

# INTRODUCING LITERATURE

A Practical Guide to  
Literary Analysis, Criticism,  
and Theory

Brian Moon

chalkface

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# Preface

In recent decades, the study of literature has increasingly been influenced by theory. In a relatively short span of time, a succession of movements – New Criticism, structuralism, reader-response, Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism – has transformed our ways of reading and responding to works of literature. For the most part, this has been a necessary and productive change. Literary theory has questioned and corrected a host of assumptions that once went unchallenged. Many of those assumptions – about fixed and singular meanings, textual transparency, and literary aesthetics – had become untenable in the face of a growing democratisation of education and increasing cultural diversity. Theory reminded us that the writing, publishing, circulation and certification of texts were not separable from the complex realities of class, gender, race, and education.

The rise of theory has not been without cost, however. In some courses, reading of theory has displaced reading of literary works, with the result that students learn more about ways of reading while knowing fewer texts in detail. To paraphrase Terry Eagleton’s famous quip about sensitivity, this risks students becoming more and more theoretically perceptive about nothing in particular. A second problem has been greater attention to high-level study at the expense of introductory courses that help students take their first steps in the informed reading, analysis, and enjoyment of literature. It is this second problem that *Introducing Literature* aims to address. Its goal is to lay the groundwork for higher-level, theorised approaches to literature by first introducing some basic rules and principles of literary study.

The book is designed to support students who are entering their first formal courses in literary reading and textual analysis. It does this by setting out clearly and explicitly what kind of activity literature study is – and then developing some basic skills for reading and responding. Designed to be studied in sequence, the chapters cover topics that teachers and students might need to address in an introductory course:

- how literature courses are structured, and what to expect
- why we read literature
- what kinds of writing count as literature, and why
- the rules for judging and interpreting literary works
- the types of knowledge and skills required for success
- the ways of responding to literature, including creative responses
- the issues and theories addressed in higher-level study.

The framework for this study is largely *rhetorical*. This means that literary practice is viewed as an activity in which meanings emerge from the interplay between writer, reader, text, and context. This rhetorical framework aligns well with contemporary curricula, while also providing a foundation for future theoretical work. Practical exercises in literary reading and analysis are used throughout, to get students working purposefully with texts.

The sample texts are largely drawn from the traditional English canon. This is a deliberate move designed to provide some valued historical and literary coordinates, and to equip students with some knowledge of influential and socially powerful texts. The aim is not to restore the canon and all its accompanying assumptions, but to recognise the historical fact that such texts continue to inform and influence the writing and reading of literature in English. The position taken by this book is that complete ignorance of the English tradition would be just as damaging as blind obedience to it.

The broader perspective of the book is ultimately historical. It regards the production, circulation, and interpretation of literary works as a social practice – one whose methods and values are constantly renegotiated in response to changing circumstances. It is hoped that this book, while introducing students to elements of literary practice, will also help teachers reflect on their own assumptions, and encourage debate of our purposes and goals in studying literature.

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Brian Moon

### About the author

Brian Moon has taught English in Australian schools and Universities for more than 25 years. He has been a state examiner of English and has worked as a curriculum consultant and teacher educator. He is the author of many textbooks for English, including *Studying Literature*; *Literary Terms: A Practical Glossary*; *Studying Poetry*; *Viewing Terms: A Practical Glossary for Film and TV Study*; and *Writing Projects*, all from Chalkface Press. He holds a PhD in Communication and Cultural Studies and is currently an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia.