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Literary Analysis

the basics

ROUTLEDGE

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INTRODUCTION: THINKING ABOUT LITERATURE

WHAT IS LITERATURE?

From ancient myths and oral stories to today's fan fiction and self-publishing boom, literature has served a variety of functions in society. Literature conveys sacred knowledge, teaches moral and social lessons, announces new ideas, records revolutions, tests the limits of cultural values, and shows us our best and worst selves. As the set of stories we tell of ourselves through **narrative, performance, lyrical** reflection, and many other forms, literature encapsulates human experience and records the messy, painful, triumphant, and sublime realities of the passage of humans through our world. While other fields of study attempt to understand humans by measuring and compiling facts about our psychological responses, economic behaviours, sociological institutions, and anthropological patterns, those fields smooth out the edges of our rough and often irrational behaviours by highlighting general tendencies or statistical probabilities. Literature offers us the human life in total – not reduced – with its inconsistent logic, morality, and identity on full display.

For instance, when William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was first performed in 1606, three years after Queen Elizabeth I's death, the play provided an imaginative forum from which to consider and debate questions of power, gender, ambition, political machination, and the nation itself.

Three centuries later, when the play was staged in 1936 with an African American cast, *Macbeth* became an emblem of African American artistic equality and a revolutionary statement about shifts in racial, artistic, and political power in the USA. A 1970 Zulu-language adaptation of the play had an even more radical effect for South Africans. Playwright Welcome Msomi rewrote *Macbeth* as *uMabatha*, the story of Shaka Zulu, a nineteenth-century Zulu ruler. This translation and revision of Shakespeare's text brought new attention to the achievements, intrigue, ambition, and ultimate tragedy of this period of South Africa's history.

The gender issues at the heart of the original play have also resurfaced again and again. In particular, the 1955 Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier stage performance at Stratford-upon-Avon – Shakespeare's home – spotlighted the role of Lady Macbeth. Olivier's planned film adaptation would have further redefined Lady Macbeth's femininity and ambition by adding a miscarriage to the plot (Barnes 2012).

Finally, imperialism, modernization, and culture came to the fore in the presentations of *Macbeth* embedded in the 1965 Merchant Ivory film, *Shakespeare Wallah*. The film, set in India, depicts the lives of the actors in a travelling Shakespeare company whose work is being replaced by a home-grown Bollywood film industry. The film questions the role of the English literary tradition in an independent India, but, like the play it quotes, offers no easy answers.

So what keeps readers, writers, and audiences coming back to this play in so many different forms and so many different times? Is it that we, like Macbeth, want to know the point of power and ambition in our brief lives? Do we want to know if it is true that 'Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more' (Shakespeare 2008, act 5, scene 5, lines 24–6)? Or are we more interested in identifying the 'Something wicked' that 'this way comes' (Shakespeare 2008, act 4, scene 1, line 45)?

Both the original play, *Macbeth*, and later adaptations call upon readers and audiences to examine the meaning of human experience by using rich language to inspire thoughts and feelings in each of us. Indeed, literary **critics** for centuries have highlighted the personal effects of reading literature. Nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold viewed the study of literature as a path to attaining humanity's best quality, culture, which he described in

Culture and Anarchy (1869) as our spiritual quest for ‘sweetness and light’ through beauty, knowledge, and the rational pursuit of truth. More recently, Harold Bloom (2001, p. 22) called reading ‘selfish rather than social’, as readers enjoy the beautiful words that inspire their interests and their sense of self. Critic Rita Felski (2008) claims that we use literature to recognize ourselves in the words of others, to gain knowledge, to experience shock, and to feel a sense of enchantment with new worlds and new ways of seeing our own – all uses attuned to the reactions brewing in the individual reader’s mind.

Without a doubt, much of the magic of literature lies in this capacity to transform a single life. But not all.

As a social medium and a technology for sharing words, images, and ideas, literature ignites another kind of magic. Literature offers us an immersive record of our past and emerging collective experience. Shared readings establish points of contact that cross national, historical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.

Before written language, the earliest oral literature – creation stories and epics of early tribes and civilizations – was recited and performed in memorable language with rhythmic beats to preserve and circulate the core knowledge and identities of groups of people. To borrow Felski’s terms, the wave of enchantment of these early spoken texts carried essential knowledge, recognition, belonging, and even shock at actions that could threaten the survival of the community as a whole. Today, with over seven billion people living in approximately 200 nations around the globe, such strictly unifying messages are neither possible nor desirable, yet the connections forged through literature continue to serve vital, collective functions in our diverse and complex societies.

The examples above define what literature *does*, not what it *is*. The paragraphs that follow map out a few approaches to facing a definition of literature head-on.

