

Critical Anthology

NOTE: whilst this was booklet was not originally designed for our current EDEXCEL specification, it has some very useful material that can be applied to all literary texts. Make sure you quote, using quotation marks, and cite the source properly in the work itself and in the bibliography at the end.

CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY FOR USE WITH INDEPENDENT READING COURSEWORK

Welcome to this booklet of critical material. It is designed to help you to make connections across texts, and to see that the study of literature is underpinned by certain methods and ideas.

The purpose of the booklet is to introduce you to some different ways in which the study of literature can be approached.

The booklet is in three parts.

Section A looks at two connected ‘schools’ of critical approach: *Marxism* and *Feminism*. They are connected in that they both approach literary texts from a socio-economic point of view, looking to see who has power in the world of the text, and whether the world of the text reflects accurately the realities of the world as we know it. The definitions of feminism are likely to be of particular use.

Section B explores how meanings are made with particular reference to *Metaphor*. It looks at the topic from various angles, including the fact that all language is highly metaphorical, not just literary language.

Section C is arguably less useful for your current coursework but you might find it interesting. It asks you to consider some fundamental questions about studying literature. Is it possible to define ways in which literature, as an art form, contains beauty? Why are some texts given high status? Does reading literature offer you anything of value?

SECTION A

POLITICAL READINGS

1 The politics of class: Marxism

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.

From:

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

2 Marxist literary criticism: general

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.

From:

Barry, P. (2002). *Beginning Theory*, 2nd Edition, (pp 158–159), Manchester University Press.

3 What Marxist Critics Do

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' 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.

From:

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

4 Feminism

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, selfsacrificing 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.

From:

Bertens, H. (2001) *Literary Theory: The Basics*, (The Politics of Class: Marxism), (pp 94–5, 97–99), Abingdon: Routledge.

5 Feminism and feminist criticism

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 ‘androtxts’ (books by men) to ‘gynotxts’ (books by women). She coined the term ‘gynocritics’, meaning the study of gynotxts, 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.

From:

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

6 What Feminist Critics Do

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.

From:

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

7 Gender

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.

From:

Bertens, H. (2001) *Literary Theory: The Basics*, (The Politics of Class: Marxism), (pp 94–5, 97–99), Abingdon: Routledge.

SECTION B

THE MEANING OF METAPHOR

8 Metaphor

When we talk about metaphor, we mean the use of language to refer to something other than what it was originally applied to, or what it ‘literally’ means, in order to suggest some resemblance or make a connection between the two things. We can illustrate this with two examples taken from the Bank of English corpus (BoE), a 450-million-word corpus of recent English texts. In this case, they are metaphorical uses of single words or phrases, although metaphors can be developed over much longer stretches of text:

The **jewel** in Northumbria’s ecclesiastical **crown** is Lindisfarne Priory on Holy Island, built as a monastery in 635 and reached by a tidal causeway.

We used to **thrash** all the teams in the Keith Schoolboy League. We had a great squad and no-one could **touch** us.

Clearly, a priory is not a jewel in the way that a diamond or sapphire is, nor does Northumbria have any sort of ceremonial headgear in the way that a monarch traditionally has: the literal meanings of *jewel* and *crown*. Clearly, one team is unlikely to have hit the other teams with sticks or whips, and equally unlikely is the impossibility of anyone making physical contact: the literal meanings of *thrash* and *touch*. We recognise these words in these contexts as exaggerations and non-literal, and we interpret them accordingly. *Jewel* represents something that is valuable, attractive, and desirable, and *a jewel in —’s crown* refers to the most important or valuable achievement; *thrash* suggests the totality of a victory, and *touch* suggests achievements and success which are much greater than others seem capable of.

This explanation of metaphor is of course dependent on a definition of literalness. Unless we identify and agree what the **literal** meaning of a word or expression is, we cannot identify and agree what is metaphorical.

From:

Knowles & Moon (2006) *Introducing Metaphor*, (pp 2–6), Abingdon: Routledge.

