

*HOW TO STUDY  
LITERATURE*

# Literary Terms and Criticism



John Peck and Martin Coyle

# LITERARY TERMS AND CRITICISM

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and  
Martin Coyle

**M**  
MACMILLAN  
EDUCATION

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*For Rachel and Pamela*

## General Editors' Preface

Everybody who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck  
Martin Coyle

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## Preface

THIS guide is basically a dictionary of literary terms. It resembles other such dictionaries in that it attempts to provide essential information on a wide range of literary topics. It differs from other dictionaries, however, in that we have tried to produce a book that meets the particular needs of students at school, college and university. This means that the overall structure of the book, the range and kind of terms included, and the approach adopted within the individual entries, are somewhat unorthodox as compared to other guides to literary terms.

First, the overall structure: the standard approach is to provide a straightforward alphabetical listing of terms. This should make things easy to find, but a list of terms is not all that helpful if you are not entirely sure what you are looking for. We have, therefore, divided the book into six sections – a survey of literature, 'Poetry', 'Drama', 'The novel', 'Critical concepts' and 'Critical positions and perspectives'. If, for example, you are studying a novel, you might find a number of useful ideas simply by browsing through the Novel section. If you know exactly what you are looking for, the quickest way of finding the relevant entry is to consult the Subject index at the back of the book. Our own experience as students was that we were not only puzzled by specific terms, such as 'metaphysical poetry', but also lacked broader ideas about literature. The Poetry, Drama and Novel sections therefore begin with introductory essays that might help you understand the characteristics of the major genres.

These introductory essays, along with the survey and the general essay on criticism in the final section, are intended to provide a view of the broad picture. They are followed by more specific entries, alphabetically arranged. We should point out

that this is not an all-inclusive guide: we do not include terms such as 'limerick' which are not in any way central in the study of literature. The exclusion of minor terms has allowed us room to include period terms, such as 'Renaissance poetry' and 'the eighteenth-century novel'. These are not, strictly speaking, literary terms, but they are descriptive terms that students encounter. It seemed more important to cover the words and phrases you are likely to meet as a student, even to the extent of including a separate entry on Shakespeare, than to worry too much about maintaining a pure approach. The intention is to provide helpful information which is directly relevant to your studies.

This idea was also uppermost in our minds in determining the approach adopted within each entry. We do not attempt to cover the entire history of any term, nor do we attempt to list all the authors who have chosen to work in a certain mode. In their place we have substituted critical discussion, attempting to provide guidelines for your study of literature. Underlying many of the definitions is the idea that literature attempts to come to terms with, or order, the complexity, or disorder, of experience. You might find this idea limiting, but it should prove useful in helping you find your critical feet. Our hope is that the definitions will show you how to get started, but really this is a guide to grow out of as you become more confident and learn how to develop and express your own ideas about literature.

Probably the best way to use this book is to browse through it, stopping at whatever catches your attention. But, as previously stated, there is a Subject index which should enable you to find a specific term quickly. In addition, there is an Author index. Most of the major authors in English are discussed in this guide: by following up the entries in the Author index you could well discover some quite useful guidelines about how to approach and discuss an individual author. The major shortcoming of most guides to literary terms is that they so often fail to tell you what you want to know: our hope is that we have gone at least some way towards providing the kind of information and critical discussion that you are likely to find useful.

We should like to thank those who have helped us in the

writing of this book. In particular we are grateful to our colleagues Michael Quinn and Stephen Copley, who have always been prepared to discuss the material and to contribute their ideas and advice. We are also grateful to those many students and teachers in Cardiff who have been extremely tolerant and helpful while we have subjected them to endless definitions, and to Sheila Morgan, not only for her excellent typing but also for her interest and constructive comments.

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## English, American and Commonwealth literature: a brief survey

LITERARY criticism is primarily concerned with discussing individual works of literature. The most important thing is to read and reread the books you are studying, trying to decide what they are about and how they work. It is also useful, though, to have some broader ideas and information about literature. In particular, an awareness of the larger context into which any work fits can help you understand the individual text you are studying. There are, in fact, two contexts in which any work can be seen: a generic or genre context, and a historical context.

