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed. Necessarily, the criticism which undertook this work was combative and polemical. Then, in the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mood changed. *Firstly*, feminist criticism became much more *eclectic*, meaning that it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism – Marxism, structuralism, linguistics, and so on. *Secondly*, it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. *Thirdly*, attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

Such distinct phases of interest and activity seem characteristic of feminist criticism. Elaine Showalter, for instance, described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention

from 'androtexs' (books by men) to 'gynotexs' (books by women). She coined the term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexs, but gynocriticism is a broad and varied field, and any generalisations about it should be treated with caution. The subjects of gynocriticism are, she says, 'the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition'...

... But feminist criticism since the 1970s has been remarkable for the wide range of positions that exist within it. Debates and disagreements have centred on three particular areas, these being: 1. the role of theory; 2. the nature of language; and 3. the value or otherwise of psychoanalysis.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 121–123.

3.3 What feminist critics do

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.
2. Revalue women's experience.
3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.
4. Challenge representations of women as 'Other', as 'lack', as part of 'nature'.
5. Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.
6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and 'natural'.
7. Raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.
8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an *écriture féminine*, and whether this is also available to men.
9. 'Re-read' psychoanalysis to further explore the issue of female and male identity.
10. Question the popular notion of the death of the author, asking whether there are only 'subject positions ... constructed in discourse', or whether, on the contrary, the experience (e.g. of a black or lesbian writer) is central.
11. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly 'neutral' or 'mainstream' literary interpretations.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, p134.

3.4 Feminist criticism: an example

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

As an example of feminist criticism I will take the account of *Wuthering Heights* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, from their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The piece is reprinted in the widely-used *Debating Texts* (ed. Rick Rylance). Rylance reprints two other accounts of the same novel, one by Q.D. Leavis, which might be considered as liberal humanist, and one by Frank Kermode which might be seen as post-structuralist. Comparisons can also be made with Eagleton's Marxist account of the same novel in his book *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, to which Gilbert and Gubar refer.

Gilbert and Gubar's strategy with Brontë's novel is to see it as a female version of the male form known as the *Bildungsroman* (this German term means the 'formation' or 'education' novel) in which the hero's growth to manhood is traced, as a process of 'triumphant self-discovery', whereby an identity is discovered and a mission in life conceived and embarked upon – a classic example would be James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For the heroine, however, things are different, and an equivalent novel (like *Wuthering Heights*) about the growth to womanhood records a process of 'anxious self-denial', this being the 'ultimate product of a female education'. Gilbert and Gubar say that 'What Catherine, or any girl, must learn is that she does not know her own name, and therefore cannot know either who she is or whom she is destined to be'. The process of denial involved they describe as 'social castration'. Effectively, Catherine has to leave behind all her instinctive preferences, signified by the Heights, and take on an alien attitude, signified by Thrushcross Grange. The point of the word 'castration' here is that in order to achieve acceptability and femininity Catherine has to lose the power which men take for granted, namely power over their own destiny. This is symbolised by the phallic guard-dog, 'purple tongue hanging half a foot out of its mouth' which bites Catherine's foot as she enters the Grange, a symbolic castration, they say. She then undergoes the initiation ritual of imprisonment at the Grange, similar to that undergone by traditional heroines like Persephone and Snow White.

The Grange is the home of 'concealment and doubleness'. Here she learns, as Brontë says, 'to adopt a double character without exactly intending to deceive anyone', that is, say Gilbert and Gubar, she must learn 'to repress her own impulses, must girdle her own energies with the iron stays of "reason"'. This 'education in doubleness' involves 'an actual doubling or fragmentation of her personality', as Heathcliff, 'her rebellious alter-ego' is forcibly excluded from her life. In this spirit of self-denial she agrees to marry Edgar, even though she says of Heathcliff that he is 'more myself than I am'. In this process Heathcliff too is degraded and powerless, and so 'Catherine has learned, correctly, that if it is degrading to be a woman it is even more degrading to be *like* a woman'. Hence, Gilbert and Gubar argue, against the run of *Wuthering Heights* criticism, that Edgar does not represent an image of effeminacy in contrast to the manliness of Heathcliff; on the contrary, in his ruthless employment of his social and sexual power, he is an embodiment

of the patriarchal principle. The marriage 'inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy', so that Heathcliff's return, the 'return of the repressed', as we might call it in Freudian terms, 'represents the return of her true self's desires without the rebirth of her former powers', hence the inevitable descent into self-rejection (Catherine fails to recognise her own face in the mirror), self-starvation, madness, and death, 'a complex of psycho-neurotic symptoms that is almost classically associated with female feelings of powerlessness and rage'. Thus, the events of the novel are 'strongly' read as emblems of the construction of gender identity.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 134–136.

3.5 Gender

Taken from *Literary Theory: The Basics*, by H. Bertens:

To put what I have just sketched in somewhat different terms: this type of feminist criticism leads to a thorough examination of *gender* roles. Gender has to do not with how females (and males) really are, but with the way that a given culture or subculture sees them, how they are culturally *constructed*. To say that women have two breasts is to say something about their biological nature, to say something about what it is to be a female; to say that women are naturally timid, or sweet, or intuitive, or dependent, or self-pitying, is to construct a role for them. It tells us how the speaker wants to see them. What traditionally has been called 'feminine', then, is a cultural construction, a *gender* role that has been culturally assigned to countless generations of women. The same holds for masculinity, with its connotations of strength, rationality, stoicism, and self-reliance. Like femininity, traditional masculinity is a gender role that has far less to do with actual males than with the wishful thinking projected onto the heroes of Westerns, hard-boiled private eyes, and British secret agents. Masculinity, too, is a cultural construction. We can see this, for instance, in one of the traditional representations of homosexuality, in which maleness and masculinity are uncoupled. Although homosexuals are male they are often portrayed as feminine, that is as lacking masculinity.

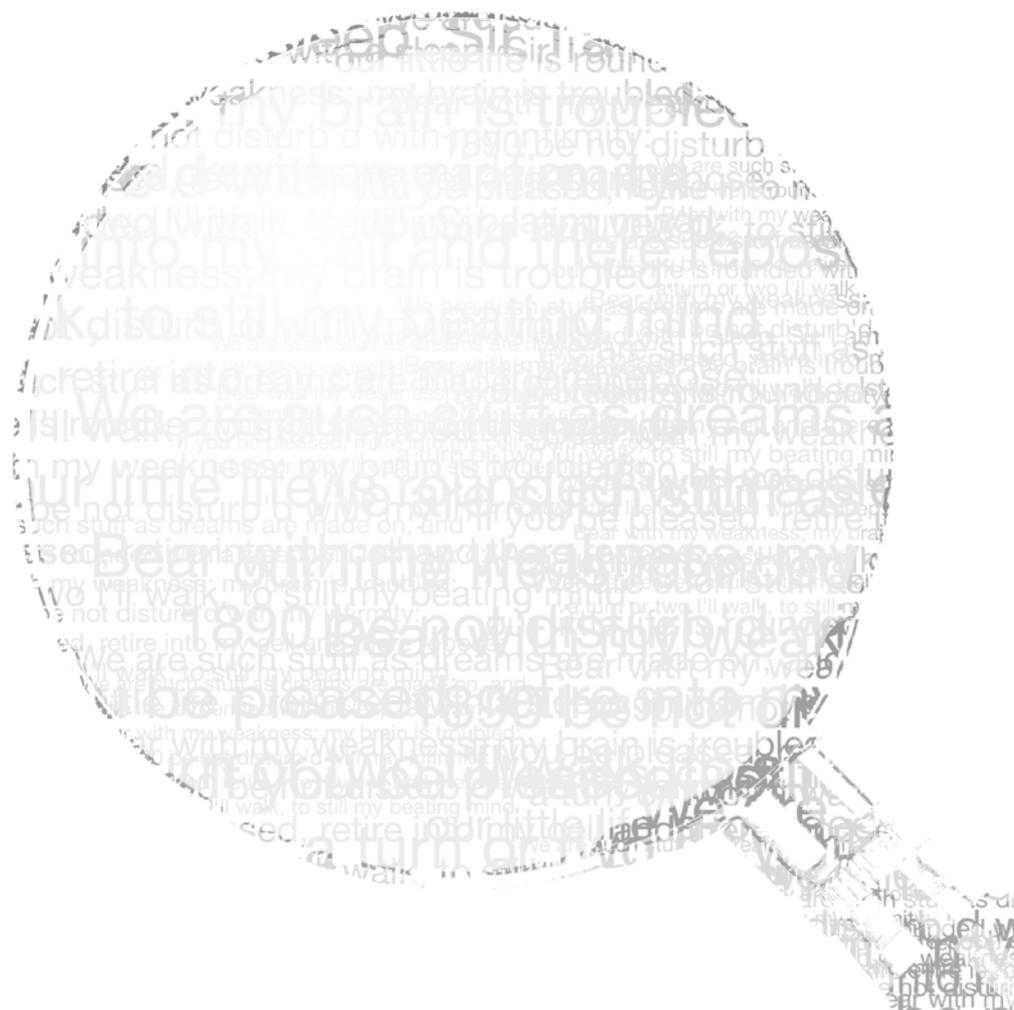
Feminism, then, has been focused right from the beginning on gender because a thorough revision of gender roles seemed the most effective way of changing the power relations between men and women. Since no one in their right mind will want to give serious power to a person who must be timid, dependent, irrational, and self-pitying because she is a woman, the effort to purge the culture of such gendered stereotyping is absolutely crucial. (It is all the more crucial because thinking in terms of gender stereotypes has rather paradoxically brought a good many timid, dependent, irrational, and self-pitying males, whom everybody automatically assumed to be 'masculine', to positions of great and dangerous power.) Feminism has politicised gender – by showing its constructed nature – and put it firmly on the agenda of the later twentieth century. Moreover, after its initial focus on the gendered representation of women (and men) in Western culture, it has very effectively widened the issue and shown how often seemingly neutral references, descriptions, definitions, and so