9 The Importance of Metaphor

Metaphor is pervasive in language, and there are two principal ways in which it is important.

First, in relation to individual words: metaphor is a basic process in the formation of words and word meanings. Concepts and meanings are **lexicalised**, or expressed in words, through metaphor. Many senses of multi-sense words are metaphors of different kinds, as in the meanings of *field*, *hurt*, and *dark* in the following BoE examples:

She has published extensively in the **field** of psychology.

The failure has **hurt** him deeply.

... the end of a long tale, full of **dark** hints and unspeakable innuendos.

Similarly, the names of many new concepts or devices are metaphorical or extended uses of pre-existing words: for example, computer terms such as *web*, *bug*, and *virus*. Many compound words encapsulate metaphors: *browbeat*, *foothill*, *pigeonhole*. Idioms and proverbs are often metaphorical in origin: *don't put all your eggs in one basket*, *miss the boat*, *rattle someone's cage*, and, more obscurely, *kick the bucket* and *a red herring*. These are mainly **conventional** metaphors.

Second, in relation to discourse: metaphor is important because of its functions – explaining, clarifying, describing, expressing, evaluating, entertaining. There are many reasons *why* we use metaphors in speech or writing: not least, because there is sometimes no other word to refer to a particular thing. But where we have a choice, we choose metaphors in order to communicate what we think or how we feel about something; to explain what a particular thing is like; to convey a meaning in a more interesting or creative way; or to do all of these. Significantly, a lot of our understanding of things is mediated through metaphor. That is, we might well not understand them except with the help of metaphorical models or analogies, and our understanding is itself conditioned by the metaphor. For example, the cells in our bodies react biologically in complex ways to infection: we can understand the process more easily through a metaphor of war, thinking of it in terms of fighting and invasion, as in

Scientists believe stress may suppress development of T-cells, the white blood cells which help to **fight off invading** micro-organisms.

(BoE)

Other metaphors might have been used, but this is the dominant, most familiar one, and the way in which we now conceptualise the biological process is determined by it. It is typical that metaphors use concrete images to convey something abstract, helping to communicate what is hard to explain.

From:

Knowles & Moon (2006) *Introducing Metaphor*, (pp 2–6), Abingdon: Routledge.

10 Creative and Conventional Metaphors

Creative metaphors are those which a writer/speaker constructs to express a particular idea or feeling in a particular context, and which a reader/hearer needs to deconstruct or ‘unpack’ in order to understand what is meant. They are typically new (another term is **novel metaphor**), although they may be based on pre-existing ideas or images. Creative metaphor is often associated with literature, but there are plenty of instances of it in other genres. Here are two taken from, respectively, a tourist guide and restaurant criticism:

The main street follows a higgledy-piggledy contour from the safe, sandy cove beside which the east village sits, towards a busy harbour full of the rippled reflections of brightly coloured fishing boats and **cradled by the crooked finger** of the harbour wall.

(Greenwood et al. *The Rough Guide to Ireland*, 1999: 227)

Got second Martini. No delicate shaving of lemon peel, just twisted to release oils, but two strips of thick peel bearing pith. And it was warm. Not **the silver bullet whistling through the rigging**, as it should be.

(Matthew Fort *The Guardian (Weekend)*, 17 March 2001)

Creative metaphors contrast with **conventional metaphors**. These are metaphorical usages which are found again and again to refer to a particular thing. Cases in point are the metaphors of cells *fighting off* infection and of micro-organisms *invading*; and the metaphorical meanings of *divorced* to mean ‘completely separated’ and *field* to refer to a specialised subject or activity. These kinds of metaphor are institutionalised as part of the language. Much of the time we hardly notice them at all, and do not think of them as metaphorical when we use or encounter them: dictionaries are likely to record them as separate senses.

The term **dead metaphor** is sometimes used to refer to conventional metaphors, especially those which people do not recognise as metaphorical in ordinary usage.

From:

Knowles & Moon (2006) *Introducing Metaphor*, (pp 2–6), Abingdon: Routledge.

