

LITERARY ANALYSIS

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.

Celena Kusch is Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of South Carolina Upstate, USA.

THE BASICS

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THE BASICS

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kusch, Celena. Title: Literary analysis: the basics/Celena Kusch.

Description: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015034080 | ISBN 9780415747097 (hardback: alk. paper) |

ISBN 9780415747103 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315688374 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Literature—Philosophy. | Literary form. | Literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc.

Classification: LCC PN45 .K834 2016 | DDC 801—dc23LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015034080>

ISBN: 978-0-415-74709-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-74710-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-68837-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Book Now Ltd, London

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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 Harlem 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 Msimi 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 might 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* – the tools 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 well on 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

question the power structures that promote some authors or some groups of authors over others.

Among Johnson's 52 English poets in his *Lives*, for example, only five are Welsh, Scottish, or Anglo-Irish. None is a woman. None comes from British colonies. Nearly all attended one of a handful of exclusive schools. Lists like Johnson's have led many to call the English literary canon the tradition of great white men. When Virginia Woolf (1981) levelled her criticism of the canon in *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, she pointed to several factors that had limited the role of women in literature:

- women were excluded from public places, such as schools, libraries, and theatres, in which they could be exposed to literary communities;
- cultural expectations of femininity established silence and modesty as women's greatest achievements;
- property laws prevented women from gaining financial independence and affording themselves the luxury of time and space in which to write uninterrupted; and
- male-dominated institutions did not recognize the value of women's perspectives and voices and therefore did not publish, compensate, promote, or reward women's literature.

Woolf offers as an example, the fictionalized figure of Shakespeare's sister, born with as much raw talent and intellect as her famous brother, but destined to meet a tragic and silent end because she could not go to school, could not write except in secret, and could not gain access to the theatre except as the mistress of a stage manager. What I find most interesting about Woolf's argument and example is that they are systemic, not personal. For Woolf, no single authority chose male writers over female, wealthy over poor, privileged over marginalized. Yet the set of social and political institutions that make the fields of literature and literary study possible reproduced power inequalities (based on gender, race, nationality, religion, class, sexuality, etc.) within the literary canon as well.

Echoing Woolf's institutional criticisms, scholars of the late twentieth century ultimately concluded that the canon is not an objective classification system, but that our views of 'greatness', 'importance', and 'universalism' have always been influenced by society's power structures.

Individual texts make their way into the canon because they offer representative examples of the dominant **movements**, **genres**, experiments and innovations, and/or intellectual trends at the time, but that ‘dominance’ depends upon society’s values. As a result, today scholars and critics engage in spirited debates about the best way to reshape the literary canon to reflect those texts of greatest literary value – the books that everyone must read – without falling into the traps of discrimination or marginalization that have so sharply limited our literary history. Books like John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), Leslie Fiedler and Houston Baker’s *English Literature: Opening up the Canon* (1981), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Women Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988, 1994) all offer possible corrections and additions to the short list of classics that make up the canon. They call into question the criteria used to divide between ‘dominant’ and ‘minor’ literary texts and bring additional **movements** and **genres**, to the fore.

The result of these debates is that major anthologies of English or American literature now include female, multicultural, and transnational writers in nearly all **literary periods**: we read Margery Kempe beside Chaucer, Olaudah Equiano on the heels of Aphra Behn, and a parade of postcolonial and multicultural Nobel Laureates – Derek Walcott, Toni Morrison, J. M. Coetzee, Rabindranath Tagore, V. S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer – in studies of twentieth-century literature in English. Likewise, the world literature anthologies have grown increasingly global, spanning East, West, North, and South in the authors, movements, and selected texts.

After this history of controversy, expansion, and change, we might ask why bother with a literary canon at all? And what effect does the canon have upon the process of literary analysis?

The answer is threefold. Practically speaking, without it, students could not reasonably study for exams and instructors would teach endless courses; scholars could not count on a shared familiarity with any of the texts in their articles and books; and editors and publishers would be forced into capricious or arbitrary decisions about anthology contents, press catalogues, and even the list of texts kept in print. The canon places manageable limits upon the enormous amount of content that could be included in a study of literature and creates a common foundation from which to build

expertise within the literary field. The canon makes our academic institutions run more smoothly.

The canon also keeps in circulation texts that have historically influenced and shaped the work of writers in later literary movements and times. It reminds us that the literature we read and love was produced by writers who also read and loved earlier literature. Can we read Walcott's *Omeros* without knowing Homer? Certainly. But the poem is much more interesting if we have *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* on our bookshelves too. Can we read Rita Dove's *Mother Love* without Ovid, Petrarch, and Shakespeare? Of course. But the earth will move beneath our feet far more if we recognize the whispers of the canon within Dove's poems.

Finally, knowing what is or is not in the canon makes us more aware of the potential political implications of our own analyses. As Frank Kermode (1989, p. 115) states in 'Canon and Period', 'canons are complicit with power', and they function by 'affirming that some works are more valuable than others, more worthy of minute attention'. When we direct our attention to more marginal texts, no matter what else we might be saying, we are also making an argument that our collective sense of literary value should change. Predominantly defined by academic interests, the contemporary canon is often at odds with public reading practices and literary discussions beyond the university walls. Knowledge of the canon provides readers with a touchstone of accepted interpretations and evaluations of different categories of literature; it offers an entry point into critical conversations about the literature that matters to us – whether it be canonical or not.

Put another way, we cannot change the canon unless we know the canon and the various institutional functions it serves and that support it. Even many texts which today hold a central place as 'classics' within the canon had been disregarded or viewed as too popular or marginal by previous generations. Changes brought about by later writers, critics, publishers, and scholars can all contribute to a shift in institutional status and either bury significant literature of the past or make previously noncanonical texts emerge as exemplary of their literary categories.

Poet, novelist, and playwright John Masefield, for instance, served as the UK's Poet Laureate from 1930–1967. He was a member of W. B. Yeats's circle of writers and friends, but his pre-First World War

aesthetic has not given him enduring influence in the literary canon. Masfield wrote sonnets and ballads, social novels, novels of sea travel, religious plays and children's literature – both content and forms that fit better with our concepts of the nineteenth century than the early twentieth. Today he is best known for his children's books, and the Modern Language Association's bibliography of scholarly articles and books lists only five new texts about Masfield in this century. Certainly, Masfield impressed the powerful literary institutions of an earlier time, but he is not a canonical British author today due to changes in society's values and interests.

In contrast, the writing of modernist poet and novelist H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) played a significant role in early twentieth-century literary experimentation. She contributed to important magazines as both editor and critic, published influential poetry in all the right places, was reviewed by all the right people, but academic institutions did not continue to teach her, and many of her books fell out of print. Several factors have since combined to move her onto more required reading lists: poet Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book* (2011), published piecemeal in magazines from the 1960s to 1980s, called attention to her writing among new generations of poets; feminist critics saw her as a natural choice for a modernist woman writer to balance out the male-dominated history of the movement; and Norman Holmes Pearson, a Yale University professor, carefully collected and catalogued H.D.'s literary and personal papers in ways that made her manuscripts easier to publish and to study in depth. Increasingly, H.D. has become a canonical modernist writer.

An even more well-known example explains the pervasive presence of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in virtually every secondary school in the USA. Originally one of Fitzgerald's less successful novels, *Gatsby* did not even sell out its first printing in 1925. The novel received relatively little attention until after Fitzgerald's death when it was published in 1941 as part of a posthumous volume along with Fitzgerald's final, unfinished novel. In the intervening years, the Great Depression and beginning of World War II made the story of the former World War I army officer far more relevant and its portrayal of the 1920s fodder for economic nostalgia. When *Gatsby* was later selected by the US Armed Service Editions to be sent in paperback format to soldiers around the world, its canonical status was secured.

Part of the strength of the canon, then, lies in its ability to remain fluid, to accommodate new values, new readers, new views. Rather than seeking to ‘know’ the entire canon at any given time as though it were a fixed and finite set of texts, readers of literature would do better to know the resources that map the shape of the canon. Use the canon to understand the major divisions for categorizing literature – national and regional literatures, major genres, major literary periods – then become familiar with the exemplary texts of each of those categories, while remaining open to change.

READERS, AUTHORS, AND MEANINGS

Literary analysis today recognizes not only that the definition of literature is not objectively fixed but also that the medium of literature – language – does not open a transparent window between author’s meanings and readers’ minds. Because language functions as a sign system with words acting only as symbols for abstract or concrete objects, meanings can change and multiply in both the surface information being communicated and in the varied ways in which those details are represented (Saussure 1983; Derrida 1982).

