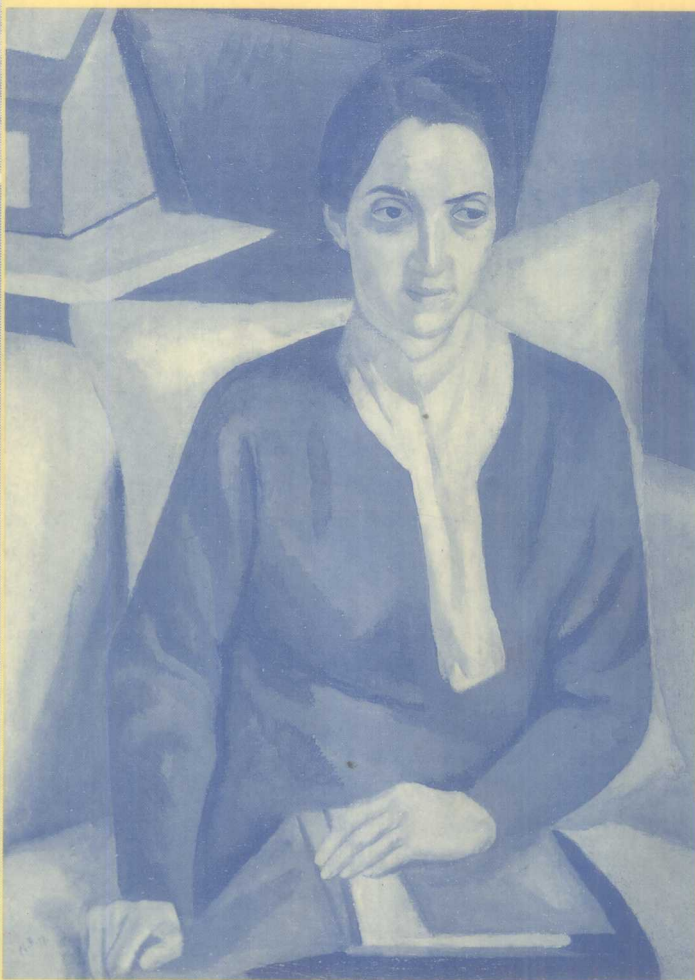


STUDYING LITERATURE

A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION



EDITED BY

GRAHAM ATKIN • CHRIS WALSH

SUSAN WATKINS

STUDYING LITERATURE: A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

Edited by Graham Atkin, Chris Walsh and
Susan Watkins

Chester College of Higher Education

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Preface

This book has been written with the needs of first-year undergraduate students of literature in mind. Typically, such students may well find themselves following some kind of foundation course or introductory module in literary studies as they start their degree programme at college or university. The help provided with the basics of studying literature at this level will vary in kind and extent from institution to institution. Some user-friendly departments put on courses tailored specifically to the requirements of their students; these courses really are foundational in nature, offering plenty of formal explicit guidance as to what is expected of literature students, perhaps supported by more informal tutorials to assist students individually. But many departments, for one reason or another, operate on a 'sink or swim' basis. In such cases students may find themselves plunged straight into a course such as 'Literature 1575–1660', and waters which to some might feel refreshing and invigorating, to others might seem choppy and icy. Where are such students to find help? However sympathetic the tutor there is a limit to the amount of help she can give; there are only so many hours in the day, and tutors have many responsibilities and duties (including research, administration and course development) over and above what appears on their teaching timetables. But in any case the overworked and underpaid tutor might reasonably expect the student to fend for herself at this level. Or the student might not feel inclined to approach her busy tutor for counselling on a matter which she regards as fairly elementary, her

difficulties notwithstanding. What then? For this is not an unusual situation. Despite the government's repeated attempts to encourage more students to opt for the sciences, engineering and other vocational courses at university, the fact remains that the arts and humanities in general, and English literature in particular (and its near-synonyms and variants: Literary/Cultural/Media/Communications Studies), continue to be the most popular area/subject at this level; and the demand shows no sign of diminishing. As the numbers entering higher education continue to expand and as literature departments are driven to find ever more ingenious ways of mounting quality courses while having to cope with very high intakes (with larger and larger classes bearing the brunt of expansion), the forlorn student left to her own devices is in danger of becoming a common phenomenon.

Where should she seek help if not from her lecturers? The college library? Libraries, in common with every other resource in higher education, have also come under severe pressure as student numbers have soared, as college budgets have been slashed and as students have been expected to become more independent as learners. If you are one of two hundred students trying to track down a book of which there are only four copies (and all of those on restricted loan) then you are likely to be disappointed. What about the college bookshop? Here the situation is scarcely better: the prices of many books have become prohibitive for someone struggling on a (shrinking) student grant. So where is there left to go for help?

