
Studying Literature

Theory and Practice for Senior Students

Brian Moon

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Preface

In recent decades the study of literature as an academic subject has undergone significant changes. New theories including structuralism, reader-response theory, and deconstruction have challenged traditional approaches to literary criticism. These new methods have expanded the focus from 'writers and their works' to encompass the study of readers and their practices, and the social contexts in which writers and readers act.

Studying Literature offers senior students an introduction to literary studies that acknowledges these new perspectives. Drawing on contemporary theories and approaches, the book helps students investigate the values, assumptions and practices that underlie literary activities. It introduces important concepts such as: the social contexts of literary practice; dominant and resistant readings of literature; 'gaps and silences' in texts; and issues of race, class and gender.

The book's opening chapter explores the very concept of literature by testing traditional views and the unstated assumptions that students may bring to literary studies. It shows that the literary qualities once regarded as properties of the text may be in part the product of social practices previously regarded as lying 'outside' the text – practices such as reading, teaching and publishing.

The second chapter applies this new concept, exploring ways of reading literary texts as 'cultural artifacts' rather than "personal expressions". It introduces the concept of reading practices: those rules or procedures by which readers make meaning with text. The chapter then goes on to consider where these practices come from, and to distinguish between dominant and resistant practices and their effects.

The final chapter examines in detail one aspect of contemporary critical practice: the issue of gender. Focussing on both feminism and masculinities, this section of the book gives students a taste of how the new approaches to literature work in practice, while at the same time pointing out relationships between literary studies and issues of social justice.

With this compact introduction, it is hoped that students and teachers can embark on a more purposeful and rewarding study of literary texts and the institutions that surround them.

Brian Moon

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What is 'literature'?

- What makes a piece of writing 'literature'?
- Who decides what is literary and what isn't?
- What can be learnt from studying literature?
- Is literary study about particular kinds of books or particular kinds of activities?

Visitors

A Night of Frost and a Morning of Mist

Read the short story, 'Visitors', which begins on the next page, and 'A Night of Frost and a Morning of Mist', which follows it. Then consider the questions below, which invite you to consider your reactions to the stories and whether you would classify them as 'literature' or not.

After reading

On your own

Think about your reactions to the stories you have just read and then write answers to these questions:

- Would you classify the stories as 'literature'?
- If so, what reasons would you give?
- If not, why not? What are they, if they aren't literature?

Discuss your answers with a partner, or in small groups, and see if you can arrive at some agreement.

Asking questions

Now consider the following more general questions about what the term 'literature' might mean to you.

In pairs

Working in pairs, write down as many descriptions and characteristics of literature as you can. You might consider the following as starting points.

- What literature is. (What kinds of writing? Which authors?)
- How works of literature differ from other kinds of writing.
- The role of literature in society. (What is it 'for'?)
- Why literature is studied.
- The groups of people most interested in literature.

As a class

After five minutes, contribute your ideas to a blackboard list for discussion.

You will need to refer to this material later, so save your notes.

- How much agreement or disagreement is there in your class about what literature is and why it is studied? What reasons can you suggest for this?

Towards a definition

When we set out to clarify our understanding of a difficult concept we often use one or more of the following techniques:

- collecting examples;
- identifying features which all of the examples share;
- identifying the function or value which the concept has in society.

Here is an example of how a simple concept can be defined:

Concept: Insects		
Examples	Features	Function or value
Fly Ant Termite Ladybug	Three body segments Three pairs of legs An external skeleton Spiracles for breathing	Pollinate flowers Consume wastes Feed small animals Provide useful chemicals

Of course, this approach assumes that we already have some idea of what we are looking for. (How else would we recognise the examples in the first place?) Its main purpose is to clarify ideas and to help us make predictions and judgements. Armed with this information, for example, we could confidently pass judgement about creatures we had never seen before.

In pairs

Try using this approach to define 'literature'. In each column there is a suggested starting point. Complete the table as fully as you can.