Indeed, the assumption that literature is a form of **representation** has guided our understanding of the field for thousands of years. To represent means to portray something or someone; to serve as the substitute or symbol for that object; to signify a concept, place, item, or person through a medium – like words, paint, film, or sculpted marble; and also to present again (*re-present*) an absent or past event or incident. All of these definitions emphasize the gap between the ‘real’ object of interest, which is now silent, elsewhere, inert, or in the past, and the *representation* of it, the echo, copy, or record of the thing we do not have. When we relate the events of a sports match to a friend who was not there, for instance, we use words to convey the excitement and suspense of a good game. In shifting from the lived experience to its representation in language, however, we lose the possibility of simultaneous sensory stimuli – smelling beer and soda, hearing a shout, feeling the sun, and seeing a play all at the same time. In the previous sentence, I listed the different experiences in quick succession, but the representation simply cannot match the speed of the reality.

Or consider the phenomenon of Madame Tussauds wax museums which have multiplied from the original London site established in 1835 to nearly two dozen locations worldwide. Viewers of these wax representations of famous historical figures and celebrities marvel at the craft necessary to create a sense of verisimilitude (the appearance of being real), but they also note the uncanniness, the unsettling feeling of something that is not quite right about the wax statues which are only *verisimilar*, not true or *veritable*.

In literature, where the places, people, events, and images represented may have no original, 'real' corollary in the world at all, the question of representation is even more complex. In *The Republic* (c. 360 BCE), Plato (1992) warned against the ability of literature to create false realities. Noting that literature is a form of *mimesis*, an imitation through representation, Plato worried that readers and audiences could be led morally astray by unvirtuous characters, narratives, and speeches. In contrast, Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 350 BCE) praised the distancing effects of literary representation and imitation. By imitating the nature of the world in what amounts to thought experiments, Aristotle (1997) argued, poets engage in the most instinctive human habits of learning and comprehending through mimicry, impersonation, and play. To use our sports example above, it may well be that revisiting and representing the scene in language, slowing it down, editing it, and savouring it bit-by-bit offer us opportunities for reflection that produce a different kind of pleasure and insight than the 'real', lived event.

Following Aristotle, literary critics today do not view the representative or mimetic characteristics of literature as a mode of deception or source of moral danger. They see literary representation as a major reason that what a text means is not merely the sum of the definitions of its composite words. Therefore, literary analysis is not a summary of plot events or a paraphrase of the dictionary or historical definitions of a poetic line. The meaning exceeds the words on the page and encompasses the larger issues and implicit, unstated connections beneath the surface.

In our daily interactions with language, we have all experienced the multiple meanings that language creates. Clearly, the path from thought to words to meaning can be long and winding. Whether or not we have consciously considered the slippery nature of language, we all know that when we wish to ask a friend a favour, we often

begin the conversation on a different, lighter, even flattering topic to make the friend more receptive to the request. We call a car accident a ‘fender bender’ to reduce anxiety when we tell our family members of the event. And we falter, grasp for language, and knit together strained phrases to express joy, grief, or surprise. We often love, hurt, and appreciate ‘more than words can say’. When we do write or speak, the order, tone, diction, juxtapositions, rhythm, speed, formality, and even fluidity or fragmentation of word patterns combine to create several meaning effects that extend far beyond – or even contradict – the surface definitions of the words we use.

How do we identify such meanings through analysis? When we attempt to analyse the meaning of a serious conversation, we take into account several factors:

- reasonable expectations for this particular type of communication, e.g. a job interview, a first date, etc.;
- the words themselves – both their connotations and denotations;
- contextual clues of body language, setting, culture, etc.;
- the previous history of statements made by that person; and
- similarities and differences between this conversation and past conversations with others.

Comparable factors inform our approach to literature. Our analytical strategies begin with studying the words and move outward in ever wider circles of context.

The chapters in this book map the set of contextual factors that experts use to analyse literature. Paralleling the interpretive acts we use in everyday life, literary analysis considers these factors in more specialized terms:

- We categorize the text by *genre* to help us understand the meaning through the common patterns and **conventions** for that particular type of literature (tragedy, comedy, coming-of-age novel, love sonnet, etc.) and its expected readers. (Chapter 2)
- We make careful or *close readings* of the words, identifying stylistic figures and literary forms that may carry additional, nonliteral meanings. (Chapter 2)
- We consider the *context* of other writings by the same author to identify recurrent meanings. (Chapter 3)

- We try to understand the *context* of references and meanings by exploring connections between the literature and major cultural and historical events at the time. (Chapter 3)
- We *compare* the text to other literary texts of the same period and of the past to see whether the meaning runs with or against the grain of other literature. (Chapters 3 and 4)
- We seek other expert opinions about the text by reading *criticism* that may send us on new paths of interpretation. (Chapter 5)
- We identify our underlying assumptions about the nature of literature, culture, and representation and consider alternative *theories* and assumptions that may open up new meanings in the literature we read. (Chapter 6)

It is worth noting here that when it comes to literary analysis, the *author's intentions* do not rank high on this list; the author's experiences and statements more often serve as context for rather than confirmation of meaning. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley (1946, p. 468) famously wrote in 'The Intentional Fallacy', 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art'. Their statement remains a central precept of literary analysis today – though not necessarily for the reasons they outlined.

For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the author's intended meaning is 'unavailable' (even if we ask a living author directly about the work) because the act of writing inevitably alters and revises those intentions. In essence, the author's only knowable intention in writing is to produce the best possible work.

Furthermore, even if authors could know and record their more specific intentions at each stage of composition, such lists would not make 'desirable' or valuable contributions to an analysis of the text because the literature produces effects that go beyond the author's intention. For example, Stephenie Meyer's (2008) stated explanation of the origins of *Twilight* begins with a dream and a desire to tell that story in no small part because she was so attracted to the vampire in the scene. Perhaps this explanation suffices for *Twilight* fans who are equally infatuated with the characters, but it does little to aid an analysis of the meaning of a decade-long social and cultural phenomena in print, film, and the Web. Similarly, when J. K. Rowling announced at Carnegie Hall in 2007 that Aldus Dumbledore of the

Harry Potter series was homosexual, her intentions did little to clarify or negate the many rich analyses and interpretations of his character and the series as a whole produced in the ten years prior. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, the text does what it does – whether it excels or fails to meet the author’s intended aims – and the author’s intentions are limiting, basic, and even irrelevant to an understanding of a text.

This mid-century criticism paved the way for later scholars to consider the role of an author as distinct from the human who writes. In ‘What is an Author?’ (1977), Michel Foucault pushed the writer even further from the text by replacing the living author with an ‘author-function’, constructed through publication practices and criticism to offer a sense of coherence, legitimacy, and authenticity (literally *authority*) to literature. Just like an actor is not a ‘star’ until after the blockbuster comes out, the author does not exist until readers recognize his or her works. Once the author or star’s name achieves that status, it continues to generate power and value in literary or cinematic markets. Publishers will jump at the chance to market a book with the names Salman Rushdie, Stephen King, Kazuo Ishiguro, Cormac McCarthy, or J. K. Rowling printed on the cover, just as film producers do not say no to Sir Ian McKellen, Johnny Depp, or Dame Judi Dench. Other, unknown writers and actors may be equally talented, but the power of well-known names also shapes their texts’ meanings (and drives up sales).

J. D. Salinger offers a clear example of the author-function. Jerome Salinger had a complex life as a writer, a soldier, a son, husband, father, and friend – both before and after he published *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), but once readers met Holden Caulfield, J. D. Salinger, the author-function of the novel, captivated and intrigued readers who thought they knew him and sought him out. Like Romanticists William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley who attributed literature solely to the individual genius and inspiration of a great writer, Salinger’s fans viewed him as the creator of a character and a world which spoke to the anxieties and disillusionment of generations of readers. Despite the actual Salinger’s efforts to resist fans’ interpretations of the novel, to pursue different projects and to escape public scrutiny by living in an isolated, rural town, fans and reporters continued to hunt for the embodiment of the public author-function of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and they continued

to be disappointed that their authorial fiction did not exist in the real world. For Foucault, the author is not the extraordinary, inspired person who imbues the text with a deliberate meaning. The author-function is society's concept of the person behind the proper name printed on the book; it is another fiction created only when the book is published.

Roland Barthes (1977) goes a step further in his critique of the author, paraphrasing Nietzsche to announce 'The Death of the Author'. For Barthes (1977, p. 143), it is a fallacy to read literature as 'the voice of a single person, the author confiding in us' when both language and ideas inevitably escape the author's control. Focusing on the linguistic materials of literature, Barthes (1977, p. 146) concludes, 'The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' and combined by authors much as hip hop artists make mixes and mashups from samples of musical tracks. Literary analysis, then, aims to 'disentangle' texts, not 'decipher' meanings embedded in code by their authors (Barthes 1977, p. 147).

Whether we wish to celebrate the 'death of the author' or attempt to emphasize a sense of the author's power and individual voice, when we perform literary analysis, we must recognize that meanings in literature emerge from a negotiation between readers' interpretations and the texts authors write.