**Genre** means a type or class of literature. (The main generic division today is into poetry, drama and the novel, but in earlier times the major genres were recognised as epic, tragedy, lyric, comedy and satire. The logic behind these divisions is straightforward: all works of a certain kind have a great deal in common and are therefore grouped together under these broad headings. The advantage of knowing about these divisions is that they tell us what sort of text we are dealing with. Many of the definitions in the following sections provide information about the genres and, on a smaller scale, the modes an author might choose to write in. A mode is a recognised type or kind of work within a genre, such as the sonnet or the realistic novel. The way in which the definitions should prove helpful is that if, for example, you have been reading some sonnets but do not know how to start discussing them, the definition of sonnet should indicate the most important characteristics of the mode. The definitions, then, should provide a starting-point in telling you what to expect and what to look for. They should also help

you identify what is distinctive about specific works of literature, for much of an author's originality lies in what he adds to the established conventions and patterns of the genre and mode within which he is working.

Every work of literature has a generic context. In addition, every work has a **historical context**: that is, it belongs to a particular historical period. Writers at a given time tend to have similar concerns and, often, similar values. An awareness of the historical context of a writer, then, should tell you what you can expect to encounter in, say, an eighteenth-century poet as opposed to a romantic poet. This again provides a starting-point for looking at a work; and, once more, seeing what a text has in common with other texts, in this instance texts written at around the same time, should help you see more clearly the ways in which a specific work is distinctive. Many of the definitions in the following sections focus on individual genres at particular times, such as the eighteenth-century novel or modern poetry, but it is also useful to be aware of the broad historical pattern of literature. What follows here, therefore, is a simple historical survey of literature in English.

English literature begins with **Old English** or **Anglo-Saxon** literature, which mainly belongs to the period before the Norman Conquest in 1066. The language in which it is written is more like German than modern English. The greatest single poem is *Beowulf* (probably written around 700), which can be described as either an epic or tragic poem. A king's hall is threatened by a monster called Grendel. Beowulf comes to help, and kills the monster and its mother. Fifty years later a dragon attacks his own kingdom: Beowulf kills it, but dies himself. One way of making sense of this story is to use a simple critical idea that we can apply to a great many literary works: we can say that what the poem is about is Beowulf's attempt to establish and maintain order in a threatening and disordered world. In other words we can look at the poem in terms of its larger meaning and pattern, seeing how it makes use of a tension between the ideas of order and disorder. The same pattern is in evidence in other works from this period, such as the prose *Chronicles*, Christian poems such as 'The Dream of the Rood', and 'The Battle of Maldon'. This, like *Beowulf*, is a narrative poem, the major mode in Old English literature, and

similarly deals with the desire for order in a savage and unruly world.

**Middle English** or **medieval** literature belongs to the period 1066 to about 1550 (dates for literary periods can only ever be approximate). The outstanding writer is Chaucer. In this period there are narrative poems (such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, fourteenth century; and Chaucer's works, including *The Canterbury Tales*, around 1400), lyric poetry, and drama (the miracle and morality plays). Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the literature of this period is that it is markedly Christian. It is also often very sophisticated. A familiar pattern is the gap between the Christian ideal and the reality of life in this imperfect world. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* can be looked at in this way: the ideal is a devout band of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, all acknowledging the greatness and authority of God, but the reality is a motley group of characters, with numerous flaws in their personalities, who tell stories that reveal what an untidy and problematic world we live in. An ideal of religious order is thus set against the reality of everyday disorder. It is important to recognise, however, that Chaucer is a comic poet: he is amused by man's folly, but not troubled by it. Confident that God's order prevails, he can enjoy the imperfections of fallen man, weighing them against the ideals of Christianity.

The notion of an ideal Christian existence is still in evidence after the medieval period, for example in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596), which presents Christian knights on journeys through life encountering all manner of temptations. This essentially religious view of experience starts to disappear, however, during the period that follows medieval literature. This is the period around the beginning of the seventeenth century and is one of the richest eras in English literature: it is the time of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Donne, Jonson and many other outstanding poets and dramatists. This is often referred to as the **Renaissance** period in English literature (approximate dates are 1550 to 1660), but one can also talk about modern literature starting at this time: from about 1600 onwards the language resembles the language we use today, and this in itself indicates that the works are referring to a world which we can identify with in some way.