Earlier I stated that literature is a social medium and a technology for sharing words, images, and ideas. This definition is very broad, and under it, we might call Web sites or mobile apps like Facebook or Instagram examples of literature. Clearly, we need to refine.

Literature is a set of **texts** (a general term for objects made of words, no matter what their format) whose purpose includes, but extends beyond, communication, in which the language itself is as

much a part of the end product as is the content. Those texts include everything from lyric poetry to feature films and television series that use language not only in the typed screenplays but also in the spoken performances of script and body language and in the relationship between the words and screen images. Box 1.1 includes a small sampling of literary technologies from our past and present.

BOX 1.1 LITERARY TECHNOLOGIES OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

oral storytelling	comedy	tragedy
drama	letters	illuminated
sermons	histories	manuscripts
biographies	epic poetry	travel writing
lyric poetry	oratory	<i>haiku</i>
Vedas	series in magazines	satires
short stories	slave narratives	sketches
novels	fan fiction	memoirs
pulp fiction	radio plays	graphic novels
film	rap	television series
opera	flash fiction	hypertext poetry
diy film	sacred hymns/ prayers	slam poetry

Again, it is easy to make the definition of literature overwhelmingly broad; to paraphrase Raymond Williams (1976), the trouble comes when we attempt to exclude individual texts or types of texts from the category of literature.

Initially, such exclusions were not part of the definition at all. In communities with a low level of **literacy** and limited supplies of expensive writing materials, literature meant merely ‘that which was written’, including everything from philosophical reflections and histories to poetry or plays. By the 1700s in Europe, that definition began to narrow to only ‘well-written’ or ‘**literary**’ texts of various sorts, adding elements of style, taste, class status, and social value to the definition – values that continue to foster debate today.

For Western literature, the Romanticists of the early nineteenth century added an emphasis on creativity and imagination, further narrowing the field at precisely the time that literacy rates and inexpensive print media were gaining ground. As Terry Eagleton (2008, p. 17) explains in ‘The Rise of English’, poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley sought to make literature ‘a mysterious organic unity’ that could transcend the practical and material realities of daily life through inspiration and genius. This distinction can be described as the difference between literature with a lowercase *l* – the stuff of celebrity biographies, romance novels, and detective fiction available for purchase alongside tabloids in a grocery store – and Literature with an uppercase *L*, the elite product of artists of language, the work of literary geniuses who appeal to advanced readers with ‘higher’ concerns.

Today, literature remains a contested term. We can agree with Eagleton (2008, p. 9) that literature is ‘a highly valued kind of writing’, but we rarely agree on which values to apply. Those who espouse definitions of *Literature*, often exclude the more populist and democratic media used to produce certain texts – such as television, film, popular fiction, graphic novels, popular music lyrics, video game narratives, and the like. Those who advocate definitions of *literature* often embrace newer literary forms, but trip over examples at the fringes or extremes.

Does the 2014 film sequel *Sharknado 2: The Second One* – a disaster movie about dangerous, salt-water cyclones filled with live and hungry sharks – fit the definition of literature? In some ways, I truly hope not. Yet, the vitality of literature as a field stems from our willingness to adapt and respond to the changing institutions for producing, publishing, distributing, accessing, and connecting through language. As an object of analysis, *Sharknado 2* or films like it could play a valuable role in our ongoing attempt to refine our understanding of what literature is and what purpose it serves for our world in our time and in generations to come.

Ultimately, excluding or including particular texts from the definition of literature is not my aim in this book. I ask only that we recognize that approaching any text as literature means attending to it as a product made of language that responds to and represents some slice of our world in ways that are not readily apparent in a single, surface-level reading. Regardless of the definition we

individually adopt – whether it be *literature* or *Literature* of literary analysis outlined in this book are applicable to whatever texts we read.

ANALYSIS, CLASSICS, AND THE LITERARY CANON

The experience of literature is both emotional and intellectual, both felt and known. In private, literature can and perhaps should be purely subjective. We feel the joy and anguish of the characters whose stories we read. The descriptions of faraway places or lyrical reflections on the human condition all engage our senses and open our hearts and minds to new possibilities that both connect to and transcend our daily lives. Our favourite books are as entwined in our personal memories and identities as our favourite songs.

But in public discussions and formal literary study, we require ways to bridge individual, emotional responses and to go beyond subjectivity to uncover new insights about the meanings of various texts. We need collective rules and assumptions and a shared vocabulary to describe literary effects. In short, we need tools to break large texts into their component parts in order to analyse the way literature is written, why it is written that way, and what it means – far beyond simply a history of the words or an outline of the author's conscious attempts to craft the text. We need a systematic practice like literary analysis to allow us to understand how literature is written, why it is written that way, and what effects these details have on meaning as a whole.