Speaking as part of the Distinguished Writers Series of the Newhouse Center for the Humanities, Colum McCann (2011) admits that much of writing owes itself to a loss of control, noting that when you talk to great writers, 'they say I'm not so sure that I absolutely knew what I was doing, but it happened to me'. Separating the creative act of producing the text from the creation of meaning within it, McCann (2011) explains that readers' interpretations continue to develop both the written text and its author in valuable and essential ways:

I've seen writers get upset because somebody's taken one of their short stories and as far as they're concerned misinterpreted it. As far as I'm concerned, if somebody gets a meaning out of, say, one of my stories or one of my sentences that's a million miles removed from what I intended, I think all the better.... My little limited world becomes a bigger world because it becomes well-read. So nothing is finished until the reader gets her hands or his hands on it, and then they bring it to a new place. I become infinitely cleverer once people have read a book.

If we, like McCann, adhere to the principles of literary analysis today, we recognize that any intended meanings consciously or unconsciously placed into a text by the author at the time of composition are at best partial clues, at worst red herrings in our efforts to find meaning. The responsibility for making meaning, then, lies firmly with the readers who analyse the texts, not with the writers who often balk at answering questions or turn cagy or coy when asked directly what their works mean.

WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN? ANALYSIS AND EVIDENCE

I have written that responsibility for making meaning lies with the readers, but it is important to explain the terms of such a responsibility. Literary analysis is also a public form of meaning-making, designed to contribute to a community of knowledge about literature as a whole and about particular literary texts. The nature of literary representation and language admits multiple possible interpretations, but it does not make literature a textual Rorschach test; the printed, performed, or spoken word cannot be reduced to a metaphorical ink blot open to the infinite free associations of our individual psyches. Thus, as readers, we are empowered to claim the meanings uncovered by our acts of analysis, but we are bound by rules of evidence to ensure the validity of our interpretations.

To return to the analogy of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, literary analysis also has a theory of interpretation: even in readings that draw from context, criticism, and **literary theory**, meanings and interpretations must also be supported by evidence from the text. Another term from religious scholarship may explain this distinction. Theologians are repeatedly warned against what is called *eisegesis*, exegesis's opposite, in which the reader begins with a set of assumptions and values then finds evidence of them ('reads into') in the text being studied. With sacred texts where ultimate spiritual authority lies within the printed page, all critical explanation must begin with the words; eisegesis can, therefore, amount to blasphemy.

The penalties for eisegesis or reading into *literary* texts during analysis are much less extreme, but the principle still holds. Any reading that begins with readers' own experiences and views of the world in general then seeks confirmation of these in the text

is invalid as literary analysis. For example, a faulty literary analysis might summarize the story of a literary character – Jay Gatsby's drive towards class mobility or Daisy's inconstant commitment to the two men she claims to 'love' – then note how 'true' that story is because the same things happen today. They do, but it is not literary analysis to say so.

A better analogy for the process of literary analysis is detective work. In detective fiction or real-world casework, the detective is given a text – the scene of a crime, the notice of a missing person. The initial scene is merely the surface of a much fuller story whose meaning is not yet understood. The detective then breaks the scene apart, carefully examining each detail and seeking more contextual information in order to uncover the meanings – motivations, consequences, even conclusions about human behaviour or the nature of justice – within the case.

Detectives who bring their own set of assumptions to the case can see only what their prejudgements allow them to notice; they may waste a great deal of time pursuing false leads because they are sure that the husband always murders the wife, the estranged parent always kidnaps the child, the scholarship kid always steals from the school, and the butler always does it. Detectives who reason from the available evidence, however, can follow a path towards meaning that will account for everything within the scene. This is the method of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* (1887) and Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* (1930) and *Hercule Poirot* (1920).

For readers, the text is our mystery to solve, and the words themselves serve as the primary basis for our evidence. We analyse by tracing the patterns among the words, following them back to their audiences and their cultural and historical contexts, and uncovering the connections between them and other texts.

The meanings we find through careful analysis allow us to recognize the depth of knowledge, insight, and revolution embodied within literature. Such analysis does not dampen our initial aesthetic and emotional pleasures in reading, but deepens them by opening up new avenues to understand the causes of that pleasure and to share our interpretations with others. Our shared acts of literary analysis stimulate fresh comparisons and connections that bring the meaning of the literature to life again in new cultures and times.

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CLOSE READING: WORDS AND FORMS

If we consider the process of literary analysis in everyday practice, we see that readers most often approach literature by selecting and categorizing a **text** – both as **canonical** or non-canonical (see Chapter 1, ‘Introduction: thinking about literature’), and as an example of the **genre** or type of literature to which it belongs. In most digital film, book, or music stores, genre categories define the entire search and selection process. In brick-and-mortar bookstores, readers may bypass the shelves of popular new releases with glossy photos from film adaptations in favour of the shocking, bold fonts of crime novels, or the jewel tones and elaborate costumes on the covers of fantasy and science fiction. Or perhaps readers march straight to the back of the store, to the darker, more staid covers of fiction **classics** in blacks, greys, and golds.

After establishing a foundation for their literary experience through first impressions based on genre, readers proceed to the words on the page and begin to explore the way language and structure shape the overall meaning. These analytical strategies apply equally to poetry and film, tragic theatre and animated cartoons, classical masterpieces, and beach reads.

This chapter outlines the way to analyse texts using the technique of close reading and careful attention to the specialized genres, forms, and **figures of speech** that enable the text to generate its meanings and effects.

ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, OR MINERAL: WHY GENRE MATTERS

Genres and subgenres are to literature what genus and species are to biology, and the value of identifying genre or genus is about the same. Spotting a member of the *Ursus* genus in the distance while on a hike conveys valuable information long before the hiker gets close enough to meet that particular bear. Knowing the genus allows the hiker to identify typical characteristics – large teeth and claws, for instance – and to predict common behaviours, such as hunting prey. The same is true of genre in literature.

Even before we begin reading any text, its basic formal features send us down a specific analytical path. Our ability to categorize texts quickly and even subconsciously allows us to associate them with clearly defined patterns of structure and meaning-making. In the age of television, audiences can classify genre based on theme song, station, time of broadcast, set design, lighting, and even the title font. If characters are lounging on sofas or sharing a meal in the opening credits, viewers can expect a situation comedy with minor domestic troubles neatly resolved through a combination of slapstick and wit in 30 minutes or less.

In literature, the first formal features that signify genre include text length, internal divisions (e.g. chapters, acts, scenes, stories, essays, or poems), distribution of white space and line or paragraph spacing on the page, and inclusion of introductory material or notes within the text (e.g. epigraph, *dramatis personae*, author's prologue or preface, footnotes, or references). When we choose to read any text, from a two-paragraph online movie review to the more than 1,200-page novel *War and Peace* (1869), we use clues of formatting to classify the text and guide us through strategies for reading it. When we discuss genre, then, we refer to the pattern of formal and structural elements a text follows and the expectations that such forms set up for readers.

If we select a mystery, we expect the action to unwind slowly with central plot elements withheld until the very end. The suspense of not knowing the truth about some characters or events keeps readers eagerly turning pages while hunting for details in a race to solve the mystery before the characters do.

Choosing a love sonnet or a *lyric* poem, however, creates an entirely different set of reading expectations. In the stereotypical lyric,

a speaker expresses emotions through **figurative** uses of language that make those feelings come vividly to life. In reading such poems, we slow down, pay attention to each word and sound, and anticipate that the meaning will emerge through the progress of the speaker's reflections across the lines. More importantly, we expect that the intimate, personal contemplations of this poetic speaker will in some way resonate with broader human experience and articulate a collective human truth. We do not read the lines as self-centred or self-indulgent; we seek in them a glimpse of the profound and sublime. In his book about genre, author John Frow (2006, p. 19) studies the ways in which genres 'create effects of reality and truth' by calling readers to observe the 'effects of authority and plausibility which are specific to the genre'. In the love sonnet or lyric, the speaker's emotions shape the reality of the poem, giving emotion itself a kind of authority within the poem.

As the examples above suggest, there are both large and small categories for classifying texts. In *The Republic* (c. 360 BCE), Plato (1992) divided literature into **narrative**, mimetic/dramatic, and mixed (e.g. epic) forms, though in his time and culture all three types were written in **verse**, not **prose**. Both those classifications and our interpretations of them have changed over the history of literary **criticism** (see Genette 1992, Duff 2000). Generally speaking, we can think of drama, poetry, and prose as the most significant genres into which literature is divided today. Yet that list is also subject to revision. With ongoing innovations in digital and multimedia literary forms, the list of major genres will surely continue to change in the future as well.

DRAMA

Perhaps the simplest literary genre to identify, drama uses actors to perform the dialogue and actions of the characters whose stories are being told. Beyond the words on the page, the play incorporates the stage set and set design, the costumes, and the very bodies and voices of the actors. Although the published play or screenplay may include detailed character descriptions or backgrounds, stage directions to announce entrances, exits, and other movements, or even commentary on costumes and set design, readers and performers recognize that only the lines of dialogue attributed to characters are meant

to be voiced aloud. Produced collaboratively with the playwright or screenwriter, director, actors, and behind-the-scenes contributors, drama creates a physical world in which readers and audiences can participate with all their senses.