Concept: Literature		
Examples	Features	Function or value
Plays (e.g. Hamlet)	Careful use of language	Entertains

When you have completed your table, join with another pair to form a group of four. Compare the items you have listed, then discuss the following questions.

- How similar are your tables? Do they seem to offer the same definition of 'literature'?
- Which column was the most difficult to complete? Why was this? Which was the easiest? Why?
- Which column seems to best explain what is commonly meant by 'literature'?

Report back to the class on your findings.

Testing the definition

Once we have defined a concept, we can test our definition by using it to classify new items. For example, we can argue that a spider is not an insect because it has eight legs, not six, and we can demonstrate that a wasp is an insect because it has all of the features we expect.

In groups

Working in groups of four, use your definitions to decide whether the following pieces of writing are 'literary' or 'non-literary'. For each item:

- state whether it would be regarded as literary or non-literary by schools and universities in your country;
- state whether it is literary or non-literary according to your definition;
- comment on how confident you are in your classification.

Samples	School classification	Your classification	Comment
Shakespeare's plays			
A newspaper			
A Mills & Boon romance			
The Bible			
The Koran			
A Jackie Collins novel			
A Jane Austen novel			
Poems by Roger McGough			
Greeting card poems			
A story by a student			
A Monty Python script			
A superman comic			
A James Bond novel			

Discuss these points in your group:

- What were the criteria you relied on most in making your decisions?
- Which items were the most difficult to classify? Why?
- Which items were the easiest to classify? Why?
- How much disagreement or agreement is there between the school classification and yours? What reasons might there be for this?

What are the features of a literary work?

Attempts to define literature by listing the features shared by literary works often lead to contradictions. In compiling a list of features we have to bear two things in mind:

- literary works are of many different types;
- many of the features we associate with literary works can be found in other types of writing as well.

Following is a list of features which are sometimes offered as definitions of literature. How many of them appear on your lists?

Features of a literary work

Contains finely crafted language
Offers serious themes for consideration
Is imaginative and creative
Uses special techniques of writing
Offers a perceptive view of the world
Educates as it entertains
Is generally agreed to have serious merit
Doesn't have a simple, practical function

One problem with trying to define a concept by listing features is that the terms used are always subject to interpretation. Even in the case of the insect, the meaning of terms such as 'leg' and 'body segment' is open to debate. The words suggest a clear-cut set of distinctions that we don't really find in the 'real world'.

This is even more obvious in the case of literature. What is 'finely crafted language'? Who decides what is 'serious' or 'imaginative'?

The features listed above are not 'objective' features; nor are they universally accepted. They are defined differently in different places and at different times by different groups of people.

In groups

Here are descriptions of three pieces of writing which are clearly not works of literature in the traditional sense.

1. An information leaflet about links between diet and heart disease. It avoids technical language and presents information in an entertaining way. The aim of the leaflet is to contribute to public awareness about heart disease and to suggest life-style changes.

2. A popular science book in which a learned physicist gives scientific explanations for the creation of the world and the meaning of human life. To avoid complex language the scientist relies upon original and clever comparisons to clarify his argument. Humour is used to maintain interest.

3. A book of graffiti collected from all over the world. The material is presented with a minimum of commentary. The examples range from trivial to profound, with comments on social issues often presented in amusing or bawdy language. The editor states that graffiti is an important means of public expression.

For each text, record a tick next to the features which might be found in the writing. These are to be group decisions, so discuss each point.

Features	Texts		
	1	2	3
Contains finely crafted language			
Offers serious themes for consideration			
Is imaginative and creative			
Uses special techniques of writing			
Offers a perceptive view of the world			
Educates as it entertains			
Is generally agreed to have serious merit			
Doesn't have a simple, practical function			

- What do your decisions suggest about the usefulness of this list of literary features?
- Can you produce a list of features which all works of literature share and which will not be found in any other type of writing?