on are in fact gendered, and always according to the same pattern. A masculine gendering is supposed to evoke positive connotations, a feminine gendering is supposed to evoke negative ones. Feminism has shown how this binary opposition – to use the structuralist term for such pairs – is pervasively present in the way we think about nature, emotion, science, action (or non-action), art, and so on.

Bertens, H. (2001) *Literary Theory: The Basics*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 94–95 and pp 97–99.

Section 4

Post-colonial ways of reading



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In this section you will see writers considering the idea that the established literature of Europe and North America has traditionally ignored or marginalised the experiences of non-Western peoples and cultures, seeing them as “other”, “different” and invariably “lesser”. To many readers such texts are, either consciously or unconsciously, racist. Some writers here focus on the perspectives of those affected by colonisation or imperialism, either because they have experienced it themselves or via studying literature that describes it or is a product of it. Post-colonial critics, like Marxist and feminist critics, are interested in issues of power, dominance and control and also in freedom and empowerment. They too are keen to explore how different groups of people are represented in literary texts, whose voices are heard and what attitudes and values the texts seem to embody and support. Writers taking this theoretical position also focus on the complex relationships between the colonisers and the colonised and on the language that is used to represent these relationships.

4.1 An Introduction to Post-colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial literature

Taken from *An Introduction to Post-colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial Literature*, by C. J. Ruffner Grieneisen:

Where does it come from?

Post-colonial literature comes from Britain’s former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and India. Many post-colonial writers write in English and focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, emigration, national identity, allegiance and childhood.

What is Post-colonial Theory?

Post-colonial Theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their people as its subject matter. The theory is based around concepts of otherness and resistance.

Post-colonial Theory became part of the critical toolbox in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* as being the founding work. Typically, the proponents of the theory examine the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior. However, attempts at coming up with a single definition of post-colonial theory have proved controversial, and some writers have strongly critiqued the whole concept.

Ruffner Grieneisen, C. J. (2008) ‘An Introduction to Post-Colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial Literature’, State College of Florida [online], available:

<http://faculty.scf.edu/ruffnec/2022/An%20Introduction%20to%20Postcolonialism.pdf>

4.2 What Post-colonial critics do & Post-colonial criticism: an example

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

What post-colonial critics do:

1. They reject the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seek to show its limitations of outlook, especially its general inability to empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference;
2. They examine the representation of other cultures in literature as a way of achieving this end;
3. They show how such literature is often evasively and crucially silent on matters concerned with colonisation and imperialism (see, for instance, the discussion of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* in the example described below);
4. They foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity and examine their treatment in relevant literary works;
5. They celebrate hybridity and 'cultural polyvalency', that is, the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture (for instance, that of the coloniser, through a colonial school system, and that of the colonised, through local and oral traditions);
6. They develop a perspective, not just applicable to post-colonial literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived 'Otherness' are seen as sources of energy and potential change.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 198–200.

4.3 Post-colonial criticism: an example

Taken from *Beginning Theory*, by P. Barry:

Let us take the essay by Edward Said on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, an essay rapidly achieving something of a definitive status and available in Mulhern's *Contemporary Marxist Criticism*, in Newton's *Theory into Practice*, in Eagleton's *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives* and Said's own *Culture and Imperialism*. Under the title 'Jane Austen and the Empire' Said carefully 'foregrounds the background' of Austen's novel, which is the estate in Antigua which Sir Thomas Bertram owns, and through which the estate of Mansfield Park is maintained. The central irony, then, is that the estate in England which represents an ideal of order and civilisation is sustained by another estate a world away, so that Mansfield Park would 'not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar and the colonial planter class'

(Mulhern) for as Said remarks, 'Sir Thomas's property in the Caribbean would have had to be a sugar plantation maintained by slave labour (not abolished until the 1830s)'. Said thus makes central the 'moral geography' of the novel, and sees Austen as the start of a line in fiction which leads to Conrad and Kipling in which the processes of colonialisation are examined. As Mulhern puts in his introductory note, the consequence is that the 'dating of British culture's imperial phase must be revised backwards from the beginning of formal Empire into the eighteenth century'. Thus, Sir Thomas, returning home and rapidly re-establishing order, without ever the thought that his views and instincts could be narrow or mistaken, is the quintessential colonialising figure who takes himself as the norm of civilisation. He is, says Said, 'a Crusoe setting things in order'. Nothing prevents our assuming, he says, that he 'does exactly the same things – on a larger scale – in Antigua ... to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in association with it'.

This reading involves 'concretising' a dimension of the novel which is largely left implicit: it involves not necessarily arguing that all these things are 'there' in the novel but that this is the right way to read it. All the same, Said insists, precisely, that these things *are* there: 'all these things having to do with the outside brought in, seem to me unmistakably *there* in the suggestiveness of her allusive and abstract language'. So Said invokes the processes of close reading in his support, for the most part convincingly, but in the end his appeal seems to be to the *conscience* of the (especially) white and middle-class reader:

We cannot easily say that since *Mansfield Park* is a novel, its affiliations with a particularly sordid history are irrelevant or transcended, not only because it is irresponsible to say that, but because we know too much to say so without bad faith.

There is, I think, no doubt about the effect of reading Said's essay. Any 'innocence' we might have had about this aspect of the novel goes: it is impossible henceforth to read it without a constant awareness of that absentee settler-planter who is at the centre of everything, in one sense, and yet constantly withdrawn and marginal in another. Said's reading likewise locates the centre of the book in an absence, in things unsaid and unspecified. In this sense it is a form of Marxist criticism influenced by post-structuralist views, contrasting with Krieger's much 'straighter' Marxism. It also, like new historicism, comes closer to actually naming the details of a specific social/colonial situation (the absentee planter-landlord class of eighteenth-century Antigua) rather than just evoking a generalised notion of colonial exploitation.

Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp 198-200.

4.4 Colonialist criticism

Taken from *Colonialist Criticism*, by C. Achebe:

When my first novel was published in 1958 a very unusual review of it was written by a British woman, Honor Tracey, who is perhaps not so much a critic as a literary journalist. But what she said was so intriguing that I have never forgotten it. If I remember rightly she headlined it 'Three cheers for mere Anarchy!'. The burden of the review itself was as follows: These bright Negro barristers [...] who talk so glibly about African culture, how would they like to return to wearing raffia skirts? How would novelist Achebe like to go back to the mindless times of his grandfather instead of holding the modern job he has in broadcasting in Lagos?

I should perhaps point out that colonialist criticism is not always as crude as this but the exaggerated grossness of a particular example may sometimes prove useful in studying the anatomy of the species. There are three principal parts here: Africa's inglorious past (raffia skirts) to which Europe brings the blessing of civilization (Achebe's modern job in Lagos) and for which Africa returns ingratitude (sceptical novels like *Things Fall Apart*).

Before I go on to more advanced varieties I must give one more example of the same kind as Honor Tracy's which on account of its recentness (1970) actually surprised me:

The British administration not only safeguarded women from the worst tyrannies of their masters, it also enabled them to make their long journeys to farm or market without armed guard, secure from the menace of hostile neighbours. The Nigerian novelists who have written the charming and bucolic accounts of domestic harmony in African rural communities, are the sons whom the labours of these women educated: the peaceful village of their childhood to which they nostalgically look back was one which had been purged of bloodshed and alcoholism by an ague-ridden district officer and a Scottish mission lassie whose years were cut short by every kind of intestinal parasite.

It is even true to say that one of the most nostalgically convincing of the rural African novelists used as his sourcebook not the memories of his grandfathers but the records of the despised British anthropologists. The modern African myth-maker hands down a vision of colonial rule in which the native powers are chivalrously viewed through the eyes of the hard-won liberal tradition of the late Victorian scholar, while the expatriates are shown as schoolboys' blackboard and caricatures.