It may be somewhat surprising, then, to consider that the academic tradition of literary analysis in English is not even 200 years old.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the first scholars to use the methods that would become the foundation of literary analysis were theologians, and their texts were the Hebrew and Greek scriptures of the Tanakh or Bible. Practising *hermeneutics*, the theory of finding meaning through interpretation, these clerics produced *exegesis*, the critical explanation of the meaning of a text. St. Augustine's multi-volume *Tractates on the Gospel of John* (c. 406–420), for example, offers a line-by-line exegesis of the entire gospel, beginning with several pages exploring how the Word both was 'with God' and 'was God' (John 1:1). Theologians like St. Augustine based their explanations of sacred literature on careful analysis of the following:

- historical information about the author and the events in the period being depicted;
- the origins, translations, and idiomatic or figurative meanings of the particular words in the passage;
- comparisons with other passages about the same content or within the same part of the text;
- and comparisons among different ancient manuscripts of the same text.

Many of these methodologies still inform the practice of literary analysis today.

For centuries, though, the only texts considered worthy of analysis were sacred writings. Even among these writings, only the **canonical** literature (also called the **canon**), the set of sacred books and theological documents deemed authentic and officially approved by the religious leadership, were viewed as acceptable subjects of exegesis and analysis. It is from this model of the religious canon that the academic institution of the literary canon evolved.

When we discuss the **literary canon**, we refer to a set of literary texts widely recognized for their importance, influence, brilliance, and exemplary qualities – criteria that are notoriously subjective and value-laden. Unlike the biblical canon, however, there is no definitive list and no single authority to generate and regulate such a list. We find these lists informally in the major anthologies of literature, in the syllabi of university courses, in the required readings for qualifying examinations and certification tests, in the curriculum guides for secondary schools, in publications of literary **criticism**, and in the general icons of literary history represented in monuments, museums, films, and public culture. As the record of both public and expert interest, the literary canon expands and contracts as the definition of literature and our collective sense of its value shifts over time.

To illustrate: in England, after scholars began to embrace secular literature as part of academic study, they turned their attention to classical literature in Latin and Greek, performing literary exegesis of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8th century BCE) or Virgil's *Aeneid* (c. 19 BCE) in much the same way (and in many of the same languages) that biblical exegesis had been performed. Throughout most of the Renaissance, academic authorities saw no need to analyze texts written in English, whose meaning was viewed as accessible without rigorous study.

By the eighteenth century, the authors themselves were their way to creating a canon of English literature. Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779–1781) is the most famous example of such an effort to establish at least a partial canon for readers, if not for universities. In fact, Gerald Graff (2007) points out that by the early nineteenth century, communities of literary clubs, debating societies, and magazine readers and contributors actively engaged the field of English literature as part of their everyday social activities throughout many English-speaking nations. Famous public lectures – such as the 1806 and 1810 lectures by Coleridge on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – sketched the shape of the canon before large audiences. In turn, Graff notes, academic scholars generally felt the field of English literature (much like popular television today) belonged to the public, not to university experts.

Within educational institutions, the study of classical Greek and Latin literature focused increasingly on grammar and the field of *philology*, the study of the historical development of language and its evolving structures and meanings as expressed in literature. These practices later became the nineteenth-century model for English studies which focused mostly on Old and Middle English and the development of the language or on historical criticism about the authors' lives and accomplishments. Based on these academic interests, the canon inside the university tilted more in favour of older texts – *Beowulf*, *The Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – than on the works of the writers of the time.

Both inside and outside the university, the field of English and world literatures has shifted considerably. If we fast forward to the late twentieth century, we find the literary canon a site of intense scholarly dispute. Certainly, some of the same writers who drew the attention of earlier critics and scholars remained in the canon of the 1980s and 1990s: Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton, to name just a few. The works of these authors have often been described as English **classics**, texts that can be read as 'masterpieces' of literary craft; texts that address ideas of fundamental importance with such eloquence that they transcend place and time; in short, 'Great Literature'. Such terms, like the notion of the canon itself, rely on value judgments designed to erect borders around the best and separate it from the rest. In reaction, the trend of the twenty-first century has been to 'open' the canon, break down borders, and



knowledge begins with **the basics**

Literary Analysis: The Basics is an insightful introduction to analysing a wide range of literary forms. Providing a clear outline of the methodologies employed in twenty-first-century literary analysis, it introduces readers to the genres, canons, terms, issues, critical approaches, and contexts that affect the analysis of any text. It addresses such questions as:

- **What counts as literature?**
- **Is analysis a dissection?**
- **How do gender, race, class, and culture affect the meaning of a text?**
- **Why is the social and historical context of a text important?**
- **Can digital media be analysed in the same way as a poem?**

With examples ranging from ancient myths to young adult fiction, a glossary of key terms, and suggestions for further reading, *Literary Analysis: The Basics* is essential reading for anyone wishing to improve their analytical reading skills.

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