Problems of definition

The problems faced in defining literature demonstrate that the concept is not as straightforward as our language appears to suggest. The harder we try to pin down exactly what literature is, the more contradictions and confusions we encounter.

Modern theories of literature suggest that 'literature', like many other concepts, doesn't really exist at all as a fixed object or category. Rather, what we refer to when we speak of literature has a lot to do with beliefs about what is good writing and what is not.

It is a bit like the concept of weeds. Weeds are not really a type of plant; weeds and plants can't be distinguished from each other on the basis of their features. The term, weeds, simply is used to refer to plants which are not valued in any way - and this varies over time, and from place to place.

Beliefs and values

It is difficult to build a definition of literature based on a list of features. More useful is a view that sees literature in terms of values and beliefs, as a concept which both springs from and gives rise to certain ways of looking at the world.

On your own

Think about a piece of writing which you value: one which has influenced you, or has been important to you in some way. This might be a fairytale or children's book; a novel, poem or story; a non-fiction work or an autobiography. Make notes about your choice in the following form.

Title and author	
Description	(What kind of writing is it? What does it contain?)
Value	(Why is the writing important to you? Which features are responsible for its importance to you? Do you think you will always value it so highly? Why or why not?)

Bring the writing to class to pass around after your discussion, if you can.

In groups

Form groups of six and take turns reporting to the group. Using your notes as a guide, explain why the piece of writing is valuable to you.

To begin your discussion, these questions might be asked of each presenter.

- How old were you when you first came across the writing?
- Have your feelings about the writing changed over time?
- Do you know of other people with similar tastes?

As a class

Compile a blackboard list of the different types of writing people have talked about. Make a separate list of the reasons people value these pieces of writing. Talk about the following questions.

- How big a range of works is represented?
- Are there types of writing which do not appear? Why might this be?
- How many of the choices would be classed as 'literary'? By whom?

On your own

Write down your thoughts on these points.

- What might this activity suggest about the influence of writing on people?
- What could it suggest about people's choices? (How much do they differ?)
- What values or beliefs might they support?
- What might this suggest about the definition of 'literature' which dominates in schools and universities? Does it take account of the full range of people's values?

Whose values?

If decisions about what is and isn't literature are always value judgements, we are entitled to ask whose values are being supported. Modern theories of literature argue that a society's definitions of literature are shaped by the views of specific groups of people. Since 'English Studies' departments first developed in the Arts faculties of British universities, it might be expected that traditional ideas about literature reflect the views of the white, upper-middle class males who taught at these universities.

Here is a list of people who could be involved in producing, distributing, teaching and reading the many types of writing created by a particular culture. On your own, rank these people according to how much influence you think they have in deciding what counts as 'serious literature'. Use 1 to indicate the most influence and 8 the least. Write a brief explanation alongside each one. Then, in groups, compare and discuss your rankings.

People	Influence (1-8)	Comment
Writers Schoolteachers Publishers The general public 'Educated' readers University lecturers Critics Booksellers		

The question of taste

In the 1920's a young lecturer in English at Cambridge University, I.A. Richards, set out to study the 'literary judgement' of his first-year students. He presented the students with a range of poems, minus their titles and authors' names. Richards wondered whether his students could demonstrate good judgement without these vital 'clues'.

He published the results in a book titled, *Practical Criticism*. Many students criticised the work of famous literary figures and praised the writing of unknown authors. Richards concluded that many of his students had poorly developed tastes. He assumed that the works of great authors had qualities which clearly distinguished them from other writing, and that his students needed to have their reading skills refined so they could see these qualities.

On your own

Following is a selection of poems without titles or authors' names. Read and make notes about each in response to these questions.

- What is the subject matter of the poem?
- What poetic 'techniques' can you find? (Consider figurative language, unusual word order, metaphor and simile and so on.)
- Which techniques seem most effective to you?
- What appears to be the theme, or general meaning, of the poem?
- What is your personal response to the poem? What factors shaped your response?