(Andreski 1971: 26)

I have quoted this at such length because first of all I am intrigued by Iris Andreski's literary style which recalls so faithfully the sedate prose of the district officer government anthropologist of sixty or seventy years ago – a tribute to her remarkable powers of identification as well as to the durability of colonialist rhetoric. 'Tyrannies of their masters' ... 'menace of hostile neighbours' ... 'purged of bloodshed and alcoholism'. But in addition to

this Iris Andreski advances the position taken by Honor Tracy in one significant and crucial direction – its claim to a deeper knowledge and a more reliable appraisal of Africa than the educated African writer has shown himself capable of.

To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: 'I know my natives', a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand – understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding. Thus in the heyday of colonialism any serious incident of native unrest, carrying as it did disquieting intimations of slipping control, was an occasion not only for pacification by the soldiers but also (afterwards) for a royal commission of inquiry – a grand name for yet another perfunctory study of native psychology and institutions. Meanwhile a new situation was slowly developing as a handful of natives began to acquire European education and then to challenge Europe's presence and position in their native land with the intellectual weapons of Europe itself. To deal with this phenomenal presumption the colonialist devised two contradictory arguments. He created the 'man of two worlds' theory to prove that no matter how much the native was exposed to European influences he could never truly absorb them; like Prester John he would always discard the mask of civilization when the crucial hour came and reveal his true face. Now, did this mean that the educated native was no different at all from his brothers in the bush? Oh, no! He was different; he was worse. His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and unregenerated had none the less done something to him – it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretensions. 'I know my natives; they are delighted with the way things are. It's only these half-educated ruffians who don't even know their own people.' How often one heard that and the many variations of it in colonial times! And how almost amusing to find its legacy in the colonialist criticism of our literature today! Iris Andreski's book is more than old wives' tales, at least in intention. It is clearly inspired by the desire to undercut the educated African witness (the modern myth-maker, she calls him) by appealing direct to the unspoilt woman of the bush who has retained a healthy gratitude for Europe's intervention in Africa. This desire accounts for all that reliance one finds in modern European travellers' tales on the evidence of 'simple natives' – houseboys, cooks, drivers, schoolchildren – supposedly more trustworthy than the smart alocs ...

Achebe, C. 'Colonialist Criticism', in Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (eds.) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, pp 73–74.

4.5 Language

Taken from *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin:

Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre – whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities', or by planting the language of empire in

a new place – remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be ‘known’. Its system of values – its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction – becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourses are grounded.

One of the most subtle demonstrations of the power of language is the means by which it provides, through the function of naming, a technique for knowing a colonized place or people. To name the world is to ‘understand’ it, to know it and to have control over it. The word ‘Africa’, for instance, is determined by European historical formations which had little or no relevance to the complex of linguistic cultural and economic factors which tied and sometimes separated various societies on the continent. To name reality is therefore to exert power over it, simply because the dominant language becomes the way in which it is known. In colonial experience this power is by no means vague or abstract. A systematic education and indoctrination installed the language and thus the reality on which it was predicated as pre-eminent.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (2006) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, p 261.

4.6 Language and transformation

Taken from *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin:

Post-colonial writers who write in English have used it as a cultural vehicle through which a world audience could be introduced to features of culturally diverse post-colonial societies. But the use of colonial languages has opened up a long-running and unresolved argument in post-colonial circles. According to Indian linguist, Braj Kachru, English has been widely accepted as a *lingua franca* in India because of its relatively ‘neutral’ nature, since its effects in everyday use are far less inflammatory than those stemming from the contention between one or another minority languages (1986). On the other hand, the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo has argued that writing in an African language ‘is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples’ (1981: 28).

Underlying the dispute over the most effective form of discursive resistance is the question: ‘Can one use the language of imperialism without being inescapably contaminated by an imperial world view?’ It is a question which continues to provoke argument, because it is ineluctably rooted in real political conflict. Martinican Edouard Glissant, for instance, says:

There are ... no languages or language spoken in Martinique, neither Creole nor French, that have been ‘naturally’ developed by and for us Martinicans because of our experience of collective, proclaimed, denied, or seized responsibility at all levels. The official language, French, is not the people’s language. This is why we, the elite, speak it so correctly. The language of the people, Creole, is not the language of the nation.

(1989: 166)

Although framed in terms of class, Glissant's observation alerts us to the frequency with which a particular use of language can be conflated with the language itself. What makes a language a 'people's language?' Does it lie in the facts of its origin, its 'invention', or in the particular conditions of its use? The extent to which either French or Creole will be the language of the people depends largely on *how* it is used as much as upon *how widely* it is used and by whom.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (2006) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, p 277.

4.7 Language and spirit

Taken from *Language and Spirit*, by R. Rao:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of a village I have tried to tell.

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

After language the next problem is that of style. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on. And our paths are paths interminable. The *Mahabharata* has 214,778 verses and the *Rama-yana* 48,000. The *Puranas* are endless and innumerable. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons' to bother us – we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our storytelling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story.

It may have been told of an evening, when as the dusk falls, and through the sudden quiet, lights leap up in house and after house, and stretching her bedding on the veranda, a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale of her village.

Rao, R. 'Language and Spirit', in Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (eds.) (2006) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, p 276.

4.8 Post-colonialism and gender

Taken from *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, by O. Oyewùmí:

The histories of both the colonized and the colonizer have been written from the male point of view – women are peripheral if they appear at all. While studies of colonization written from this angle are not necessarily irrelevant to understanding what happened to native females, we must recognise that colonization impacted males and females in similar and dissimilar ways. Colonial custom and practice stemmed from 'a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the nonhuman and the subhuman, the *masculine* over the *feminine* ... , and the modern or progressive over the traditional or the savage' (Nandy 1983: x).

Therefore, the colonizer differentiated between male and female bodies and acted accordingly. Men were the primary target of policy, and, as such, they were the natives and so were visible. These facts, from the standpoint of this study, are the justification for considering the colonial impact in gender terms rather than attempting to see which group, male or female, was the most exploited. The colonial process was sex-differentiated insofar as the colonizers were male and used gender identity to determine policy. From the foregoing, it is clear that any discussion of hierarchy in the colonial situation, in addition to employing race as the basis of distinctions, should take into account its strong gender component. The two racially distinct and hierarchical categories of the colonizer and the native should be expanded to four, incorporating the gender factor. However, race and gender categories obviously emanate from the preoccupation in Western culture with the visual and hence physical aspects of human reality. Both categories are a consequence of the bio-logic of Western culture. Thus, in the colonial situation, there was a hierarchy of four, not two, categories. Beginning at the top, these were: men (European), women (European), native (African men), and Other (African women). Native women occupied the residual and unspecified category of the Other.

Oyewùmí, O. (1997) *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p 256.

4.9 Cultural reading and understanding

Taken from *Heroic Ethnocentrism: The idea of universality in literature*, by C. Larson:

In the Fall of 1962, when I began teaching English literature to high school students in Nigeria, I encountered a number of stumbling blocks, which I had in no way anticipated – all of them cultural, experiential. This was not a matter of science or technology and their various by-products as I had anticipated ('What is a flush toilet?') but, rather, matters related to what I have learned to call culturally restricted materials. It was enough, to be sure, just for my African students to read through a 450-page Victorian novel (required reading in those days for the British-administered school certificate examinations); and, as I later learned, in the lower levels at least, students were accustomed to taking several months or even the greater part of a year to read through and discuss the plot line of a single novel. Length alone was enough to get them, since English was their second language and the problem of vocabulary was especially troublesome. But once the problems of language, vocabulary and verbosity had been overcome, reading through the words became a less difficult process than understanding what the words themselves related – the 'experience of literature' as we are wont to say.

'Excuse me, sir, what does it mean "to kiss"?' That was a much more difficult question to answer than the usual ones relating to the plot or the characters of the novel – a real shock when it was brought to my attention that I had a rather naïve boy in my class. So I brushed the question off until it was repeated a number of times and I slowly began to realize that all of my students had no real idea of what it meant to kiss. This seemed an extremely odd thing to me because most of my students were upper-form boys in their late teens – some in their early twenties – and I had, of course, heard them talking on occasion about their girlfriends. It was also rumoured that several of the boys were married, although by school regulations they were not supposed to be. Nevertheless, that question and others of a like nature kept recurring – in part, no doubt, because we were reading Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Why did Hardy's characters get so flustered when they were kissed (or more likely, when they weren't kissed)? When I asked one of the European-educated African teachers why my students always seemed ready to return to that same question, I was more than surprised to learn that Africans, traditionally at least, do not kiss; to learn that what I thought was 'natural' in one society is not natural at all, but learned, that is, cultural. Not all peoples kiss. Or, stated more appropriately, not all peoples have learned to kiss. (When I later attended American movies with Africans, I could understand why the audience often went into hysterics at the romantic scenes in the films.)