11 Metaphors in everyday discourse and in literary discourse

The idea that a particular metaphor is ‘novel’ can be understood in a number of ways. It can be understood as referring for example to the newness or uniqueness of a conceptual mapping between a source and target domain, or alternatively, to a striking method of expression which a writer uses to relay a metaphor. However, taking the idea further requires that we work from the background assumption that most metaphorical mappings are transmitted through familiar, commonly occurring linguistic expressions. For instance, the metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD is relayed through a variety of everyday constructions like ‘I can’t stomach that idea’, ‘Your theory’s half-baked’ or ‘His story is pretty hard to swallow’ and so on. It is interesting that the pattern in such metaphors involves the mapping between an abstract target domain (IDEAS) and a more physical source domain (FOOD). This pattern of ‘concretisation’, where we try to

capture the essence of an abstraction by recasting it in the terms of something more palpable, is replicated in a great many metaphorical constructions and it offers an important insight into the way the human mind works ...

... To return to the issue of novelty, it is against this background of everyday metaphorical mapping that writers of literature seek not only to establish new connections, and new types of connection, between target and source domains, but also to extend and elaborate upon existing metaphors in various ways. Consider for instance the following fragment for Craig Raine's poem 'An Enquiry into Two Inches of Ivory':

(2) ...the vacuum cleaner grazes
over the carpet, lowing, ...

Here the target domain is an everyday domestic appliance and the source domain a familiar bovine animal. The source domain, as with many metaphorical expressions, is evoked by verbs which specify some action of the target ('grazes' and 'lowing'), so the overall metaphorical formula can be captured as: A HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCE IS A FARMED ANIMAL. As far as the novelty of the metaphor is concerned, it is the mental coalescence, or 'conceptual blending', of the familiar entities that offers a fresh perspective on an otherwise prosaic object like the humble vacuum cleaner ...

... As a footnote to this discussion, it is worth reemphasising that novelty in stylistic expression cannot remain novel indefinitely, and what is foregrounded in an original context of use will become part of the background as time goes by. Indeed, many of our common sayings and figures of speech originated from creative metaphors in literature. The expressions 'cold comfort', 'a tower of strength', 'play fast and loose', 'in my mind's eye' and 'to the manner born' may have little impact nowadays, but all of them saw their first use in the plays of William Shakespeare.

Metaphor and style

The following poem is by the Liverpoolian poet Roger McGough:

40	–	LOVE
middle		aged
couple		playing
ten		nis
when		the
game		ends
and		they
go		home
the		net
will		still
be		be
tween		them

(McGough 1971)

In this poem, McGough employs a range of linguistic-stylistic devices to relay a single underlying conceptual metaphor. Whereas the target domain is our understanding of a human relationship, the source domain for the metaphor comes from games and sport, yielding the formula: A HUMAN RELATIONSHIP IS A GAME OF SPORT. Regarding the source domain, we often apply concepts drawn from games and sports to a whole host of target domains – the game of chess alone services a great many metaphors in many different cultures. However, what is particularly marked about the McGough poem is the way this conceptual metaphor is sustained by patterns of graphology and other levels of language. Using this variety of devices, McGough develops the basic metaphor through two processes known as *extending* and *elaboration*. Extending a metaphor means expressing it through linguistic resources which introduce new conceptual elements from the source domain. In the poem, McGough extends the source domain from the more general concept of sport to one specific type of sport, and this enables yet further stylistic-expressive possibilities in the way the target domain is subsequently developed. The particular spatial organisation of tennis, with its back and forth movement between ball and players, is captured stylistically by the break up of the text into two columns, and this forces the reading of the text into a similar to and fro movement ...