The literature of the Renaissance is so rich because society was changing in such a fundamental way: the world was becoming much more complex, with the whole economic and social fabric of society changing. A great gap opens up between those religious ideals which had previously dominated man's thinking and a new sort of dynamic society which no longer found it possible to focus on other-worldly concerns in the same way as had been the case in the past. What we thus find in Renaissance literature is a tension between a traditional order and disruption of this order. It is this tension which is at the heart of such Shakespeare plays as *Hamlet* (1600) and *King Lear* (1605): the old order is dislodged and displaced by the new self-interest of a new sort of worldly-wise man.

The central historical event in the seventeenth century, the Civil War of 1642–51, embodies a similar conflict between old and new, between the king's traditional status and authority and new forces who wish to wrest power from the king. This tension between an old order and disorder is also evident in Milton's choice of theme for his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667): the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God. Deceived by Satan they are expelled from Eden with its ideal order and have to confront the reality of life in our disordered world.

Like medieval writers, seventeenth-century writers still recognise God as the only true source of order, even though so much of their attention is on how man is distracted and tempted by worldly ambition and secular concerns. Towards the end of the century, however, the focus of literature becomes almost entirely secular. Explicitly religious poetry all but disappears and is replaced by social poetry, for example the poetry of Dryden and Pope. The period from about 1660 to 1790 is in addition characterised by the rise of the novel, a genre which concentrates on social life, in particular on the lives of individuals in a complex society. What the poets and novelists (such as Richardson and Fielding) of the **eighteenth century** are interested in is in seeing whether harmony and balance can be created within society. The tension that is in evidence in their works, however, is between this notion of the desirability of social order and their awareness of the inevitability of social disorder. Here again it proves useful to look at the literature of a period in terms of a pattern of the tension

between order and disorder, seeing how the writers deal with the gap between how things could or should be in society and how they really are.

Social order, however, is not a very inspiring ideal, although it continues to be at the heart of many subsequent works of literature, particularly at the heart of realistic novels, such as those of Jane Austen, who was writing around 1800, and George Eliot, whose novels were published between 1859 and 1876. The period in which Austen writes is known as the **romantic** period, though Austen herself seems a slightly anomalous figure in the literature of this time (roughly 1790 to 1830), when there was a reaction against the social philosophy of eighteenth-century literature.

The romantic period is one of the great ages of English poetry, with Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Shelley all publishing around 1800. Unlike earlier writers, the romantics do not turn to God as the source of order, nor is order sought in society: what the romantics seek is to find a harmony in life which is at one with a pattern that can be found in the natural world. At the same time there is a great stress on the imagination: the source of order becomes internal, as in the work of Wordsworth, where there is a stress on how his mind interacts with what he sees in the natural world, so that some pattern and harmony is created in life. Wordsworth is aware, however, that this vision is a rare thing, that it might be illusory, and that life for the most part is disordered, puzzling and fragmented.

(Victorian literature develops from, rather than reacting against, romantic literature, and the poets of this age (1830 to the end of the century), such as Tennyson and Browning, are the heirs of the romantics.) They cannot, however, sustain the romantics' confidence in the autonomy of their own imaginations. There is no longer the same ability to create a vision of order and unity. Instead, there is a far more dominant impression of the world as fragmented, of life being too complicated and painful for any real sense of order to be found. (The feeling of confusion and despair that characterises a lot of Victorian poetry has much to do with the religious doubts and uncertainties of the period.) Literature might have been explicitly secular from the late seventeenth century onwards, but (it is only in the Victorian period that a certain traditional

religious confidence disappears, and, with the disappearance of this confident faith in a controlling deity, the world begins to seem much more confusing, depressing, and even chaotic. \

In addition, society itself was becoming increasingly complex, something that is reflected in the Victorian novel. The Victorian period is the great age of the novel, possibly because the novel was the only form that could expand enough to cope with the scale and complexity of Victorian society as it, too, expanded and changed with the growth of industrialisation. The great novelists of the age are Dickens and Eliot, both of whom seek to create a full and intricate picture of a complex social world. They are fully aware of the disorder, injustices and hardships of the world they live in, yet at the same time there is a confidence in their writing that the novel can confront the whole of life.