How was one to read a Thomas Hardy novel with all those frustrated kisses without ever having been kissed? How was I to explain something like this to my African students? Or, to limit my experience to a more technical matter concerning the novel's form which also perplexed my students, what about those long passages of description for which Hardy is so celebrated? My African students couldn't understand what page after page of description of the countryside had to do with the plot of the novel. What they had given

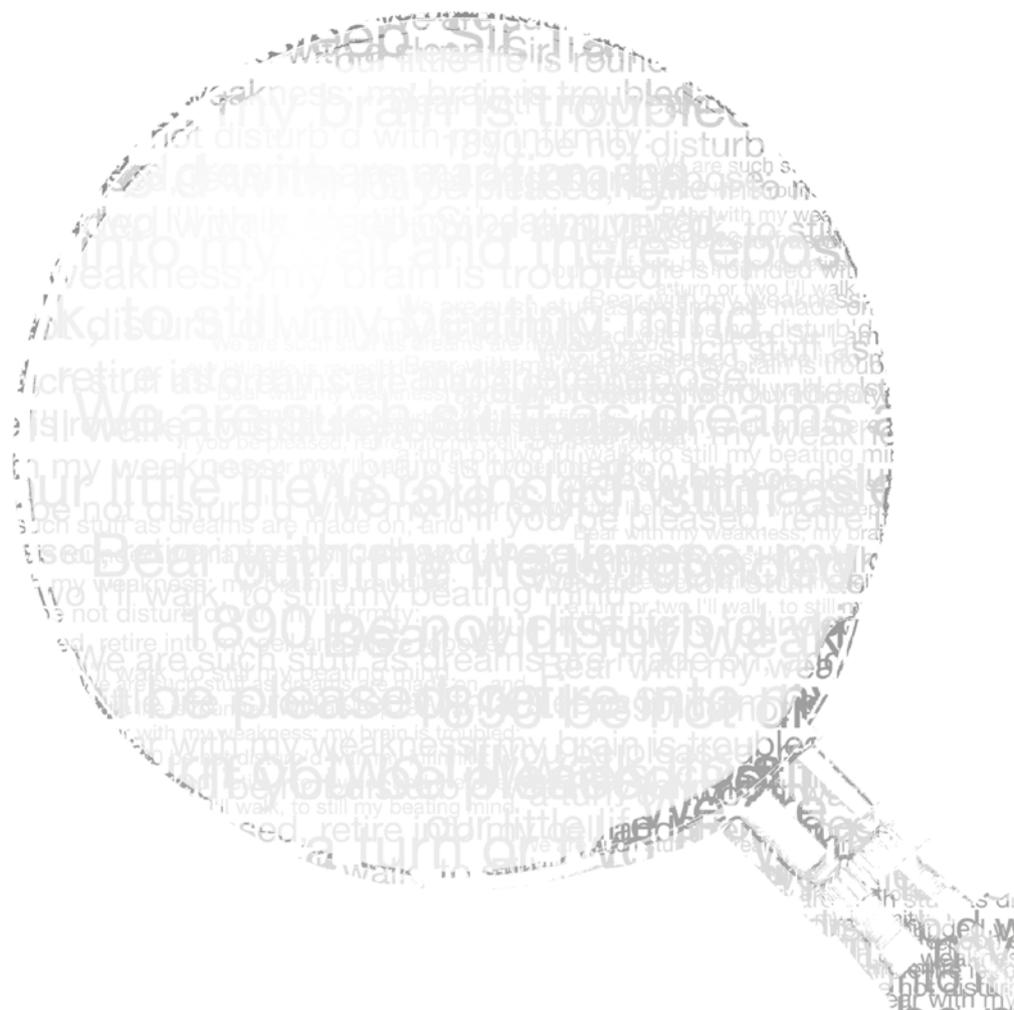
me, as I later learned, was another clue to the differing ways in which culture shapes our interpretations of literature. It was not until I seriously began studying the African novel itself, however, that I could put all of those pieces together; just as the questions about those kisses revealed something about my African students' cultural background, so too, did their concern about the descriptive passages of Hardy's book. The fact that descriptive passages were virtually non-existent in African fiction initially seemed particularly puzzling to me, since the first generation of African Anglophone novelists, at least, had been brought up almost entirely on the Victorian novel. Whereas other elements of the Victorian novel had found their way into the African novel, description had not. Could it be that this omission in the African novel revealed something basically different between African and Western attitudes toward nature, toward one's environment?

Kissing and description, attitudes toward love and nature – are these attitudes so different for the African? Is the African way of life less sophisticated than our own? Or is the belief that these supposedly 'universal' attitudes should be the same as ours the naïve one? Is this what we really mean when we talk about 'universality' in literature – if someone does not react to something in our literature the same way that we do, then he is to be considered inferior? Perhaps the term itself is meaningless. After all, people love and die in every culture. Their reactions to these events in their lives, however, may be significantly different from our own. And these reactions, in turn, shape their interpretations of literature.

Larson, C. 'Heroic Ethnocentrism: The idea of universality in literature', in Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (eds.) (2006), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, pp 77–80.

Section 5

Ecocritical ways of reading



Section 5

Ecocritical ways of reading

In this section you will see writers focusing on the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The earth is seen as being central to literary readings, and for many ecocritics this is essentially the only thing worth considering because if we don't have a planet to live on then all other human concerns are pointless. Texts are read in relation to the ecological values they show. The focus might be on whether men and women write about nature and values differently, about how the wildness of nature has been represented over time and how language is used to reveal concerns about the environment. Ecological criticism sees human culture as being crucially connected to the non-human world and ecocritics believe we ignore that connection at our peril. Ecocriticism is essentially modern and, although it has its roots in the pastoral tradition and Romanticism, it really only gained momentum in the 1990s when scientists began to understand the environmental crisis facing the world. It reflects the concerns of the modern world regarding nature and the environment and directs readers to consider how human beings and their actions impact on the planet. Because ecocriticism has its roots in pastoral writing there are some extracts included here that provide some insights into the pastoral genre and begin to link it to ecocritical concerns. Many of the writers whose work is included in this section also mention literary texts that have been of interest to them and which may provide students and teachers with some ideas about which texts to explore in the light of ecocritical ideas.

5.1 What is Ecocriticism?

Taken from *What is Ecocriticism?*, by C. Glotfelty:

Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs US government reports, and what rhetoric enforces this view? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-

fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human.

Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory “the world” is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, that “Everything is connected to everything else,” we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact.

Glotfelty, C. (2014) ‘What is Ecocriticism?’ *The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment* [online], available: <http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/defining/glotfelty/>

5.2 Glossary of terms

Taken from *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, by L. Coupe:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| anthropocentrism | the assumption that human life is the central fact of the planet. |
| anthropomorphism | the attribution of human form or personality to nature (as in the ‘pathetic fallacy’ condemned by John Ruskin). |
| bioregion | a natural region, exhibiting both stability and diversity, which is defined by its ecological coherence. |
| biosphere | in its modest, neutral sense, the collective name for all the areas of the earth in which life is found; in its more ambitious, positive sense, the planet and its physical environment as forming one living whole (as in James Lovelock’s ‘Gaia’ hypothesis). |
| deep ecology | a radical form of ecology which challenges anthropocentrism and which insists that human beings must subordinate their interests to those of the planet. |
| ecocriticism | the most important branch of green studies, which considers the relationship between human and non-human life as represented in literary texts and which theorises about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction. |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| ecofeminism | a movement which resists both the domination of nature by humanity and the domination of women by men, exploring the connection between the two processes and seeking a new relationship between woman, man and nature. |
| ecology | a branch of biology concerned with the relation between living things and their environment; the study of the earth as our home or 'household' (Greek, <i>oikos</i>). |
| ecosystem | the web of connections linking all the animals and plants in a particular environment. |
| environment | in general, the physical and biological system which supports life; in particular, the surroundings in which living creatures find themselves. |
| environmentalism | by contrast with 'deep ecology', the belief that the natural world can be 'managed' for the benefit of humanity while causing as little damage to the biosphere as possible within the existing culture – nature relationship. |
| green studies | an emerging academic movement which seeks to ensure that nature is given as much attention within the humanities as is currently given to gender, class and race. |
| industrialism | the term used by Andrew Dobson in his <i>Green Political Thought</i> for the whole political system which is opposed by what he calls 'ecologism'. |
| nature | the physical, non-human environment including wildlife and wilderness, flora and fauna, and so on; but also the 'essence' of anything, including humanity, in which case it is often spelt with a capital N and should be used with caution. |
| pastoral | a literary convention which associates the country with innocence and the court or city with corruption; any literary work contrasting rural and urban life. |

Coupe, L. (2000) *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 302–303.