POETRY

Poet and critic Donald Hall (1993, p. 1) has evocatively called poetry ‘pleasure first, bodily pleasure, a deliciousness of the senses’, adding that by the end most poems say ‘something (even the unsayable)’. To view poetry in more concrete terms, readers will note that the visual impact of poetry on the page is one of gaps and spaces. Most commonly – though not always – poetry is written in *verse*, meaning that words are grouped and divided purposely, not allowed to flow naturally across the margins of the page. Because poets exploit the breaks between words and lines as well as the arrangement of words within sentences or phrases, poetry may be likened to music, which was an essential part of its historical roots. As with music, often patterns of rhythm and rhyme lend poetry an important aural component, though neither a regular beat nor repeating rhyme is required.

Individual poems may be quite short or extend across dozens of pages, and it is important to note that verse plays, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* (1808), and epic poems, like Homer’s *Odyssey* (c. 800 BCE), are comparable in length to texts in any other genre.

Conventionally, we call the ‘voice’ of the poem the speaker, regardless of whether that person seems to be nearly identical to the poet or an invented character or *persona* speaking dialogue or sharing an interior reflection.

PROSE

While we are often tempted to assume that prose refers to a novel due to the dominance of that literary form today, the genre of prose actually covers nearly everything that is not poetry or drama. Its distinguishing visual feature is the presence of paragraphs running steadily down the page. Prose writers do not manipulate individual line breaks and word placement, nor do they expect their characters’ words to be spoken and performed, but otherwise the content, purpose, length, and internal divisions of the text are completely open to the writer.

Prose can depict invented people, places, and events as in *fictional* short stories or novels, or it can be *nonfictional* as in literary essays, biographies, memoirs, or histories. Creative non-fiction essays, letters, and speeches about any number of subjects were the first prose literary forms. In English literary history, sketches, stories, and vignettes appeared next, followed only in the eighteenth-century by the *novel*. The English novel emerged out of medieval French *romans*, the chivalric romances of knights and ladies written in prose as early as the thirteenth century. The later influence of the Spanish *Don Quixote* (1605) brought more middle-class concerns to the developing form. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) are often considered the first novels in English. Both relate adventure stories of travellers to the New World through first-person narrators who make every effort to portray their stories as true reports of real, living people, yet both are fictional narratives, and Defoe never even visited the Americas. Increasingly, semiautobiographical fiction, historical fiction, New Journalism in which personal and creative narratives blend with conventional reporting, metafiction in which the **author** intrudes upon the fictional text to discuss the limits or process of writing, and other prose forms have blurred the distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

In prose, we usually refer to the 'voice' imagined to be speaking the words on the page as the narrator. Like the speaker in poetry, the narrator may be clearly designated as a character or may be a disembodied figure who may or may not be similar to the author.

GENERIC CONVENTION

Each major genre comprises several more specific subgenres, including novels, short stories, historiographic metafiction, nonfiction prose essays, autobiography, tragedy, comedy, history plays, passion plays, musicals, horror films, epic poetry, lyric poetry, sonnets, elegies, ballads, and many more. The genre or subgenre helps to convey the rules for reading and conventions for writing that govern the style and content the author may present. In *Genre*, Heather Dubrow (1982) likens **generic conventions** to rules of etiquette and other shared codes for social behaviour.

See a *tragedy* expecting an adventure story and you may be distressed and even disturbed by the way the most sympathetic characters

and heroes are destroyed in the end. Aristotle's *Poetics* (1997, p. 21) describes the dramatic tragedy as driven by the actions of characters who are above the norm, yet flawed, whose reversal of fortune when they recognize their errors too late elicits pity and fear. Witnessing the loss and fall of the tragic figure leads to a catharsis or venting of the audience's emotions as the audience realizes they have escaped that tragic fate, but the dominant experience remains sorrowful. In contrast, the adventure genre plays on adrenalin and suspense released in the end by a return to safety and confidence or optimism that tragedy cannot provide.

Likewise, if you pick up an autobiography expecting a *comedy*, you will be deeply disappointed by the self-absorption of the main character. Displaying a general sense of play and joy despite challenges, a *comedy* requires a happy ending and rise in fortune for the main characters who start their story with room to improve their status (e.g. William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* or *Much Ado About Nothing*, both written in the 1590s). While *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791) may be amusing at times, its aim as autobiography should always be to convey the experience of a singular life, generally in chronological order with the benefit of hindsight guiding the selection of significant scenes and events. The conventions of autobiography dictate that telling a true, nonfiction, first-person account of a life must be more important than maintaining an upbeat and even humorous style.

Despite the comfort of having expectations fulfilled by texts that behave the way their genres predict, readers often reject texts that follow the rules of genre too closely. Texts which obey all generic conventions to the letter become predictable and formulaic – in a word, boring. Often writers achieve innovation and originality only by bending, questioning, or even breaking expectations of genre. Indeed, in 'The Origin of Genres', Tzvetan Todorov (1976, p. 159) notes that 'the authentically modern writer . . . no longer respects the separation of genres', in much the same way that many contemporary societies no longer 'respect' traditional divisions that were so important to social institutions of the past. After centuries of experimentation *within* genres, some of the most creative literature today works *across* genres in order to shape the genres that will come to dominate future generations.

Carolyn Forché's 'The Colonel,' for instance, offers a clear example of a text that employs and exploits several genres at once. Published in Forché's 1981 poetry collection, *The Country Between Us*, 'The Colonel' is ostensibly a poem, but its wide block format, spreading from margin to margin with no breaks for lines or *stanzas* (groups of lines with a blank line following), already makes it a generic hybrid – a *prose poem*. Within the poem, the speaker at first adopts the objectively straightforward voice of a reporter or a witness at a trial as she describes a visit to the home of a military leader during the Salvadoran Civil War. The poem is, in fact, based upon Forché's work in El Salvador as a human rights activist and Guggenheim Fellow researching for her poetry collection; therefore, the incorporation of a nonfiction prose genre certainly fits the content. However, as the prose poem draws to a close, the tightly-controlled language begins to break down. Abandoning quotation marks around the colonel's dialogue and blending poetic images of the signs of his war-time atrocities with the speaker's stunned reluctance to continue to describe the horrific scene of trophies from his torture victims, the poem breaks many rules and resists any single classification. In many ways, its point is the inadequacy of language to bear witness to acts of human cruelty. And the poem makes that point by tearing at genre's seams.

For many contemporary critics and writers, pushing the boundaries of genre is simply part of the nature of generic categories. **Literary theorist** Jacques Derrida (1980, p. 212) writes in 'The Law of Genre' that texts do not *belong* to a genre, they *participate* in at least one genre. In this way, Derrida suggests that genre does not include or exclude texts in the way a family would welcome children and spouses but expel strangers from its rigid borders. Instead, genre offers up practices or rituals that demonstrate commonalities, and texts may engage in practices from a range of genres all at once. Most importantly, each time a text sends up the signal of a particular genre – even mocking it – it redefines the genre in slightly new ways.

For example, former US Poet Laureate Rita Dove comments on the power of the sonnet genre both to structure poetry and to entrap it. Throughout *Mother Love*, Dove (1995) writes variations on the *sonnet* – 14 lines long with ten-syllable lines, and one of two standard rhyme structures – but her poems rarely follow an iambic

pentameter rhythm, hardly ever employ a rhyming pattern, seldom use the stanza divisions typical of Petrarch's or Shakespeare's sonnets, and never elevate the language to mask the rawness or pain of the acts of love at the heart of the collection. Writing of the myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades, Dove makes Hades a slick-talking seducer living in Paris who brings Persephone a drink at a party. Poems like 'Hades' Pitch' or 'Demeter, Waiting' bluntly describe erotic attraction and maternal devotion. A bored exchange student, Persephone finds herself attracted to Hades precisely because he does not offer a safe relationship (Dove 1995, p. 37). The long-distance mother, Demeter vows to rage against the loss of her daughter until she gives up in self-loathing and simply waits for her to return (Dove 1995, p. 56). The emotional power and psychological revelations of the poems are clear. Reading them through the expectations and conventions of the sonnet genre, however, adds new contrast between their stark reality and the tight and beautiful rhymes of love sonnets of the past. Dove uses a centuries-old, traditional form for writing about love in order to show that we may not know as much about love (or about poetry) as we thought we did.

Yet Dove does not see her work as a 'violation' of the sonnet form. She notes, 'I will simply say that I like how the sonnet comforts even while its prim borders (but what a pretty fence!) are stultifying; one is constantly bumping up against Order' (Dove 1995, foreword). Today's critics and writers increasingly analyse genre in the collision between the individual text and the conventions of the genre or genres the text explores. As a result, meaning comes not only from the text's content but also from the strategies it uses for fitting that content into a particular genre or genres and into the functions those genres are expected to serve.