It is a confidence that subsequent novelists cannot sustain. As we move towards the **twentieth century** we find an increasing sense that life is overwhelmingly confusing and complicated. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, for example in the novels of Hardy, Conrad, Joyce and Lawrence and in the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Yeats, there is a feeling that the world has become so baffling that it is impossible to make sense of it, particularly as the decline, and in many cases the total eclipse, of religious faith robs writers of any secure perspective or framework of shared values from which they can interpret and make sense of experience. The central historical event of the early years of the twentieth century is the First World War (1914–18), a war so terrifying and tragic that it seems to sum up a world that is closer to chaos than to any sane order.

Yet the early twentieth century is a period of extraordinary creativity in all the arts – not only in poetry and the novel, but also in music and painting, and even drama is revitalised after many years of stagnation. What this points to again is the fact that rapid social change, an alteration in the whole structure of society, almost always stimulates the production of great art. The text which perhaps best exemplifies the age is T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922), which presents a vision of a fractured society where the poet can find no order or consolation. As with so many works of the period it is innovative and experimental in form: it seems to be built out of fragments of

poetry, reflecting a world where the artist can no longer impose confident and comprehensive control over the facts he encounters. A term often applied to the formally innovative works of this period is **modernist**: modernist works, such as Eliot's or Joyce's, are often difficult to read, but they become less difficult if we see that the difficulty simply enacts the problems the artist is having in making sense of the world.

T. S. Eliot was an American, and at this time it makes sense to start looking at British and American literature together. We could trace a lengthy history for **American literature**, but as far as most readers are concerned American literature really comes to life around 1850. Significant works are the essays of Emerson and the poems of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, but it is perhaps most rewarding to focus on the development of the American novel from about 1850. The most important texts in this context are Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Unlike the English novel, which emerges from and comments on a long-established society, the American novel is not immersed in society in the same sort of way. Instead it often takes the form of a symbolic journey, which can be a journey into the unknown territories of the mind. American novels are often referred to as 'romances', for the writers, unlike their English counterparts, tend to turn their backs on society and go off into conjecture, dream and myth.

What we witness in the second half of the nineteenth century, then, is the development of a distinctively American novel. As American literature moves into the twentieth century, however, it establishes a closer link with European culture. This is first evident in the novels of Henry James, published between 1875 and 1904, which present the lives of young American idealists and their experiences in the English social world. Later novelists such as Fitzgerald and Faulkner, while having distinctively American qualities, are heavily indebted to the example of Joyce, but it is a two-way exchange, for the American poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are domiciled in London and help shape the whole course of English poetry at this time.

After the modernist era, however, which can be said to come to an end in the twenties, American literature is by and large far



more adventurous than British literature. It is as if British writers do not know how to advance from the experiments of the twenties, and so retreat into safer waters. W. H. Auden and Graham Greene are the two best-known names from the thirties and forties, yet neither is a writer of the first order. Throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies, the English novel, with the exception of the works of William Golding, settles down into a fairly conventional realistic pattern. Similarly, the poetry of this time, apart from the interesting work of Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney, remains unexcitingly modest.

In a relatively unambitious period of British literature the one exception has been in drama; the last thirty years have been an exciting period for the English theatre. There are both established dramatists such as John Osborne, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, and newer writers such as David Hare, Howard Brenton and Trevor Griffiths who together offer an important discussion of the state of contemporary Britain. Here again the pattern that is in evidence is one of writers trying to order their impressions of a complex society undergoing change, and in Britain since the Second World War (1939-45) it seems to be the theatre that has provided the most suitable forum for discussing these changes. This is possibly because the questions that have had to be faced are political questions about the way society orders itself, and drama is the form that lends itself best to this sort of political or social debate.

America has also produced impressive drama in the period from 1930 to the present day, for example the works of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. In America though, unlike in Britain, the same period has been an equally strong one for poetry and the novel. There is the poetry of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, and America continues to be the source of the most energetic and original poetry in English, for example in the works of Robert Lowell, John Berryman and John Ashbery. Even in the realistic novel a writer such as Saul Bellow offers us the impression of an author who is exploring new territory while so many British novelists seem to be retracing familiar ground. America has also set the pace in experimental fiction, as in the novels of Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon can be described as a **post-modernist** writer: the term suggests an experimental form of writing, which can be found in poetry and drama as well as in fiction, which moves beyond