5.3 Introduction to Ecocritical literary study

Taken from *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, by L. Coupe:

More broadly, and in the light of Hochman's differentiation, green studies debates 'Nature' in order to defend nature.

The focus of any praxis is on the future; with green studies what is at stake is the future of the planet itself. In that sense, it is the most radical of critical activities. Class, race and gender are important dimensions of both literary and cultural studies; but the survival of the biosphere must surely rank as even more important, since without it there are no issues worth addressing. Paul Virilio might be accused of hyperbole when he declares that the ecological battle is 'the only one worth fighting', but one sees what he means. With no planet, there is no future, and so no other battles to be fought.

The word 'radical' reminds us that green studies is also about getting back, with an appropriate pun, to the 'grassroots' of culture. It remembers both the nature from which culture emerged and, within culture, the past efforts of those who in their time tried to speak for the earth: but green studies reminds us that place matters as much as time, geography as much as history, being as much as becoming, permanence as much as change.

Indeed, it is with the contemporary 'green turn' that we see how vital is the continuity between the language and symbolism of poets such as Wordsworth and contemporary environmentalism. The interest, then, is in deciding how far the spirit of romanticism needs restating in order to give it newly ecological significance, how far the original meaning still stands as a challenge to our times. Sometimes we may have the feeling that we are only just catching up with Wordsworth; sometimes we will be consciously enlisting him for the campaign through appropriate citation and quotation. Moreover, if the tension between original meaning and subsequent significance is at stake, we need not confine ourselves to romanticism, but may find that Shakespeare, say, will offer visions of nature that are as relevant as they are remote.

Coupe, L. (2000) *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 4–5.

5.4 Writing the wilderness

Taken from *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, by L. Coupe:

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World ...

In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness. It is the uncivilized free and wild thinking in Hamlet and the Iliad, in all the scriptures and

mythologies, not learned in the schools, that delights us. As the wild duck is more swift and beautiful than the tame, so is the wild – the mallard – thought, which 'mid falling dews wings its way above the fens. A truly good book is something as natural, and as unexpectedly and unaccountably fair and perfect, as a wild-flower discovered on the prairies of the West or in the jungles of the East. Genius is a light which makes the darkness visible, like the lightning's flash, which perchance shatters the temple of knowledge itself – and not a taper lighted at the hearthstone of the race, which pales before the light of common day.

English literature, from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets – Chaucer and Spenser and Milton, and even Shakespeare, included – breathes no quite fresh and, in this sense, wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome. Her wilderness is a greenwood, her wild man a Robin Hood. There is plenty of genial love of Nature, but not so much of Nature herself. Her chronicles inform us when her wild animals, but not when the wild man in her, became extinct.

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them – transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library – aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.

I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. Approached from this side, the best poetry is tame. (Thoreau).

Coupe, L. (2000) *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, Abingdon: Routledge, p 23.

5.5 Three kinds of Pastoral

Taken from *Pastoral*, by T. Gifford:

The term 'pastoral' is used in three broadly different ways. First, the pastoral is a historical form with a long tradition which began in poetry, developed into drama and more recently could be recognised in novels. So we can speak of Renaissance pastoral dramas, such as Shakespeare's, or of Augustan pastoral poetry, such as Pope's, and agree that we are talking about a literary form that is used in each of these periods and motifs which we can recognise as deriving from certain early Greek and Roman poems about life in the country, and about the life of the shepherd in particular. Indeed, to refer to 'pastoral' up to about 1610 was to refer to poems or dramas of a specific formal type in which supposed shepherds spoke to each other, usually in pentameter verse, about their work or their loves, with (mostly) idealised descriptions of their countryside. This definition of pastoral is summed up by Leo Marx as 'No shepherd, no pastoral'. For the reader or audience,

this literary device involved some form of retreat and return, the fundamental pastoral movement, either within the text, or in the sense that the pastoral retreat 'returned' some insights relevant to the urban audience.

But beyond the artifice of the specific literary form, there is a broader use of 'pastoral' to refer to an area of content. In this sense pastoral refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban. For example, the novels of James Herriot about a North Yorkshire vet could be called pastoral because their country setting is a major presence in the narratives. A poem about trees in the city could also be called pastoral because it focuses upon nature in contrast to the urban context. A delight in the natural is assumed in describing these texts as pastorals. Here a pastoral is usually associated with a celebratory attitude towards what it describes, however superficially bleak it might appear to be.

But that simple celebration of nature comes under scrutiny in the third use of 'pastoral'. A Greenpeace supporter might use the term as a criticism of the tree poem if it ignored the presence of pollution or the threat to urban trees from city developers. Here the difference between the literary representation of nature and the material reality would be judged to be intolerable by the criteria of ecological concern. A farm worker might say that a novel was a pastoral if it celebrated a landscape as though no-one actually sweated to maintain it on a low income. In this case the difference between the textual evidence and the economic reality would be judged to be too great by the criteria of social reality. This is a sceptical use of the term – 'pastoral' as a pejorative, implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country. Here, what is 'returned' by retreat is judged to be too comfortably complacent to qualify as 'insight' in the view of the user of the term 'pastoral' as pejorative. So, it remains for the reader to consider whether a James Herriot novel should be characterised as pastoral in having the features of a literary device, or just generally pastoral in content, or pastoral in the critical, dismissive sense.

The pastoral convention has come under attack in recent years as critics have examined the frames within which the writer is presenting a pastoral view of the world. The most serious accusation is the suggestion that pastoral in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created a false ideology that served to endorse a comfortable status quo for the landowning class who had been the reading public before the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most comprehensive and succinct attack of this kind is contained in the political definition of pastoral by Roger Sales, which is summed up in his statement that pastoral represents the 'five Rs': 'refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem, and reconstruction' (Sales 1983: 17). His view is that pastoral is essentially escapist in seeking refuge in the country and often also in the past; that it is a selective 'reflection' on past country life in which old settled values are 'rescued' by the text; and that all this functions as a simplified 'reconstruction' of what is, in fact, a more complex reality. The political purpose of pastoral for Sales is slightly more insidious than John Lucas implies when he refers to English pastoral's 'deeply conservative ambition' (Lucas 1990: 118). Sales argues that the literary form came to be used to prevent

the questioning of the power structures that underpinned land ownership and, indeed, the complete fabric of society.

Gifford, T. (1999) *Pastoral*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 1–2 and pp 7–8.

5.6 Post-pastoral

Taken from *Pastoral*, by T. Gifford:

Wordsworth believes his idyll to represent the truth of human interrelatedness with nature.

But even in putting it this way, we are reading Wordsworth's texts in a way pastoral has not been read before. Ecocriticism may be the frame of our age, informed with a new kind of concern for 'environment', rather than 'countryside' or 'landscape' or the 'bucolic', but we cannot pretend that there have not been changes in our knowledge, attitudes and ideology. We cannot pretend that the relationship between texts referring to nature and urbanised readers (who may live in villages but be economically orientated towards the urban) has not changed. And despite Buell's complaint that the pastoral 'has been treated with much astringency of late' (Buell 1995: 33), we cannot ignore both the evidence of the anti-pastoral and the development of the pejorative use of the term in twentieth-century British culture. That the pastoral has become not only a 'contested term', but a deeply suspect one, is the cultural position in which we find ourselves.

The sixth element of post-pastoral writing is the ecofeminists' realisation that the exploitation of the planet is of the same mind-set as the exploitation of women and minorities. The gift of conscience, given us by the form of consciousness of our species, must address both environmental and social exploitation at the same time if there is to be social justice *and* a place for it to be practised. The divisiveness of our social life, in other words, derives from the same source and hubris as our divisiveness from our home. The desire to heal our relationship with the earth we inhabit must accompany the healing of our relationship with ourselves as a species. To the ecofeminists there would be no point in liberating women from exploitation if there were no healthy unpolluted planet for us to inhabit together. 'Together' is the key word, for it includes not only males (and as a post-feminist discourse some of the major contributors to ecofeminism are male critics such as Patrick Murphy), but also our fellow species. Some ecocritics are now turning towards particular aspects of our relationships with other parts of nature in literature, such as animals or mountains, in order to deconstruct and discuss our assumptions about our relationships with them that are located in our representations of them in our literature.

Gifford, T. (1999) *Pastoral*, Abingdon: Routledge, p 147 and p 168.

5.7 The great pastoral con-trick?

Taken from *The Great Pastoral Con-Trick?*, by J. Bate:

... In Romantic poetics, poetry is to be found not only in language but in nature; it is not only a means of verbal expression, it is also a means of emotional communication between

man and the natural world. John Clare's poem 'Pastoral Poesy' begins with a manifesto remarkably similar to Hazlitt's [in the first of his *Lectures on the English Poets*] ... [He speaks of] 'A language that is ever green'. ... For Clare, himself a farm-labourer, not a 'gentleman' like Wordsworth, 'pastoral poesy' is the life and the beauty in nature. It is available to give joy unto all, to elevate even the 'simplest hearts'; when the shepherd's heart lifts with joy at the sight of a wild flower, that is poetry. Pastoral poetry has a permanent, enduring power – it is an evergreen language.