ANALYSING LANGUAGE

While genre provides a good orientation to any work of literature, literary analysis depends upon reading and interpreting the individual words of a text. Here *reading* means not only understanding the surface meaning of the sentences, but comprehending the deep underlying meanings within and connections among them.

In *Practical Criticism*, I.A. Richards (1930, p. 13) describes the initial surface reading as making out the text's 'plain, overt meaning, as a set

of ordinary intelligible, English sentences'. Surface readings find the literal definitions (*denotations*) of the words and use grammar cues to determine the relationships among them. Approaching the sentence, 'Soft fell the snow', the plain reader notes the sentence subject (snow) and verb (fell) and concludes that the sentence means that the snow fell softly, not with a harsh or fast whipping of winds.

Such readings are necessary to enable interpretation of a text, but they fall far short of literary analysis. Analysis demands that readers break apart the text into its details to determine how they work and why they work that way. For critic John Guillory (2008, p. 9), analysis and interpretation are complex and creative processes: 'By *interpretation* I mean the capacity of a reader to re-understand the words of a text by translating these words into a new frame of reference'. With this model, readers assume that the text says far more than its literal meaning and that the particular way the text adds feelings or undertones (*connotations*) to the words and forges connections across its different parts creates meanings and insights that the basic definitions of words alone cannot convey. The positive and gentle connotations of 'soft' at the beginning of the sentence 'Soft fell the snow', for instance, evoke a tenderness and perhaps even nostalgia that imply an emotional content much deeper than a simple weather report.

In a more thorough example, reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) literally might suggest that is about Jay Gatsby's attempt to reconnect with Daisy Buchanan, his lost love. By reading deeply and interpreting, however, we see that Gatsby associates Daisy not so much with love as with money and the freedom that wealth and social status provide. He does not want to return to the past as much as he wants to rewrite his past as Daisy's social equal. Looking at the text through a new frame of reference – for instance focused on its word choices that emphasize characters' different ethnic names, immigrant heritages, and American regional backgrounds – interpreters of *The Great Gatsby* see that Tom Buchanan's discussion of white supremacist texts over dinner, the African American witness to the car accident, and even narrator Nick Carraway's focus on the American West all connect together to explain the impossibility of Gatsby's (aka James 'Jimmy' Gatz) dreams.

In literary analysis, the method of interpreting the detailed use of language is called *close reading*. Despite many changes in the field

of literary studies, since the early twentieth century, close reading has served as the cornerstone of literary analysis. First developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s by the British scholars of Practical Criticism and the American New Critics, close reading demanded that critics focus their attention on the text alone, using detailed etymologies of words to identify multiple meanings within lines, then exploring the ways that the beauty of the text as a whole held together its complex meanings. Practical Criticism and New Criticism brought literary study into the university system as 'serious criticism' (Green 2012, p. 65), founded on sound, objective intellectual principles rooted exclusively in the words on the page, not on the reader's personal, subjective responses or even the social significance of the text's content.

Although both personal and social or political responses have again become a part of literary analysis, in 'Close Reading in 2009', Jane Gallop (2010, p. 15) argues that close reading is 'the most valuable thing English ever had to offer' and 'the very thing that made us a discipline, that transformed us from cultured gentlemen into a profession'. Despite the burgeoning of digital humanities approaches to technology-based, bulk textual analysis and abstract model-building (Moretti 2013) or increasing attention to affectively focused, 'uncritical' responses (Warner 2004), critic Daniel Green (2012, p. 70) notes that even newer schools of literary criticism and analysis that seem to oppose New Criticism 'really only do so by affirming an underlying premise held in common', often the premise of close reading. I would further emphasize that the majority of experts who currently advocate alternative strategies to literary analysis have already cemented their reputations by mastering basic close reading techniques.

An important advocate of New Criticism in the mid-twentieth century, Reuben Brower (1951), describes the method of close reading as a slow examination of a text, reading and re-reading multiple times to ensure that every detail has been explored. As a professor at Harvard University in the 1950s, Brower taught students to select a single detail, even a single word, and trace the many connections that could be found throughout the text. Working predominantly with poetry due to the intensity of the task, Brower (1951, p. 8) analysed the relationships among words based on grammar, logic, imagery, metaphor, rhythm, sound, and dramatic intensity. Thus, close reading

considers each word horizontally as it relates to the other words and sentences around it and vertically as it relates to the history and development of the word's meaning.

Is such close reading necessary? Absolutely. Because art, logic, imagination, the senses, history, culture, and psychology all meet in literature, we cannot treat it as mere communication. For New Critics like Cleanth Brooks, literature communicates on multiple levels at once. Writing about poetry, Brooks (1975, p. 73) states, "The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself". Here he argues that the details of the poem are not merely decorations flowering over a rather straightforward idea; instead, the images, metaphors, sounds, rhythms, and other artistic elements express complex, interrelated concepts. The same holds true for any kind of literature, and close readings can be applied to any text – from political speeches to advertisements or even conversations with friends.

HOW TO MAKE A CLOSE READING

First, select a text and, as Richards suggests, read once to understand the basic, surface-level plot and grammatical meaning of the sentences and words. Read any particularly interesting or difficult passages aloud to hear the rhythm and tone of the language. Look up definitions of any unknown words. Identify the speaker or narrator: is he or she a particular character or persona, a person from a particular time or culture, or an unnamed figure observing or reflecting within the text? Consider any details of setting or **context**, including the time period, location, and social conditions. Make note of the publication date and any differences between it and the time period described within the text. For example, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) was published two decades after the abolition of slavery in the USA, but the plot takes place in roughly the 1830s in slave states of the American South. The narrator is Huck himself, a poor white boy whose friendship with the wealthier Tom Sawyer has given him an unusual position in the community. These basic details, the facts of the text, will be necessary to complete a close reading.

To begin close reading, select a particular passage or segment of a text and answer the following questions:

- What is the *general topic* of the passage as compared to that of the text as a whole? Also consider the title or *epigraph* (introductory quote after the title) as indicators of topic when doing a close reading of the beginning of a text. This topic may differ from the surface idea or event being discussed as the word choices in the passage draw attention to multiple, deeper layers of ideas. For example, as Nick Carraway lists the dozens of party goers in *The Great Gatsby*, the repetition of ethnic names, occupations, infidelities and crimes makes the scene a portrait of American culture in transition or crisis, not merely idle party gossip.
- What are the *major images, metaphors, or literary figures* in the passage? Which images, words, sounds, or ideas recur and relate literally, physically, or through their underlying connotations? How do these images or **literary figures** (many listed under 'Poetics and literary terms' below) relate to the general topic? Do they support, contradict, or provide a subtext for the general topic? Descriptions of cars pervade *The Great Gatsby*. Their fast, sleek, expensive, and modern bodies are always teetering on the edge of disaster as a sign of the out-of-control lives of their drivers.
- How do the *characteristics, tone, and social position of the speaker or narrator* affect the meaning of the passage? Should we believe what the speaker or narrator says, or should we be sceptical? Does a seemingly straightforward tone hint at *satire* or sarcasm? In satire, the text may appear to be serious, but may offer outrageous or comical statements that clearly criticize any real society that behaves in the way its fictional settings are described (e.g. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Jonathan Swift's 1726 novel *Gulliver's Travels*). As the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway is not satirical, yet it is still wise to remain suspicious about his observations. He tells us that he is an open-minded person who avoids criticizing those around him, but in the same sentence, he also notes that many dull and unusual characters have consequently told him their stories (Fitzgerald 1925, p.1). Is he reserving judgement or is he such a bad judge of his own character that he does not see how judgemental he really is? Can we trust him to give accurate accounts of other characters if he so misjudges himself?

- How does the *form* of the passage affect the meaning? Does the form fit genre conventions or is it experimental? Is it regular or more erratic? Does the form make it easier or more difficult to read? How does the form and its ease or difficulty relate to the main ideas of the text? For instance, why does it take so long for Nick to describe Gatsby in the novel named for him? How does the wait for the title character add to our understanding of Gatsby's attempts to create an upper-class identity?
- Finally, how does this *passage fit in with the rest of the text*? Is it consistent or does it make a surprising reversal? If there is a reversal, what does that say about the text's overall meaning? The best known image in *The Great Gatsby* is undoubtedly the billboard advertisement for Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, featuring only the eyes floating behind yellow glasses. Readers may be tempted to interpret these watchful eyes as an omniscient god, as the poor character George Wilson does, but that concept of divine purpose, meaning, or morality conflicts with the overwhelmingly meaningless and amoral events and images of the rest of the text. God is not a sub-text for Gatsby's efforts to climb the social ladder. Instead, if we close read the entire image surrounding the eyes, the abandoned billboard and missing facial details contribute to the impression of lost identity and instability experienced by both Gatsby and Nick.

Now we will put these questions to work on a single passage in James Joyce's short story 'The Dead' (1914). In it, two Irish characters, Gabriel Conroy and Miss Ivors, discuss why Gabriel secretly publishes unsigned book reviews in a pro-British paper. Following only Gabriel's train of thought, this conversation seems to be merely about whether or not book reviews can be apolitical if published in a political press.