This book has been designed to provide for that need. Planning it grew out of the actual experience of teaching a foundation course in literature to successive substantial intakes of first-year undergraduate students from very varied backgrounds and with widely differing expectations and abilities. Although most of the students who come to Chester College of Higher Education to study literature (normally as part of a combined studies degree) are standard literature 'A'-level entrants, there are many students who have taken instead the language 'A' level, or who have studied only a small amount of literature to date, including hardly any pre-twentieth-century texts and no poetry to speak of; then there are the mature 'access' students whose backgrounds in the subject vary enormously. More particularly, the book arose out of a programme of mass 'core' lectures in which members of the Department of English Literature endeavour to cover the fundamentals of degree-level literary study, in an attempt to give all literature students the kind of help, advice, encouragement and information that they so patently need. This book

tries to deal comprehensively and effectively with all of the appropriate issues and key topics and is, therefore, suitable not only as a set text on first-year undergraduate literature courses, but also as a handbook for students to use by themselves as they follow their programmes of study.

It is aimed at undergraduate students of literature in English (though much of the guidance given will also apply to those studying other literatures) especially those just entering higher education, whether at university or college. It is intended that students should read the book before they embark on a degree course, but the idea is that they should continue to make use of it throughout their first year (if not beyond). It may also be of some interest to those sixth-form and other students (and perhaps to their teachers) who are considering whether or not to study literature in higher education. It has been deliberately pitched at a realistic level: while some chapters may be more challenging to read than others, every attempt has been made in the book as a whole to be lucid, lively and accessible, without in any way talking down to the reader. Moreover, although the ground covered is substantial the book is reasonably concise. Above all, it is intended to be useful.

The book has also been designed to bridge a gap between skills-based publications and overtly theoretical studies. Thus the book starts by dealing with the practical skills required to study literature at this level. It then moves on to consider various aspects of studying literature in practice. Some fundamental issues of criticism and theory are examined towards the end. Where applicable further reading is suggested in brief, annotated bibliographies at the end of each chapter.

The book, then, combines academic rigour with pragmatism. The contributors, all of whom have experience of teaching in a busy English Department, are concerned throughout to offer practical guidance and helpful suggestions so that students are encouraged to think for themselves right from the start, thereby ensuring that they are well placed to progress further with, and succeed in, their literary studies. Each chapter has been written to be self-contained, though there are occasional cross-references between chapters. The whole book may, of course, be read straight through, in which case the alert reader will no doubt notice the differences of emphasis and approach of the nine contributors (though when it comes to practical advice the reader should not find that she is being counselled to do contradictory things). The guidelines offered here should apply wherever a student is studying literature in higher education though there will obviously always be slight variations in recommended good practice from place to place: readers should ask their tutors if in doubt.

In the case of the end-of-chapter notes, subsequent references to a text already cited are given within the chapter itself.

Throughout, personal pronouns are given in the feminine gender when referring to the reader, the student, the tutor. We adopt this convention simply because the overwhelming majority of people involved in the study of literature at this level are not men but women.

Finally, the editors would like to thank the various people who helped to make this book possible, including many colleagues and students, past and present, both at Chester and elsewhere. Chapter 2, in particular, could not have been written without the co-operation of several students, including: Corrine Adams, Peter Bursnell, Beryl Campbell, Mark Cox, Judith Crooks, Enys Davies, Christopher Goodwin, Julia Hatten, Lesley Hughes, Kate Lewis, Kerry Marsh, Thomas Plunkett, Annette Rubery, Martin Shaw, Adrian Smith, Caroline Wilson and Louise Woolmer. Jen Mawson's deftness with different word-processors proved to be invaluable. Finally, Jackie Jones, erstwhile of Harvester, is also owed a debt of gratitude for her support and advice in the early stages of the project.

Graham Atkin

Chris Walsh

Susan Watkins

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Introduction

Studying literature: probably no readers need to have the word 'studying' explained to them, though its etymology will be unfamiliar to many – it derives from the Latin *studere*, to be zealous. But what about the second term in the book's title, 'literature'? What *is* literature? Is not this term as straightforward as the first? Actually the question 'what is literature?' is more easily asked than answered and perhaps for this reason is more frequently ignored than squared up to.