For modern criticism, however, pastoral poetry is historically and socially specific. *Pace* Clare, it is not really written by shepherds, it is a comforting aristocratic fantasy that covers up the real conditions of oppression and exploitation in feudal and neo-feudal agrarian economies. Raymond Williams writes with honest indignation: 'It is not easy to forget that Sidney's *Arcadia*, which gives a continuing title to English neo-pastoral, was written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants. Roger Sales lashes out with less measure: 'Pastoralism covers a multitude of economic sins. Literary criticism ought, therefore, to take the form of a brutal strip-tease. Pastoralism should be divested of its silver-tongued language and myths of the golden age'. A major count in the critical indictment of Wordsworth is that he was among the many conspirators in the Great Pastoral Con-Trick.

Bate, J. (2000) 'The Great Pastoral Con-Trick?', in Coupe, L. (eds.) *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 169–170.

5.8 Ecothrillers: environmental cliffhangers

Taken from *Ecothrillers: Environmental Cliffhangers*, by R. Kerridge:

Why has literature – the realist novel in particular – been so slow to respond to environmentalism? In public debate, environmental issues have been a conspicuous presence for at least three decades. Environmentalism asks new questions (as well as some old ones) about consumerist assumptions and habits. It asks us to re-examine pleasure, desire, ambition. It intrudes into personal lives and demands inclusion in many areas of political and moral debate. It throws into sharp focus the question of what rich and poor nations should expect of each other. Since ecology is concerned with the interdependencies of different life forms which inhabit and constitute the same environment, an ecological approach to culture will search for the hidden interdependencies between areas of life usually seen as opposites: nature and artifice, pastoral and urban, leisure and work, fantasy and reality.

One would expect a cultural development of this magnitude to register strongly in literature. Feminism, for example, has found expression across the range of literary genres. We might expect to see by now a flow of novels, plays and poems exploring the conflicts aroused by environmentalism and producing new environmentalist literary forms. In Britain, at least, this has been slow to happen. Some visions of environmentalist sensibility have begun to emerge in poetry; Terry Gifford discusses a number of these in *Green Voices* (1995). But in literary fiction environmental preoccupations have not yet made a very noticeable appearance.

There are some exceptions. Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) continues a tradition of novels in which landscape dominates both as setting and metaphor. Jenny Diski's *Rainforest* (1987) takes as its main character a woman ecologist working on a species-survey; this minutely detailed work tightens around the heroine, as she is besieged by formless anxieties. Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987) draws on recent scientific ideas to suggest that non-linear patterns of time, to be found in nature and childhood, can counter the oppressive values of the Thatcherite period.

Julian Barnes's book of short stories *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) repeatedly teases its reader with the undecidability of environmental fears. A.S. Byatt's novella *Angels and Insects* (1992) visits Victorian nature-writing to explore the different economies and vulnerabilities of masculine and feminine versions of 'nature', in a tense fable of sexual selection. But these books do not approach environmentalism directly, or engage with its strongest desires and anxieties, its eroticism, its politics. They tend to subordinate it, treating it as background or period-colour, or as subsidiary to the main concerns of each work.

Why does the realist novel have such difficulty in involving itself with environmental issues?

Kerridge, R. (2000) 'Ecothrillers: Environmental Cliffhangers', in Coupe, L. (eds.) *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 242–243.

5.9 Defending Middle-Earth

Taken from *Defending Middle-Earth*, by P. Curry:

What is most striking about Tolkien's Middle-earth is the profound presence of the natural world: geography and geology, ecologies, flora and fauna, the seasons, weather, the sky, stars and moon. The experience of these phenomena as comprising a living and meaningful cosmos saturates his entire story. It wouldn't be stretching a point to say that Middle-earth itself appears as a character in its own right. And the personality and agency of this character are none the less so for being non-human; in fact, that is just what allows for a sense of ancient myth, with its feeling of a time when the Earth itself was alive. It whispers: perhaps, therefore, it could be again; perhaps, indeed, it still is.

Animals appear, but Tolkien obviously had a particular affection for flora. There are at least sixty-four species of wild plants mentioned in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* – surely an unusual number for any work of fiction – in addition to several invented kinds. Pride of place, however, goes to trees. Tolkien once referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as 'my own internal Tree'. 'I have among my "papers",' he once wrote, 'more than one version of a mythical "tree", which crops up regularly at those times when I feel driven to pattern-designing ... The tree bears, besides various shapes of leaves, many flowers small and large signifying poems and major legends.' And his personal 'totem' – a birch tree – has long been sacred to indigenous peoples throughout North America, Europe and Asia, the rediscovery and adaptation of whose values is one of the keys to our collective future

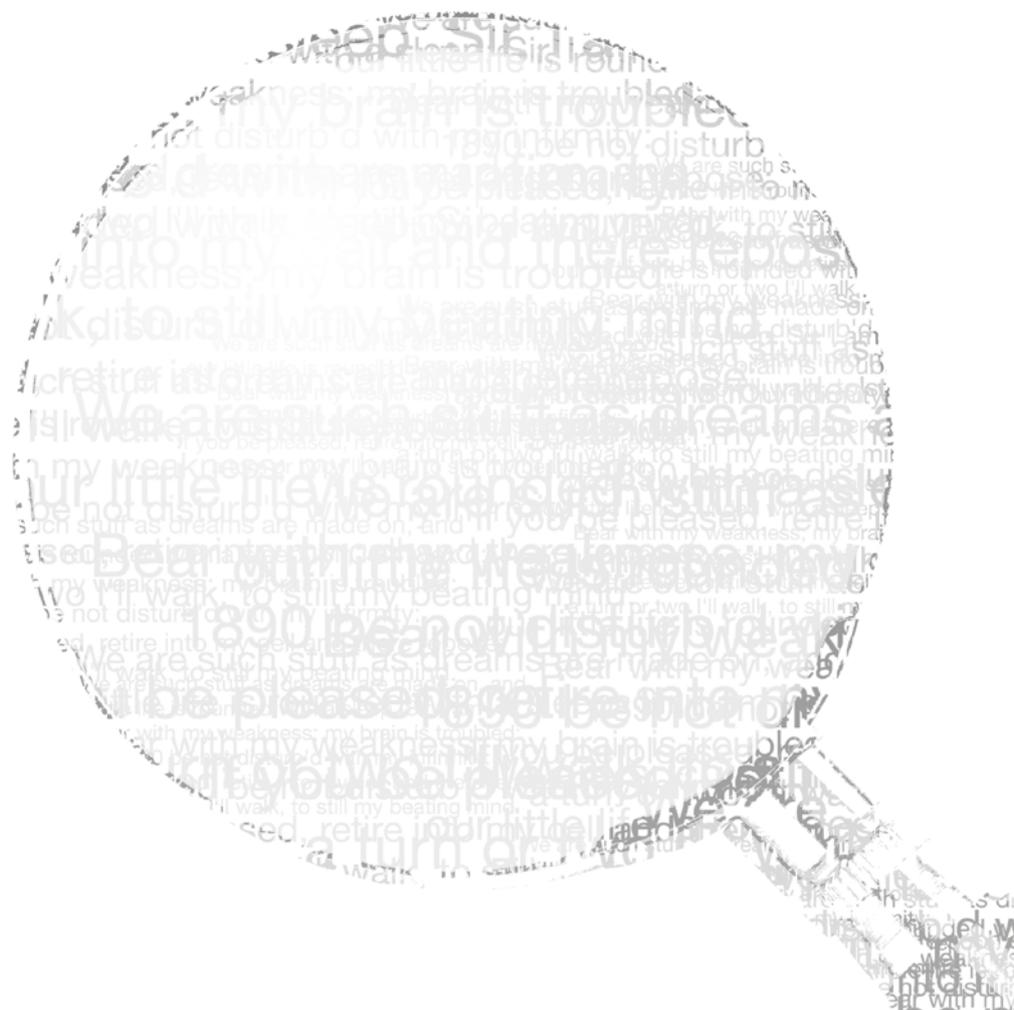
survival, let alone renewal. (Fully rationalized people, such as our present masters seek, will fall for the first rationalization for exploiting and destroying a disenchanted world that consequently doesn't feel worth defending.)

Tolkien's involvement with trees combined the mythically resonant with the personally poignant in a way which led to an extraordinarily vivid depiction in art.