However, the surface level is only part of what is going on. The whole conversation takes place during a dance, and the text constantly interrupts the dialogue with spins and twirls and dance moves whose names hint at the deep disagreement between the dancers. The main topic of the passage, however, is neither book reviews, nor dancing; a close reading reveals that the scene depicts a struggle to understand Irish identity.

Joyce's description of the folkdance uses the double-meaning of its name, the 'lancers', to evoke a battle as the dancers cross and chain

together. The words of the passage focus on surrenders, concessions, and retreats in order to convey Gabriel's sense of being attacked. With each part of the dance, the conversation begins anew, warmly and often with smiles, as the dancers' hands meet, but their political disagreements melt the smiles and divide them just as quickly as the dance does. Throughout the passage, Gabriel's mind seems to be spinning along with his body as Miss Ivors forces him to question his intellectual ability and to admit to preferring Europe over Ireland.

A literary analysis of the scene must interpret why those two, different elements (dance and conversation) are narrated together and what effect the dance has on the meaning and value of the conversation. Plotting the language used to describe the dance steps alongside the verbal argument reveals that Miss Ivors's accusations of anti-Irish sentiment shake Gabriel's identity to the core. A close reading of word choices, violent military imagery, and the interplay between dialogue and description suggests that the violence of the early-1900s Irish independence movement simmers beneath every aspect of the characters' everyday lives.

Ultimately, close readings must pay careful attention to the text's particular words and patterns of language in order to interpret the additional layers of meaning beyond the logic of the words' dictionary definitions. At the level of definition, the film title *Military Conflict in Space* would mean the same thing as *Star Wars* (1977), but the rhyme and repetition in the latter title make it more inspiring, more epic, and more literary. Arnold Schwarzenegger's robot character in *The Terminator* movies (1984) could have said, 'I'll see you again', but the phrase takes on the double menace of a threat and a promise when he says, 'I'll be back'. Likewise, Shakespeare could have called his 1611 play *The Big Storm*, but *The Tempest* hints at the psychological and interpersonal levels of chaos and turmoil that accompany the weather in the play. Ezra Pound could have used the title 'In a Subway Station', but 'In a Station of the Metro' (1913) not only confirms the setting in Paris but also evokes the stillness of the stationary, waiting area within the rushing underground train system. The title phrase also uses an uncommon word order to remind readers of the French *la station de metro*, suggesting that the poem is in part a translation of the experience. At the heart of literary analysis, then, lies an intense awareness of language and the relationships between words and forms.

POETICS AND LITERARY TERMS

As noted above, literature is a mode of communication, but one deeply concerned with aesthetics as well. In philosophy, aesthetics is the study of beauty and art, but in its broader definition, the term derives from the Greek word for perceiving, sensing, and feeling. Education scholar Sir Ken Robinson emphasizes the function of aesthetics in contrast to the numbing, paralyzing qualities of anaesthesia: 'An aesthetic experience is one in which your senses are operating at their peak; when you're present in the current moment; when you're resonating with the excitement of this thing that you're experiencing; when you're fully alive' (2008). In literature, the aesthetic experience is constructed almost entirely of language as writers deploy the physical sounds of spoken words, their visual appearance on the page, as well as their ability to evoke other sensory and emotional content to create a lived experience in readers.

The study of poetics catalogues and names the vast set of literary strategies for producing such effects through literature of all sorts, not just poetry. In the early twentieth century, in particular, schools of literary scholars called formalists and structuralists sought to identify what gave language the power to evoke an aesthetic experience by studying literary structures, forms, and figures of speech. In 1917, Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1965, p. 22) described that power as *defamiliarization*, the process of artistic creation designed to 'remove the automatism of perception', a mechanical way of taking in words and meanings without perceiving the ideas and images that may once have seemed fresh and new. The cliché 'slow as a snail', for example, is too familiar; it no longer evokes vivid mental images of a persistent snail oozing its way without legs or arms along the sidewalk. Yet when we 'defamiliarize' the phrase by calling to mind the courageous drive of the legless creature, propelling itself and its heavy shell seemingly by sheer force of will, we shift our focus and begin to perceive in a new way.

The literary techniques of defamiliarization use new combinations and connections among words in order to prevent readers from taking language for granted and to force them into awareness of the full sensory and intellectual details of the text.

Writers defamiliarize by using strategies, structures, and forms that cause readers to slow down and experience the language aesthetically, not merely functionally.

Literary scholars have identified myriad terms for such strategies, structures, and forms, and these specialized terms allow readers to describe clearly and concisely the effects they encounter in close readings. Listing every important literary term goes far beyond the scope of this basic introduction to literary analysis, but readers should be aware of the many comprehensive guides to literary terms to assist with further study (see Abrahms and Harpham 2014, Greene 2012). The sections below highlight some of the most common literary terms, including terms for some genres, literary styles, figures of speech, and overall structures. These are divided into two categories: ‘Structures and forms’ describes those literary strategies that determine the text’s entire, global pattern; ‘Figurative language and textual tactics’ illustrates some of the effects created within particular lines, passages, or sections.

STRUCTURES AND FORMS

Perhaps one of the most important literary structures is *narrative*, the umbrella term for the sequence of actions related in a text. Poems, plays, fiction, biography, even 30-second television commercials may all use a narrative arc to unfold events experienced by some characters or actors. In ‘An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative’, Roland Barthes (1975, p. 237) links narrative with a sequential logic that can be found in ‘myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, *drame*, comedy, pantomime, paintings (in *The Legend of Santa Ursula* by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation’.

As anyone who has seen Sophocles’ play *Oedipus the King* (c. 420 BCE), read Homer’s *The Odyssey*, or watched the film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996) can attest, narrative includes more than a chronological relation of events. It is the way the story is told and the choice of which events to divulge and which to withhold, which to speed through and which to slow down, which to progress towards and which to *flashback* to in memory, that make the *plot* of a narrative (Genette 1980). If Sophocles had told the story of Oedipus mechanically from his birth amid incestuous and

murderous prophecies to his adoption by a neighbouring king, the accidental slaying of his birth father, marriage to his birth mother, and later realization of these realities, the play would lack any surprise, suspense, or interest. Because we discover these events through Oedipus's own innocent investigation into the murder of King Laius (his birth father), the tragedy of Oedipus's family's fate leaves readers cursing the prophecies that sent Oedipus out to avoid killing his father in the first place.

In studies of narrative structure, Russian Formalist scholars distinguished between the basic, unadorned events (the *fabula* or story) and the plot (or what they called the *suzužet*) which unfolds in patterns designed to create aesthetic and dramatic effects through the strategies of storytelling employed by a *narrator* (Erlich 1980, p. 242). Applied to an auction, the *fabula* lists the basic facts of the asking price and the final sale, the *plot* comes out through the auctioneer's chant that lures bidders with the excitement of competition, suspense, and reward. Whether the narrator is identified with the author – as in Dante's telling of his seemingly personal journey through hell in the poetry of *Inferno* (c. 1308–1314) – or with a fictional figure participating in the plot of the narrative – as in Herman Melville's Ishmael who is a sailor on the whale hunt in *Moby Dick* (1851) – the narrator shapes the story into a plot by selecting which details to relate in which order.

Acting almost as a camera lens made of words, the narrator determines whether we view a scene broadly in a description of the landscape or historical background or whether we zoom in on minute details of emotion or even interior thoughts of a character. Indeed, the issue of lens or perspective is a defining characteristic of a narrator, and literary studies distinguish between different types of narrators based on what has traditionally been called the point of view, including the narrative level, the mode of narration, and the voice. Most narratives written in the third person describe the events that happen to characters ('him' or 'her') from a heterodiegetic position external to the characters within the narrative, but their voice may describe events at a variety of different narrative levels – as wholly external observers, as members of the same world being narrated but separate from the characters' lives, or as narrators of a story within a story (Genette 1980, pp. 228–9). In many narratives, the narrators shift among these different levels throughout the course of the text.

Narrators whose voices speak in the first person as an 'I' reveal to readers their own observations and conclusions about the actions in the texts. Structuralist Gérard Genette (1980, p. 245) calls such narrators homodiegetic, meaning that they are as present within the world created in the narrative as any of the other characters, though Genette distinguishes between those first-person narrators who are the heroes of the stories they tell (autodiegetic) and those who play more marginal roles within the text. Nick Carraway tells Gatsby's story in the first-person as a character who often participates in the scenes and dramas throughout the novel, as does Ishmael tell Captain Ahab's story in *Moby Dick*. Huckleberry Finn in Twain's novel, and the Invisible Man in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel of that title, however, are also the central characters, and they relate the details of their own fictional lives.