... A range of levels of language are also exploited in order to *elaborate* the under-lying conceptual metaphor in the poem. Elaboration involves capturing an existing component of the source domain in an unusual or unconventional way. For example, once the source domain has been extended to tennis, special features of this domain, such as its *props*, can acquire extra signification in the metaphorical mapping. The net which serves as the physical barrier in a tennis court symbolises a spiritual and emotional barrier between the estranged couple. Similarly, the numerical scoring system used in tennis allows for further elaboration, where the reference to ‘40’ in the title parallels the ages of the couple and, even more fortuitously, the reference to ‘love’ allows a metaphorical projection from the sport domain to the more abstract target domain of human relationships. Derived from the French *l’oeuf* on account of the resemblance of an egg to the zero symbol, the tennis-domain ‘love’ facilitates a pun because it

allows more than one sense to be projected. The score in the games of love for the middle aged couple is, it seems, at zero.

Throughout the poem, a variety of devices enable a conceptual projection to be made from the physical body of the poem into the more abstract world of human relationships. In sum, McGough’s text illustrates well the idea of novelty in metaphor because it offers both a new type of conceptual mapping between a source and target domain as well as a striking method of expression to relay the metaphor.

From:

Simpson, P. (2004), *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students* (pp 92–95), Routledge.

12 Symbolism and Allegory

Symbolism itself, of course, may play an important role in literature. In literature, the symbols employed by writers can sometimes be private or personal, and this can pose problems for the reader in the interpretation of what the writer actually means. Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' represents a major symbolic work, and in the early decades of the twentieth century, the work of Yeats employed a range of symbols, including the tower and the phases of the moon, which embody the poet's personal philosophy.

Children's writers have often used symbols in their narratives. One of the most well-known is the symbol of the kitchen where it stands for safety and comradeship. This can be seen in the following description of Badger's kitchen in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*: objects are here presented as anthropomorphic.

The ruddy brick floor smiled up at the smoky ceiling; the oaken settles, shiny with long wear, exchanged cheerful glances with each other; plates on the dresser grinned at pots on the shelf, and the merry firelight flickered and played over everything without distinction.
(Grahame 1908/1951: 44)

Interestingly, the kitchen symbol can also be used in the opposite way, as in this extract from George MacDonald's *The Princess and Curdie* where it symbolises moral decay:

Everywhere was filth and disorder. Mangy turnspit dogs were lying about, and grey rats were gnawing at refuse in the sinks ... [Curdie] longed for one glimpse of his mother's poor little kitchen, so clean and bright and airy.
(MacDonald 1883/1990: 317)

Gardens too can be symbolic, of course, if we think of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, or Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, and many other pieces of literature, including medieval literature.

Allegory itself represents a metaphorical representation. For example, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a moral and religious allegory. Other writers such as Jonathan Swift use allegory to satirise, as does George Orwell, in whose work the hidden meanings are political and social rather than moral or religious. C.S. Lewis uses allegory in his re-telling of the Christian story for children. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, depends very much on the narrative of Christ's passion and the Resurrection:

‘Oh, it's *too* bad’ sobbed Lucy, ‘they might have left the body alone.’
‘Who's done it?’ cried Susan. ‘What does it mean? Is it magic?’
‘Yes!’ said a great voice behind their backs. ‘It is more magic.’ They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself.
‘Oh, Aslan!’ cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad.
‘Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?’ said Lucy.
‘Not now,’ said Aslan.

(Lewis 1950/1988: 147) Whole narratives, then, can be seen as structured around metaphors. In fact, complete subgenres of literature can be seen in terms of the *life is a journey* metaphor. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a good example from one such sub-genre: compare also the classical epics the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* or medieval stories of quests and pilgrimages, such as in Arthurian literature or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In children's literature, in the classical adventure stories of the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the narratives usually follow the path of an adolescent British male hero on an imperial journey to Africa or India. Here, the life is a journey metaphor is not concerned with the complete life of the hero. Rather, it is that part of his life in which he has to prove himself by being exposed to various dangers and temptations. These he ultimately overcomes, and he returns home an older and wiser man: his physical journey is matched by the journey of his developing maturity as he ‘travels’ into full manhood.

From:

Knowles & Moon (2006) *Introducing Metaphor*, (pp 129–131), Abingdon: Routledge.

