Literary Terms

A Practical Glossary

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Introduction

This glossary is intended for use as a supplement to courses in Literature and English. Unlike other glossaries, it includes brief activities which help students develop a working knowledge of the concepts. Each of the entries is structured as a mini-lesson divided into four sections:

To get you thinking:	a stimulating puzzle or problem which brings the concept into focus
Theory:	a brief theoretical discussion
Practice:	an activity which calls for practical application of the concept in textual analysis
Summary:	a final summary which can serve as a working definition of the concept.

Definitions and activities in the text are designed so that they can be used independently by students, at individual points of need. However, the glossary can also be integrated into classroom study without the need for additional preparation.

Preface

This third edition of *Literary Terms* is the most substantial update since the original publication in 1992. All of the book's existing entries have been revised, with a large number of new introductory activities and examples. And with more than a dozen new full entries and more than eighty new terms, the number of discrete terms included has doubled. These additions, many of them requested by readers over the years, reflect the desire of teachers for a reference that covers a wider range of terms while preserving the original focus on contemporary critical practice. It is an update that not only expands the scope of the book but also, I hope, extends its usefulness for teachers and students.

Brian Moon, July 2017

Preface to the second edition

It has now been ten years since the first publication of *Literary Terms*. In that time, the theory and practice of English studies has changed substantially. In 1992 literary theory, and especially poststructural theory, was new to many teachers and students. It represented a challenge to established ideas and practices, but also promised new and exciting perspectives for study. In the decade that followed, many of those new ideas became part of the mainstream of study in subject English. Along the way, the theory itself has been modified, especially in the light of ongoing research into the history and social organisation of English studies itself.

This new edition of *Literary Terms* acknowledges both these trends. In response to the continuing spread of theoretical terminology into English, the book adds a number of new terms that have been specifically requested by readers, including cultural identity, postcolonialism, postmodernism, subjectivity, and others. In response to ongoing developments in theory, various entries have been revised and updated to reflect contemporary understandings – though the aim has been to preserve most entries in their familiar form.

In spite of these changes, the central perspective of *Literary Terms* remains the same. The key proposition explored by the book as a whole is that texts do not 'contain' meaning in some fixed form; rather, meanings are produced when readers activate a text in accordance with certain reading practices, and within specific reading contexts. All of the terms featured in the book bear upon this point in some way. They do this by drawing our attention to the many factors that come into play when we set about reading a text. With this knowledge we are better able to map out the social, historical and linguistic forces that set the stage on which we assemble our meanings.

Such activity begs an interesting question, however: Why take a social-historical approach to literature rather than, say, a personal or even mystical one? Ten years ago, at what might have been the high point for poststructural theory, the answer seemed self-evident: knowledge of the social determinants of reading, it was argued, enabled us to escape from them. Critical practice seemed to promise a greater awareness, a growing consciousness of the forces that influence our thoughts and actions. The goal was personal

and social empowerment. But a decade of further research has complicated this equation. Historicist strands of poststructuralism, derived from the work of theorists like Michel Foucault, have cast doubt upon the idea that we can lift ourselves out of our historical moment and gain a total understanding of the forces that govern us.

What we can achieve from a social-historical perspective, it now seems, are some partial, strategic reorientations: not a transformation in our consciousness, but a degree of leverage on particular problems that surround representation and meaning. Social-historical modes of reading can be deployed for a range of useful purposes: to investigate the relationships between genres and readerships; to trace the historical emergence of a literary form; to make a political point. Depending upon the use we put it to, this kind of critical practice can be politically engaged, historically curious, or self-indulgently pleasurable. (It can even be all three at once.) But whatever their range and variety, it seems, the uses of criticism remain bounded by history and limited in their effects. This means our readings are always local and specific.

That specificity extends to the critical terminology we use. Words, as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, are like tools. To drive in a nail one uses a hammer; to make statements about a text one uses specialised terms like point of view or representation. In both cases it is important to use the right tool for the job, and to use the tool in the right way. But in an age of proliferating theories and ever more 'localised' reading practices this has become a demanding task. Students need to understand that while there is more than one way of studying a text, terms and concepts cannot be mixed and matched at will: critical practice is not a smorgasbord. To talk of 'representations' that are 'true-to-life,' for example, is either to contradict oneself or to use the terms so loosely that one can hardly claim to be using a specialist terminology at all. For the modern student of literature, memorising 'standard' definitions of terms is no longer enough, for a familiar word may signify different things depending on the kind of critical practice it is employed in.

Literary Terms is designed to address precisely this problem, and the solution it offers is even more relevant today than when it was first published. It proposes that students become effective users of critical terminology not by learning lists of words but by understanding the goals and practices associated with particular ways of reading. That means introducing technical terms in a functional context, so that the words become tools for doing things with texts. My hope in writing the first edition of the book was not primarily to teach a set of terms but to help students read and think about texts with greater confidence, skill and enjoyment. I hope this new edition will offer the same assistance to its readers.

Brian Moon, September 2002

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Capitals refer to entry headings. Terms in lower case are treated under the relevant main entry.

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