The use of second-person pronouns in narrative is less common, requiring the narrator to tell 'you' what to see and think throughout an entire narrative. Such narrators do often appear in epistolary novels or novels written in the form of letters exchanged among characters which readers observe either as a fly on the wall when the novels contain both sides of the correspondence or as a vicarious stand-in for the addressee when only one set of letters is narrated. In those cases, both the narrators and narratees (the 'you' being addressed) are characters within the story; they are what Genette calls intradiegetic, existing in the world of the narrative itself. Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988) begins with a shocking use of second-person pronouns as the narrator's voice tells 'you' what you will see when you visit the tiny island of Antigua. In this case, the narrator is what Genette (1980, pp. 244–5) calls heterodiegetic, meaning absent from the story, speaking from a different time, place, or even level of consciousness than the characters contained within the narrative. Surprisingly, though, Kincaid makes her readers ('you') hypothetically intradiegetic characters as it is those readers, the ones to whom the story is narrated, who would travel from the airport, feel the island's heat, check into a resort hotel, and walk along the beach.

Of course, just as with genre, texts may combine or shift among levels of narrative, points of view and voice in order to create different effects upon readers.

As Genette's concept of narrative level suggests, narrators telling the story in any person or voice may be more or less knowledgeable

of their characters' interior lives. *Omniscient* narrators may know everything about the people and world in their narratives. They may reveal events of which the characters are unaware, or they may expose the characters' internal thoughts and desires – even those that run counter to their actions. The playful and experimental 2006 film *Stranger than Fiction* explores what happens to a character whose life is narrated by an omniscient narrator. The *protagonist* or main character, Harold Crick, awakes one morning to hear his every movement being described in the third-person by an omniscient narrator. When the narrator's voice announces, 'little did he know' his actions would lead to his death, Harold spends the rest of the film attempting to reclaim his own first-person narrative control over his life.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Harold's external narrator, narratives told in *stream of consciousness* style embed their narrators (either in first-person or third-person) so deeply within a single character's thoughts that the narrator can be pulled erratically from the present moment to a deep memory or can be so distracted by the character's moods and associations that even a simple flower can trigger an intense flashback in time to the character's childhood or a moment of loss. The term 'stream of consciousness' was first applied to literature by May Sinclair in her 1918 review, 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson'. As a narrative strategy, stream of consciousness developed out of the early twentieth-century growth in psychoanalysis and attention to the interplay between humans' conscious and unconscious desires. This twentieth-century literary innovation allowed writers to experiment with nonlinear, irrational, fragmented, and unchronological ways of telling stories. Furthermore, it opened up new possibilities for plots and conflicts. No longer did the conflict need to come from outside the character; instead, the character's own internal battles for meaning and purpose could make a simple walk down the street into a trial and tragedy of great proportions. As in Joyce's stream of consciousness story 'The Dead', Gabriel Conroy's thoughts and emotions turn a three-minute dance into an inquisition into his political loyalties. The path of his thoughts winds through the dance, back into his memories, his intellectual insecurities, his self-consciousness in his marriage, his plans for the future, and his struggle to establish a class status above the rest of his community. Externally, it may be just a dance, but internally, the scene is part of the tragedy of Gabriel's life.

As we see in the two examples above, some narrators are *extradiegetic*, disconnected from their characters, constrained as to what they can observe or quote, almost like a newspaper reporter, while others bridge that distance. *Limited omniscient* narrators may know everything about a single character, but view all other actions and events from the outside. By offering extra details and greater access to insights about a single character, such narratives are *internally focalized* upon a character (Genette 1992) and provide a biased filter that leads readers to sympathise with that character's views. In Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), for example, the third person narrator often attempts to remain distant from the characters, quoting letters and conversations without commentary, describing the settings and appearance of characters, and leaving many of readers' questions unanswered. However, the plot follows only Irene Redfield's actions, centres upon only her emotional state, reports only her conversations, and occasionally explains and even seems to enter Irene's excited thoughts.

The literary term for the narrative style in *Passing* that blurs the lines between the distant third-person narrator and the interior experience of a character is *free indirect discourse*, named for its free, unlabelled shifts from narrative description to quotation of a character's thoughts or speech. No quotation marks directly show the readers that the narrator is now in the character's head, but suddenly the narrator's sentences take on the voice, the speech patterns, even the emotional intensity of the focalized character. In *Passing*, the shift to free indirect discourse often happens subtly and gradually. As Irene reflects upon her meeting with an old acquaintance and her promise to visit the next Tuesday, the narrator informs us, 'She had, she told herself, no inclination to speak of a person who held so low an opinion of her loyalty, or her discretion. And certainly she had no desire or intention of making the slightest effort about Tuesday. Nor any other day for that matter' (Larsen 1929, p. 49). Although the passage begins by separating the narrator's words from what Irene 'told herself', by the end, Irene's indignation has so overtaken the narrator, that the sentences degrade into fragments clearly aligned with Irene's inner thoughts.

A text with free indirect discourse can seem realistic and even-handed, as if our narrator is giving an objective account, but a careful literary analysis reveals that we know only part of the story, part that

may be muddled by the character's jealousies and fears. In the case of *Passing*, the narrator's limited perspective causes some uncertainty over what to believe about Irene when the text ends in a terrible accident, yet we remain confident in the narrator's ability to tell the story. In other cases, an *unreliable narrator* betrays so many flaws or biases that it is difficult to give the narrator much credibility at all. In 'How to make a close reading', we have already considered Nick Carraway's questionable judgement as the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*. The 2013 Bas Luhrmann film adaptation casts even further doubt on Nick's reliability by making him a patient in a mental hospital.

Thus far, most of my examples of narrative have come from films or *novels*, but narrative plot is also essential to long, *epic* poems involving a hero or, increasingly today, a heroine who undertakes an extensive quest, often lasting years or even decades and including obstacles and challenges that reflect the significant values and traditions of their place and time (e.g. Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Homer's *The Odyssey*). Although we refer to the voice of the poem as the 'speaker', such speakers can narrate their poems from any of the points of view outlined above. The speaker of a *dramatic monologue*, for instance, addresses his or her listeners as 'you' throughout the one-sided conversation that makes up the poem. Through the subtle use of the speaker's statements as a fictional persona, dramatic monologues evoke a whole scene as if we have flipped to a single page of a much longer conversation between that character and some others. Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' (1842), perhaps the best known dramatic monologue in English poetry, reveals the obsessive jealousy of the Duke as he comments to his visitor about a portrait of his first wife. The result is an alarming glimpse into her life and a foreshadowing of the dismal future of the woman he plans to marry next. The narrative snapshot in the poem contains a full plot conveyed through the first-person voice of the poem's speaker.

While narrative is the most important structure for content in any genre, *metre* is arguably the most significant device for organizing the form of literature. Outside of literary analysis, a metre is a unit for measuring length or distance, and in literature as well, the metre offers a means of measurement. In our case, the metre describes the length of the line of verse as measured by the number of syllables in the words. The type of metre also indicates the pattern of stressed and softer, unstressed syllables within the line. Perhaps the

simplest way to understand metre is to recall that literature began as an oral art form, often performed with musical accompaniment. To help performers and audiences remember long, oral verse, poets used a regular rhythm or pattern of beats (stressed syllables) as well as rhymes. With the regular beats and rhyming words, listeners needed only to remember part of the poem, and the metrical structure (the pattern of the metre) would dictate the rest.

If a poem with regular rhyme and metre starts, 'If you were a cloud, I'd be your sky', the next line should have nine syllables and end with a long *i* sound: 'If you were a pear, I'd be your pie'. The rhythm of four louder, stressed syllables establishes a beat that limits the word choices. Here, the beat lands on the second syllable as in blues music, not on the first like the strong downbeat of a marching band. If we pursue the similarities between music and verse even further, the musical 'measure' makes a perfect analogy to the poetic *foot*. Written in common time, marches and ballads have four beats per measure; waltzes have three. Most poetic feet are shorter, either two or three syllables.

Iambic pentameter, the most common metre in English literature, refers to lines of five two-syllable feet (*pentameter*), alternating between an unstressed syllable and a stressed one. The pair of unstressed and stressed syllables become an *iamb*. Shakespeare's famous question – 'But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?' (1997, act 2, scene 2, line 2) – is a line of iambic pentameter in which 'soft', 'light', 'yon-', 'win-', and 'breaks' are naturally pronounced with greater stress than the other syllables and words. The stresses also emphasize the significant nouns and verbs in the sentence and downplay the less powerful parts of speech (conjunctions, adverbs, prepositions). In English, *blank verse* (unrhymed iambic pentameter) signifies formality, epic scale, the height of high literary culture. It appears throughout the centuries from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). English translators conventionally use blank verse to mark the formality of epic and classical world literature. Aristotle (1997, p. 8) states that the iambic rhythm most closely imitates natural speech, and the driving force of the metre can alter the structure of content and meaning of a text. Blank verse dominates Shakespeare's plays, but he often abandons it mid-play for prose or other poetic forms to demonstrate a shift in the character's status or state of mind.