13 Concepts We Live By

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.

But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like.

Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence, we have found that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. And we have found a way to begin to identify in detail just what the metaphors are that structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do.

To give some idea of what it could mean for a concept to be metaphorical and for such a concept to structure an everyday activity, let us start with the concept *argument* and the conceptual metaphor *argument is war*. This metaphor is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions:

Argument is war

Your claims are *indefensible*.
 He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
 His criticisms were *right on target*.
 I *demolished* his argument.
 I've never *won* an argument with him.
 You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*. He *shot down* all of my arguments.

It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument – attack, defence,

counterattack, etc. – reflects this. It is in this sense that the *argument is war* metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing.

Try to imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war, where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing ground. Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But *we* would probably not view them as arguing at all: they would simply be doing something different. It would seem strange even to call what they were doing “arguing”. Perhaps the most neutral way of describing this difference between their culture and ours would be to say that we have a discourse form structured in terms of battle and they have one structured in terms of dance.

This is an example of what it means for a metaphorical concept, namely, *argument is war*, to structure (at least in part) what we do and how we understand what we are doing when we argue. *The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.* It is not that arguments are a subspecies of war. Arguments and wars are different kinds of things – verbal discourse and armed conflict – and the actions performed are different kinds of actions. But *argument is war* is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of *war*. The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured.

Moreover, this is the *ordinary* way of having an argument and talking about one. The normal way for us to talk about attacking a position is to use the words “attack a position”. Our conventional ways of talking about arguments presuppose a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of. The metaphor is not merely in the words we use – it is in our very concept of an argument. The language of argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way – and we act according to the way we conceive of things.

The most important claim we have made so far is that metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. We shall argue that, on the contrary, human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical. This is what we mean when we say that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system.

From:

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* : University of Chicago Press.

14 Symbolism

“The fool,” cried Ursula loudly. “Why doesn’t he ride away till it’s gone by?”

Gudrun was looking at him with black-dilated, spellbound eyes. But he sat glistening and obstinate, forcing the wheeling mare, which spun and swerved like a wind, and yet could not get out of the grasp of his will, nor escape from the mad clamour of terror that resounded through her, as the trucks thumped slowly, heavily, horrifying, one after the other, one pursuing the other, over the rails of the crossing.

The locomotive, as if wanting to see what could be done, put on the brakes, and back came the trucks rebounding on the iron buffers, striking like horrible cymbals, clashing nearer and nearer in frightful strident concussions. The mare opened her mouth and rose slowly, as if lifted up on a wind of terror. Then suddenly her fore-feet struck out, as she convulsed herself utterly away from the horror. Back she went, and the two girls clung to each other, feeling she must fall backwards on top of him. But he leaned forward, his face shining with fixed amusement, and at last he brought her down, sank her down, and was bearing her back to the mark. But as strong as the pressure of his compulsion was the repulsion of her utter terror, throwing her back away from the railway, so that she spun round and round on two legs, as if she were in the centre of some whirlwind. It made Gudrun faint with poignant dizziness, which seemed to penetrate to her heart.

D.H. Lawrence *Women in Love* (1921)

Roughly speaking, anything that “stands for” something else is a symbol, but the process operates in many different ways. A cross may symbolise Christianity in one context, by association with the Crucifixion, and a road intersection in another, by diagrammatic resemblance. Literary symbolism is less easily decoded than these examples, because it tries to be original and tends towards a rich plurality, even ambiguity, of meaning (all qualities that would be undesirable in traffic signs and religious icons, especially the former). If a metaphor or simile consists of likening A to B, a literary symbol is a B that *suggests* an A, or a number of As. The poetic style known as Symbolism, which started in France in the late nineteenth century in the work of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé, and exerted considerable influence on English writing in the twentieth, was characterised by a shimmering surface of suggested meanings without a denotative core.