Curry, P. (2000) 'Defending Middle-Earth', in Coupe, L. (eds.) *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, Abingdon: Routledge, p 282

Section 6

Literary value and the canon



Section 6

Literary value and the canon

The literary canon is often understood to mean the group of authors or works that a consensus of academics, historians and teachers recognise as worthy of study: these are the texts that are regularly in print, are studied for school examinations and in universities and which have 'status'. The apparently 'accepted texts' that appear on your English Literature exam papers, for example, are regarded as belonging to the literary canon. The canon is often accused by its critics of representing the values of the ruling educated classes. Writers who question the canon often do so because of its association with privilege. In this section you will see writers questioning who makes decisions about what makes certain literary texts more valuable or worthy than others and why they do so. In reading this criticism you will be able to think for yourselves about what makes a text valuable.

6.1 Aesthetics and pleasure, art and beauty

Taken from *The English Studies Book*, by R. Pope:

In casual usage if we say a poem, picture or landscape is 'aesthetically pleasing' we generally mean that it gives us a refined sense of pleasure: it is 'artistically beautiful'. In this respect the sense of 'aesthetic' (also spelt 'esthetic') is loosely synonymous with that of 'artistic'. We start with such broad generalities and potential confusions because that is precisely where these terms and concepts are in most people's minds. 'Aesthetics = refined pleasure = art = beauty' is therefore the formula we shall explore and, to some extent, explode. The result should be a sharper sense of the distinctions as well as the connections amongst all these terms.

Aesthetics derives from a Greek word meaning 'things perceptible to the sense', 'sensory impressions'. At its broadest, anything could have an aesthetic effect simply by virtue of being sensed and perceived. From the late eighteenth century, however, aesthetics became narrowed to mean not just sense perception in general but 'perception of the beautiful' in particular. Thus by the late nineteenth century aesthetics was chiefly identified with the cultivation of 'good taste' in anything and everything from fine wine and clothes to literature, painting and music. As such, it melded with highly idealised and often socially elitist notions of 'the sublime' and 'the beautiful'. At its crudest, an aesthetic sense was simply a sign of good breeding.

Art, meanwhile, was undergoing a corresponding process of narrowing in meaning and elevation in social status. Initially, the term 'art' had derived through French from a Latin word (*ars/artis*) meaning 'skill', 'technique' or 'craft'. At this stage anything requiring practical knowledge and technical expertise could be an art, from the arts of husbandry (i.e. farming and housekeeping) to the arts of writing and building. Moreover, the 'seven arts'

of the medieval universities (later called the Seven Liberal Arts) did not recognise modern distinctions between sciences on the one hand and arts and humanities on the other. The seven arts thus comprised Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric (the trivium) along with Arithmetic, Music, Geometry and Astronomy (the quadrivium). But all were 'arts' in that they required technical knowledge. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, 'Art' was increasingly being used as a singular and with a capital letter. Art was also being used as an umbrella term for what were now being called the *fine* (as distinct from the *applied*) arts: architecture (as distinct from building), sculpture (as distinct from carving), chamber and orchestral music (as distinct from popular singing and playing), ballet (not just any dance), painting on canvas (rather than, say, house-painting), poetry (as distinct from verse and song) and Literature in the sense of 'belles lettres' (as distinct from writing in general). Significantly, at the same time, the sciences were also tending to be split into *pure* and *applied* (e.g. physics as distinct from engineering).

The overall result was that henceforth 'Art' was increasingly distinguished from other forms of representation and signification. By the same gesture, *artists* (who were supposedly preoccupied with the sublime) were carefully distinguished from their more humble and practical counterparts, *artisans*. The former, it was argued, made *beautiful* things; the latter made *useful* things. (Incidentally, it was precisely against this divisive state of affairs that William Morris and Company and the related 'Arts and Crafts' movements came into being. They resisted the split between fine and applied art, as well as that between artist and artisan.) At any rate, notwithstanding the efforts of Morris and Co, from the late nineteenth century to the present it has been common to assume that art is ultimately a matter of 'art for art's sake', and that it is either fine and pure or impractical and useless, depending on your point of view. At the same time, 'the aesthetic' is assumed to be nothing more nor less than a sensitivity to the sublime and the beautiful and an aversion to the ordinary and ugly.

For English Studies, especially for the study of Literature, the legacy of such a division has been profound. Many traditional English Literature courses still concentrate substantially on just one side of the divide: on a canon of literature treated as high art (poems, plays and novels revered as classics), as distinct from popular writing and mass media production in general (magazines, news stories, songs, soap operas, adverts, etc.). All the latter tend to be treated as artisanal, applied, commercial and ephemeral, and therefore left to courses in Cultural, Communication, and Media studies. The former, meanwhile, are treated as artistic, fine, sublime and timeless, and appropriated as certain kinds of aesthetic literary object. The narrowed sense of 'aesthetic', meaning tasteful, refined and discriminating (rather than 'sense perception in general') has played a crucial role in maintaining the boundaries. So has a willingness to play down the fact that many works currently canonised as timeless classics (e.g. Shakespeare's and Dickens's) were highly popular and commercial and designedly ephemeral in their own day.

Pope, R. (1998) *The English Studies Book*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 162–165.

6.2 Judgement and value

Taken from *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*, by M. Montgomery, et al:

Many kinds of writing might be designated as 'literature'. In the past, definitions of what counts as literature have been much broader than our present definitions, at times taking in non-fictional works, travel writing, essays, political and religious texts, and so on. However, not all literature excites critical interest and comment. Literary critics have usually assumed that the texts which seem to repay special attention, by many readers over a long period of time, thereby gaining the status of 'classics', do so because they are somehow intrinsically valuable. And it is these classic texts which – by virtue of their special value and the amount of criticism and commentary which they generate – come to comprise the 'canon' of Great Literature. This canon tends to form the core of syllabuses in schools, colleges and universities. Judgements about the value of texts, therefore, can clearly be seen to be at the heart of literary studies. Also, for many critics, assessing the value of a text is also seen to be a crucial part of the role of the critic.

a Characteristics of valued texts

It was against this background of assuming that certain texts were more valuable than others that critics such as F.R. Leavis set out to judge which texts are valuable and which are not. Value, in such a view, is seen as a quality residing within texts themselves. And critics of this persuasion have generally stressed the importance of characteristics such as complexity, aesthetic unity, literary language, subject-matter, and canonical status.

b Complexity and unity

Literary texts which are assumed to be of special value are generally characterised by complexity of plot, structure, language, and ideas. Indeed, complexity is often used in this context as a synonym of value. But complexity can be of a number of different kinds. In novels, complexity typically involves not only a skilfully constructed main plot, but often the co-existence of this plot with sub-plots which mirror and highlight the events and themes in the main plot. The structure of a specially valued poem is held to be complex in ways which repay close attention; for example, the poem may be structured as a complex sequence of parallelisms. The more the reader studies the poem, the more he or she is aware of the poet's skill in composing it in this way. The language of valued literary texts is also typically assumed to be complex: writers do not simply choose 'ordinary' words, like the words we use for conversation, but words which have resonance, historical associations, beauty, or 'rightness' for the particular context. The reader is encouraged to assume that writers of valued texts laboured painstakingly to choose exactly the right word, since each word forms part of a larger complex structure. Nor can the ideas of a poem or novel be taken as haphazardly chosen: they too form complex patterns or structures, either being echoed by other ideas in the text or reaffirmed in the form of general themes. The complex

interweaving of elements of language, structure, plot, ideas and so on, can be seen to constitute the aesthetic unity of the text. Through carefully studying the text, the reader will consequently find that all of its elements contribute to the same overall structure, and is thereby likely to consider the poem to have achieved value, or even greatness. Alternatively, if by applying the same criteria the reader is not able to discover a complex but unified pattern in the text, that text will not be regarded as the highest kind of literature, and will be judged to be flawed.

c Language

We assume that writers of canonical texts are craftspersons – that they are in command of their writing, and that they are skilled in ways that other writers are not. Of special interest, as regards the question of value, is the attention paid to the language of valued texts. Language in valued texts is described as being elegant, witty, patterned, controlled; in short, the author is considered to have taken care in her or his choice, and the reader takes pleasure in the skill which the author displays. Literary language, for critics such as the Russian Formalists, is seen to constitute a separate type of language where authors consciously play with the possibilities of expression in order to produce verbal art that has specific aesthetic qualities.

d Subject-matter

The subject-matter of valued texts is generally considered to be serious, dealing with moral and philosophical topics of acknowledged importance. Valued texts are supposed to give the reader an insight into fundamental questions which are of universal concern, such as the nature of evil, the corrupting effect of money, the value of love, and so on, and to rehearse the dilemmas of moral and ethical choice. For this reason, comic texts are rarely accorded status unless they appear to discuss such supposedly universal themes. Because valued texts are held to deal with such universal themes, which are of concern to all people, they are also thought to have qualities of durability. Shakespeare's works, for example, are deemed valuable because they are believed to have significance not only for his time but for all time. When texts discuss evidently universal questions, they are unlikely to be at the same time texts which discuss specific political questions in any detail. Political polemic (open and heated critical discussion) is generally taken to be at odds with literary worth, and is often seen to detract from the universalising aim of great literature (satires are often valued for their observations about humankind in general, rather than for their more specific criticisms of particular societies).