The process of identifying the metre of poetry by counting syllables and marking stresses is called *scansion*. Although any of a variety of formal scansion systems can be applied, below is a basic rhythmic scan of our two simple lines:

ǃf yóu | wěre ă clóud, | Í'd bé | yǒur ský.
 ǃf yóu | wěre ă péar, | Í'd bé | yǒur píe.

The cup-shaped symbol (*breve*) indicates an unstressed syllable, while the slash (acute accent) shows the stress. Vertical bars (the pipe symbol) show the separations between metrical feet. The majority of the lines have iambic feet. If these lines were part of a longer poem, they might continue to follow the iambic *tetrameter* (four feet per line) and four-line stanza (*quatrain*) pattern of a ballad. Within the lines, however, metrical variations disrupt the ballad rhythm. In both lines, the second foot requires us to rush through two unstressed syllables to reach our stressed syllable, creating a three-syllable foot with an *anapaestic* stress pattern, but since the extra syllable is unstressed (*ă*), it does not fundamentally upset the overall rhythm. In the third foot, there is so little difference in stress between 'Í'd' and 'be' that the foot becomes a *spondee* (two stressed syllables), again without much overturning the pattern of the poem as a whole. Replace 'pear' with 'banana', however, and the lines would change significantly:

ǃf yóu wěre | ă bă ná | nă, Í'd bé | yǒur píe.

The result is *syncopation*, a rhythm in which attempting to follow the metre forces the stress to land on a normally unstressed syllable, such as 'were' in the first foot. Indeed, the choice of 'banana' disrupts the metre so much that we might call it *doggerel*, irregularity in rhythm due to poor technique or bad poetic choices. Despite these irregularities, scansion of a whole poem can reveal the underlying rhythmic pattern beating like a pulse beneath even unruly lines of verse.

Few poems follow any metre exactly, and those that do are often disparaged as tedious sing-song. Most poems written today, in fact, avoid regularity in metre and follow a *free verse* or *vers libre* style. Yet scansion can usefully identify the undercurrents that signal the metre and even the genre to which the poem belongs and thereby give clues to further meanings.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND TEXTUAL TACTICS

Beneath the large, structural layer, the detailed uses of *figurative language* generate aesthetic impressions at the sentence and line level. In contrast to literal language confined to the letter of the definition, figurative language extends the effects of words by defamiliarizing them and imbuing them with extra meaning. Lists of hundreds of literary and rhetorical figures can be found readily online. This section will define just a few. Words used as figures can function on multiple levels at once – as ‘figures’ like numbers representing complex, intangible concepts, as ‘figures’ in illustrations portraying concrete systems of interrelated parts, or as the ‘figures’ of the word’s visual and aural shape which may recall similar words with very different meanings.

In this last sense, the material experience of the sight and sound of words carries additional content. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the use of *rhyme*. Recall the pleasure children take in rhymes as they experiment with the feel of words on their still-developing tongues. What do you call an enclosure full of flowers? A ‘bloom room’. What is a shoplifter in a bookstore? A ‘book crook’. *Perfect rhymes* like these foster predictability not only in the *end rhyme* of the final words of poetic lines, but in other literary forms as well. Hewey, Dewey, and Louie were Donald Duck’s nephews in innumerable Disney cartoons. Even Salman Rushdie employed rhyme in his 1983 novel *Shame* to link the characters Chunni, Munnee, and Bunny in a preternatural bond of sisterhood.

Other rhymes can instill discord or dissonance in the text by promising a connection that never comes. A *slant rhyme* introduces a mismatch in the sounds of the final syllable of the rhymed words, as in ‘tune’-‘loom’ or ‘sixteen’-‘kitchen’. Similarly, an *eye rhyme* appears to be a perfect rhyme, but falls short when pronounced (e.g. ‘prove’-‘love’). Not to be dismissed as mistakes, these partial rhymes use the surprising sensory experience of the words to alert readers to possible disconnections and interruptions in the content. If it behooves me to prove to you my love, the jarring eye rhyme might hint at a possible flaw in the quality of my emotion as well.

Figurative language can take advantage of the sensory qualities of words, but words can also be used to create sensory experiences through *imagery*. Including all senses, not just sight, vivid, descriptive

imagery weaves an illusion of the sounds, smells, sights, feel, or taste of the objects being described. In Rita Dove's 'The Bistro Styx', the speaker, Demeter, meets her daughter Persephone in a Paris restaurant after she has been seduced by Hades. Demeter conveys the depths of her daughter's hunger through detailed imagery of the food she eats: the 'golden globe' of rich, ripe Camembert cheese, the 'dripping mess' of tear-drop slices of pear, and wine as dark as blood (Dove 1995, p. 42). The imagery carries readers beyond the menu into the sensual experience of the meal.

Through figurative language, words inspire readers to imagine both physical realities and abstract, intellectual concepts. Arguably the most important literary figures, *metaphors* ask readers to suspend limited, logical definitions to create new, intuitive definitions by comparison. A metaphor compares unrelated objects in order to convey a direct understanding of characteristics both share when literal explanations of those qualities would simply fail. In 'The Bistro Styx', for instance, the speaker attempts to describe the changes in her daughter's personality, which has become less forceful and vibrant since meeting Hades. But how do we define the intangible qualities of personal 'force' and 'vibrancy'? Rather than struggling with psychological terminology, the poem calls upon a metaphor: Persephone is a 'lipstick ghost on tissue' (Dove 1995, p. 41). The lipstick evokes sexual potency, beauty, health, and femininity, and its erasure onto the fragile paper demonstrates its diminishing power. Where the rational explanation sounds overly analytical and lacks the deep sense of loss and concern the mother feels in witnessing the change, the metaphor translates the entire force of the thought instantly into four, little words.

Like metaphors, *similes* also generate meaning through comparison, but they more clearly identify the two objects by using the words 'like' or 'as' to introduce the comparison. Dove's poem uses a simile to note that the Chateaubriand filet is 'like' a heart pulled out as a trophy of battle (Dove 1995, p. 42). The presence of 'like' guides readers to make deeper connections on a figurative level.

Simile and metaphor translate meaning across full comparisons, but *metonymy* and *synecdoche* create meaning by shifting the focus to a part of an object. In metonymy, an object's name is replaced by the name of an object associated with it; synecdoches substitute the name of a part of the object in place of the whole. The terms

'new money' and 'old money' are examples of metonymy for different segments of upper-class society. 'Old money' really refers to the families of long-standing reputation and generations of wealth and property-holdings, but the metonymy of the economic capital associated with them encourages readers to view particular qualities of the people being described. In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy is often described through synecdoche as a voice. In climactic scenes, she does not act; instead, the voice pleads to leave, the voice is lost. Separating out her voice, which Gatsby already described as sounding like money, strips her of warmth and robs her of the ability to control her life. The synecdoche demonstrates this effect much more dramatically than a straightforward description of the plot events could do.

When metaphors or metonymies gain widespread recognition or recur throughout a text, they can assume the status of a *symbol*, an object used to represent a larger idea or concept. Symbols commonly appear in everyday life: the rose corresponds to love, the cross stands for Christian faith, the ring symbolizes marriage. Symbols both create a shorthand for referring to the larger concept and translate that concept into a tangible object that can relate metaphorically to other images and objects in the text. Many beginning readers approach literary analysis as a quest for symbols, but it is important to note that many powerful images are not symbols at all. While the green light at the end of Daisy's dock may indeed symbolize Gatsby's envy, the oranges in his orange juice maker are not symbols of autumn or harvest: they are just mixers for hundreds of party cocktails.

By building upon symbolic shorthand, writers can create complex, symbolic narratives about abstract concepts or *allegories*. An allegory relies upon symbols for places, characters, plot events, and other narrative elements in order to transform the surface story into a reflection of larger issues. From the title alone of *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*, John Bunyan makes his allegory quite overt. As his character Christian Pilgrim journeys from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, he overcomes spiritual temptations in order to reach heaven (Bunyan 1678). Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1997) directly narrates his father's story of surviving the Holocaust, but it uses a visual allegory by representing Jews as vulnerable mice, Nazis as

predatory cats, and non-Jewish Poles as pigs, an unkosher animal. The X-Men comics offer a more complex allegory of the tragedy of discrimination in society. First published in 1963 by Stan Lee, the X-Men, members of a mutated race of humans, struggle to mask their differences from other humans in order to avoid persecution. In their civil rights era context, these mutations can allegorize racial difference, but Magneto, the main mutant villain, also launches a campaign of mutant superiority over humans and strives variously to rule, transform, or eliminate humanity in an allegory of Nazi genocide (Lee and Kirby 2002). In later decades, the series added further twists to these allegorical interpretations by making Magneto himself a Jewish Holocaust survivor who will go to any lengths to protect mutants from a similar fate (Pak and DiGiandomenico 2009).

Through these and dozens of literary figures and structures, literature embeds multiple meanings within single narratives, sentences, and lines. The aim is to convey the richness of experience – its ambivalences, contradictions, complexities – through aesthetic interactions with readers. The tools of close reading unravel these interwoven layers of meaning and reveal the wealth of language in the texts we read.

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