Somebody once said, however, that the novelist should make his spade a spade before he makes it a symbol, and this would seem to be good advice for a writer who is aiming to create anything like the “illusion of life”. If the spade is introduced all too obviously just for the sake of its symbolic meaning, it will tend to undermine the credibility of the narrative as human action. D.H. Lawrence was often prepared to take that risk to express a visionary insight – as when, in another episode of *Women in Love*, he has his hero rolling naked in the grass and throwing stones at the reflection of the moon. But in the passage quoted here he has kept a nice balance between realistic description and symbolic suggestion.

The “spade” in this case is a complex action: a man controlling a horse frightened by a colliery train passing at a level crossing, while being watched by two women. The man is Gerald Critch, the son of the local colliery owner, who manages the business and will eventually inherit it. The setting is the Nottinghamshire landscape in which Lawrence, a coalminer’s son, was brought up: a pleasant countryside scarred and blackened in places by the pits and their railways. One might say that the train “symbolises” the mining industry, which is a product

of culture in the anthropological sense, and that the horse, a creature of Nature, symbolises the countryside. Industry has been imposed on the countryside by the masculine power and will of capitalism, a process Gerald symbolically re-enacts by the way he dominates his mare, forcing the animal to accept the hideous mechanical noise of the train.

The two women in the scene are sisters, Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, the former a teacher, the latter an artist. They are out on a country walk when they witness the scene at the level crossing. Both identify sympathetically with the terrified horse. Ursula is outraged by Gerald’s behaviour, and speaks her mind. But the scene is described from Gudrun’s point of view, and her response is more complex and ambivalent. There is sexual symbolism in the way Gerald controls his mount – “at last he brought her down, sank her down, and was bearing her back to the mark” –

and there is certainly an element of macho exhibitionism in his display of strength in front of the two women. Whereas Ursula is simply disgusted by the spectacle, Gudrun is sexually aroused by it, almost in spite of herself. The mare “spun round and round on two legs, as if she were in the centre of some whirlwind. It made Gudrun faint with poignant dizziness, which seemed to penetrate to her heart.” “Poignant” is a transferred epithet, which logically belongs to the suffering of the horse; its rather odd application to “dizziness” expresses the turmoil of Gudrun’s emotions, and calls attention to the root meaning of *poignant* – pricking, piercing – which, with “penetrate” in the next clause, gives a powerfully phallic emphasis to the whole description. A couple of pages later, Gudrun is described as “numbed in her mind by the sense of indomitable soft weight of the man bearing down into the living body of the horse: the strong, indomitable thighs of the blond man clenching the palpitating body of the mare into pure control.” The whole scene is indeed prophetic of the passionate but mutually destructive sexual relationship that will develop later in the story between Gudrun and Gerald.

This rich brew of symbolic suggestion would, however, be much less effective if Lawrence did not at the same time allow us to picture the scene in vivid, sensuous detail. The ugly noise and motion of trucks as the train brakes is rendered in onomatopoeic syntax and diction (“clashing nearer and nearer in frightful strident concussions”), followed by an eloquent image of the horse, graceful even in panic: “The mare opened her mouth and rose slowly, as if lifted up on a wind of terror.” Whatever you think of Lawrence’s men and women, he was always brilliant when describing animals.

It is worth noting that symbolism is generated in two different ways in this passage. The Nature/Culture symbolism is modelled on the rhetorical figures of speech known as metonymy and synecdoche. Metonymy substitutes cause for effect or vice versa (the locomotive stands for Industry because it is an effect of the Industrial Revolution) and synecdoche substitutes part for whole or vice versa (the horse stands for Nature because it is part of Nature). The sexual symbolism, on the other hand, is modelled on metaphor and simile, in which one thing is equated with another on the basis of some similarity between them: Gerald’s domination of his mare is described in such a way as to suggest a human sexual act. This distinction, originally formulated by the Russian structuralist Roman Jakobson, operates on every level of a literary text, and indeed outside literature too, as my heroine Robyn Penrose demonstrated to a sceptical Vic Wilcox in *Nice Work*, by analysing cigarette advertisements.