e The canon

As has been suggested above, the canon is the group of texts considered to be of most value. These are the books which are generally taught in schools, colleges and universities (though the canon is constantly changing, especially in schools). Although many new universities have largely dispensed with the notion of the canon, and offer courses on non-canonical writing, many more traditional universities still structure their syllabus around a

chronological study of the canon. Despite changes in the canon, however, when students are asked to list members of this elite grouping, the results are generally very similar: the first writers on the list are usually Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton; after these, a certain amount of debate generally occurs on whether to include such writers as Dryden, Lawrence, Pope, Swift, Joyce, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Jonson, Dickens, Hardy, Burns, Woolf, Austen, Eliot, and the Brontës. These writers share certain characteristics. First, most of them are male (indeed it is not unusual for some students' lists to include only male writers). Second, they are generally from the middle- or upper-class, and are all white. Third, they are all dead. To be included in the canon, writers must be seen to have written valuable texts; but is it merely a coincidence that these writers also belong to essentially the same socio-economic, racial and gender group? As soon as you ask one question about the canon, others arise. Who decides whether someone is in the canon and who is not? And how is it that most students of English literature know, to a greater or lesser extent, who is included and who is not? Most traditional critics do not consider that there are any agencies involved in decisions about who is in the canon and who is not; the selected texts are simply clearly better than others. You might like to consider, however, a range of agencies which make and enforce decisions about canonical status. Within the school context, because of the introduction of the National Curriculum, the choices about which authors and books are included on the syllabus are largely taken by government agencies. In universities, individual lecturers, ratified by other staff, university bodies and external examiners, make decisions about which books should be studied. They also largely make up the researchers and critics who work on canonical writers, and publish learned articles or introductions for students to canonical texts. This system of 'commentary', as Michel Foucault calls it, ensures that certain texts remain the focus of attention and stay in print. Outside of the educational domain, there are publishers who commission critical books from academics writing on particular authors, and who also label certain books as 'Classics'; libraries who buy such books; and individual readers who accept this version of canonicity. In the light of this, you might like to ask yourself some questions about your own course of study: for example, do you study Shakespeare; how many texts are there by contemporary writers, women writers, working-class or black writers? Underlying the way that your course is constructed may be notions about value which may come to the fore when you consider your answers to these questions.

f Some recent critical perspectives on value

Modern literary theorists have professed much less certainty about questions of literary value. While many of them have considered that certain texts do seem to be better than others, others have considered that value is simply a means of excluding certain texts. A range of differing views on questions of judgement and value now exists.

Roland Barthes, for example, was innovatory in analysing not only texts which are canonical, but also texts drawn from popular literature, like Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger* (1959). Barthes does consider, however, that there are important differences among texts; and he

is concerned in much of his writing to describe those differences. But rather than assuming that value resides within the text, he shifts attention to the 'pleasure of the text'; instead of being a scholarly enjoyment of the seeming control of the writer over her or his material, the process of reading, for Barthes, involves a more sexualised pleasure. In particular, Barthes identifies the different types of pleasure to be gained from reading realist texts compared with other texts. He calls realist texts 'readerly', because in reading such texts the reader begins not to be aware of the fact that he or she is reading, and starts to get caught up in the pleasure of narrative. But Barthes prefers 'writerly' texts, which are those texts (such as experimental and avant-garde texts) which force the reader to 'work' (and 'play') more in order to make sense of them. With writerly texts, attention is drawn to the process of writing; we are unable to become 'lost' in the narrative in the same unthinking way as with readerly texts. Thus, although Barthes claims to be opposed to constructing hierarchies, there does seem to be a value judgement made between readerly and writerly texts. Despite this, his writing on the pleasure of the text does question the traditional notion of canonical texts as somehow intrinsically more valuable than others, and suggests that the reader plays an important role in attributing value to a text.

Marxist critics are often much less clear about whether the notions of value and evaluation are useful. Terry Eagleton, for example, attacks the concept of the canon, arguing that texts become canonical precisely because they serve to support the ruling ideology. He does not want to dispense, however, with the notion of value completely, since he also thinks that there are literary texts which question or 'escape' ideology, and so force the reader to consider her or his position and perhaps lead to a form of consciousness-raising. Within the Women's Movement, for example, feminist novels written by Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter have been very important in bringing about changes in women's thinking. These literary texts have brought about a questioning of certain ideological assumptions about the position of women, and could therefore be considered valuable for that reason.

Michel Foucault takes a more sceptical position, questioning the idea of attributing value to texts at all. He argues that literary texts are really empty texts, containing less rather than more than other texts. They display, as he puts it, 'enunciative poverty'. With literary texts, critics have to work hardest, in order to fill gaps which the text leaves gaping open. It is critics themselves, writing scholarly articles and books on canonical writers, who repeat over and over the message which the text itself failed to tell. Foucault also questions the notion that the writer is totally in control of what is written. He draws attention to the importance of other factors in the writing process, such as the common-sense knowledge of the time, literary traditions, and the economic and literary pressures which led the writer to write within certain genres or styles, and on certain subjects.

Montgomery, M., Durant, A., Fabb, N., Furness, T. and Mills, S. (2000) *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 297–301.

6.3 Challenging the canon

Taken from *Critical Theory and Practice: A Coursebook*, by K. Green and J. LeBihan:

The term 'CANON' refers to a traditional core of literature made up of works deemed 'great', 'valuable', 'universal' and timeless, and therefore worthy of continued academic study. The canon has never been completely formalised, with particular writers being *always* either in or out (probably Shakespeare would be the only writer who was always 'in' on English Literature courses). Fashions do change, but the range of what is counted as great remains restricted, and reliably reproduced, if only because teachers tend to teach what they are familiar with and publishers tend to publish what they know will sell. However, this simplistic answer skirts the issue of judgement, of how a text might qualify for greatness, universality and value. T.S. Eliot, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', posits his thesis for how traditions should be perpetuated by individual poets:

The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind – is a mind which changes.

(Eliot 1975: 39)

Eliot makes both explicit and implicit points here. Explicitly, and perhaps these days uncontroversially, he suggests that the 'main current' of tradition is beyond the control of the individual, but it nevertheless influences what kind of art is produced. The less explicit points that can be gleaned from this small extract, though, are that poetry is what is important to artistic traditions, that poets are male, and most significant of all, poets are European. Such a position has not gone unchallenged, and some of this challenge has come from a liberalisation of the canon, an attempt to get a wider range of texts included on core literature courses, as well as the teaching of representative literatures, such as courses on women's writing, African-American writing and so on.

The inclusion of a wider range of texts to study is one response to the problem of an exclusive canon. But another question emerges from this debate: what is the effect of continuing to produce 'representative' canons that include the odd black writer or two, on the grounds that they are 'as good as' any of the white writers on the list? If one argues that one text is 'as good as' another, there must be a shared set of criteria on which that judgement is made. In other words, this makes alternative literatures conform to the same standards of a tradition that has excluded them.

Instead of simply saying that black writers should be included in the mainstream of literary study, it is perhaps more useful to consider what a literary canon which ratifies some works and not others does to our critical practice. What is the effect on critics' capacity to do their

work, if they are used to reading only limited kinds of literature? Paul Lauter asks: ‘How is *canon* – that is, selection – related to, indeed a *function* of critical technique?’ (1991: 228) He continues to question the ways in which the selective procedures govern the way in which we read and criticise. Try to answer Lauter’s questions for yourself:

- can the canon significantly change if we retain essentially the same critical techniques and priorities?
- where do the techniques of criticism come from? Do they fall from the sky? Or do they arise out of social practice? And if the latter, from which social practice?
- out of what social practice, from what values, does the close analysis (disregarding other contextual factors) of complex texts (i.e. those deemed complex and valuable by the sustainers of the canon) arise?
- do we perpetuate those values in pursuing the critical practice derived from them?
- does such critical practice effectively screen from our appreciation, even our scrutiny, other worlds of creativity, of art?
- are there other worlds of art out there whose nature, dynamics, values we fail to appreciate because we ask the wrong questions, or don’t know what questions to ask? Or maybe we shouldn’t simply be asking questions.

[In other words] ... the literary canon as we have known it is a product in significant measure of our training in male, white, bourgeois cultural tradition, including in particular the formal techniques of literary analysis. Other cultural traditions provide alternate views about the nature and function of art, and approaches to it.

(Lauter 1991: 228)

Lauter here is questioning the training and experience of literary critics and scholars, and suggests that the continual inscription of some texts as suitable for formal study and analysis, the continual delineation of others as unacceptable, is a self-perpetuating process. His questions ask critics to examine themselves and the answers suggest that who you are not only affects what you say, but it also affects who hears you and how they understand your work.

Green, K. and LeBihan, J. (1995) *Critical Theory and Practice: A Coursebook*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 272–274.

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