From:

David Lodge (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin (Curtis Brown Group Ltd.).

15 Rhetoric

Literary theory has been much concerned with rhetoric, and theorists debate the nature and function of rhetorical figures. A rhetorical figure has generally been defined as an alteration of or swerve from ‘ordinary’ usage; for instance, ‘My love is a red, red rose’ uses *rose* to mean not the flower but something beautiful and precious (this is the figure of metaphor). Or ‘The Secret Sits’ makes the secret an agent capable of sitting (personification). Rhetoricians formerly attempted to distinguish specific ‘tropes’ which ‘turn’ or alter the meaning of a word (as in metaphor) from more miscellaneous ‘figures’ of indirection which arrange words to achieve special effects ...

... Recent theory rarely distinguishes *figure* from *trope* and has even questioned the notion of an 'ordinary' or 'literal' meaning from which figures or tropes swerve. For example, is the term *metaphor* itself literal or figurative? Jacques Derrida, in 'White Mythology', shows how theoretical accounts of metaphor seem inevitably to rely on metaphors. Some theorists have even embraced the paradoxical conclusion that language is fundamentally figurative and that what we call literal language consists of figures whose figurative nature has been forgotten. When we talk of 'grasping' a 'hard problem', for instance, those two expressions become literal through the forgetting of their possible figurality.

From this perspective, it's not that there is no distinction between literal and figurative but rather that tropes and figures are fundamental structures of language, not exceptions and distortions. Traditionally, the most important figure has been metaphor. A metaphor treats something as something else (calling George a donkey or my love a red, red rose). Metaphor is thus a version of a basic way of knowing: we know something by seeing it as something. Theorists speak of 'metaphors we live by', basic metaphorical schemes, like 'life is a journey'. Such schemes structure our ways of thinking about the world: we try to 'get some-where' in life, 'find our way', 'know where we're going', 'encounter obstacles', and so on.

Metaphor has been treated as basic to language and the imagination because it is cognitively respectable, not inherently frivolous or ornamental. Its literary force, though, may depend on its incongruity. Wordsworth's phrase 'the child is father to the man' stops you, makes you think, and then lets you see the relationship of generations in a new light: the child's relationship to the man he later becomes is compared to a father's relation to his child. Because a metaphor can carry elaborate proposition, even a theory, it is the rhetorical figure most easily justified.

But theorists have also stressed the importance of other figures. For Roman Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy are two fundamental structures of language: if metaphor links by means of similarity, metonymy links by means of contiguity. Metonymy moves from one thing to another that is contiguous with it, as when we say 'the Crown' for 'the Queen'. Metonymy produces order by linking things in spatial and temporal series, moving from one thing to another within a given domain, rather than linking one domain to another, as metaphor can do. Other theorists add *synecdoche* and *irony* to complete a list of 'four master tropes'. Synecdoche is the substitution of part for whole: 'ten hands' for 'ten workers'. It infers qualities of the whole from those of a part and allows parts to represent wholes. Irony juxtaposes appearance and reality; what happens is the opposite of what is expected (what if it rains on the weather forecaster's picnic?). These four master tropes – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony – are used by the historian Hayden White to analyse historical explanation or 'emplotment' as he calls it: they are the basic rhetorical structures by which we make sense of experience. The fundamental idea of rhetoric as a discipline, which comes out well in this fourfold example, is that there are basic structures of language which underlie and make possible the meanings produced in a wide variety of discourses.

From:

Culler, J. (1997) *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (pp 71–73). Oxford University Press .

SECTION C

BEAUTY AND VALUE IN LITERATURE

16 Aesthetics and Pleasure, Art and Beauty

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.

From:

Pope, R. (1998) *The English Studies Book*, London: Routledge.

17 Judgement and Value

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 nonfictional 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 Michael 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.

Michael 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.

From:

Montgomery et al (2000) *Ways of Reading*, (pp 297–301), London: Routledge.

END OF CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY

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