All definitions involve setting limits, making decisions about what is to be ruled in and what is to be ruled out. Where trying to define literature is concerned the difficulties make themselves felt at once. 'Imaginative or fictional writing' will not quite do as a definition: biographies, diaries, essays, histories, philosophical works, political speeches, sermons and travel books do not in any obvious way conform to that definition, and yet instances of such texts by (respectively) Boswell, Pepys, Bacon, Gibbon, Mill, Burke, Newman and Hakluyt have traditionally been studied as 'literature' in the past. Moreover, some writings which are clearly fictional, such as Enid Blyton's Noddy books or Mills and Boon romances, are not usually classified as literature, or at least not as 'Literature'. Why is this? Is it because the average Mills and Boon romance is not as good in terms of the quality of its writing or the profundity of its understanding of human nature as the average novel by Austen or Dickens? This line of inquiry seems to be implying that we are dealing here not with measurable, objective criteria but with subjective value-

judgements. But whose values are we talking about? Where do these values come from?

Or consider the following list: science fiction, pornographic magazines, car manuals, detective thrillers, children's comic-strip stories, bus-tickets, runic inscriptions, newspaper reports, advertisements, chemistry textbooks, radio plays, legal documents, film-scripts, libretti, cookery books, plays without words, income tax forms, official notices in public parks. Which of these items, if any, would you feel justified in categorising as literature? And what would your reasons be for including or excluding specific items? Does literature have something to do with being non-ephemeral and non-practical (if not non-factual)? But who can say for sure that what we regard as ephemeral and topical today will not be the literature of tomorrow valued for its universal, timeless insights into the human condition?

Perhaps literature is 'creative' writing (thus ruling out bus-tickets anyway) as opposed to more 'utilitarian' writing? But what is meant by this word 'creative'? Is a creative (or 'literary') writer one who uses language in a particularly distinctive or inventive way compared with how most people use 'ordinary' language from day to day? The problem with this approach though is that 'literature' would have to include many adverts and political slogans (because of their obviously rhetorical nature) and would have to exclude certain kinds of factually based stories, the language of which might be wholly naturalistic and unremarkable. Perhaps, in the end, faced with such difficulties we have no option but to concede that to speak of literature as a wholly objective, non-controversial, water-tight category simply does not make much sense: 'literature' is whatever people agree to call literature. Not a very helpful description (certainly not a definition as such) but perhaps as good a description as we are likely to arrive at. Literature, in other words, is what readers such as you sign up to study in colleges and universities every year.

But even this minimalist, pragmatic description glosses over some awkward issues. For example, who decides what literature gets studied on university and college courses? Why is it that in the past some texts have had the seal of approval (the texts in what has become known as 'the canon') while others ('non-canonical' texts) have not? There is not the space here to explore such a question, important as it is.¹ What does matter though is that you register in your mind from the very outset of your literature course that the question 'what is literature?' is not the bland, innocent, uncomplicated question which some people blithely

assume it to be. For the phenomenon which you may be about to spend the next few years studying is not something to be taken for granted; on the contrary, as you will soon discover, the essence, in so far as there *is* an essence, of being a student of literature involves asking questions and generally being *critical* about all aspects of the process of (whatever is meant by) 'studying literature'.

The chapters which follow explore various facets of the study of literature at degree level. For convenience they are separated into two parts. The first part, 'Practical Skills for Studying Literature', has three chapters on studying, discussing and writing about literature. The second part, 'Studying Literature in Practice', sees the emphasis switch slightly to the actual process of reading and studying literary texts critically. The six chapters here cover the elements of linguistics, the activity of reading, the main literary genres (poetry, prose fiction, drama) and literary criticism and theory.

Merritt Moseley's opening chapter, 'Studying Literature', offers a wide-ranging and general discussion, the aim being to give the reader a clear sense of what is involved in studying the subject effectively and successfully. The chapter falls into three sections. The first section is on *attitudes*: What are the attitudes which students of literature need in order to study effectively? The second section is on *knowledge and skills*: What kinds of things do students need to know about, and know how to do, in order to succeed as students of literature? The third section is on *behaviour*: What sorts of behaviour make for the successful study of literature? Among the topics discussed in this chapter are time-management, using the library, note-taking and preparing for classes.

Bill Hughes in Chapter 2, 'Discussing Literature', develops this last point. He sets out to give first-year students of literature some basic co-ordinates to do with participating in, and learning from, the various types of classes they may attend in the course of their studies. He puts forward the model of the student as *active learner* rather than as observer and suggests that it is more helpful to think of the group discussion session as process rather than as product. This chapter is mostly devoted to a consideration of the different kinds of classes literature students are likely to encounter and some of the commoner learning and teaching methods used in them. The formal *lecture*, the *seminar*, the *student presentation* and *small group work*, are each discussed in turn and plenty of practical examples are given to illustrate the points made.

In Chapter 3, 'Writing about Literature', Jo Pryke sets out to introduce students to, and guide them through, the process of preparing for,

writing and learning from *critical essays* of the kind typically required in literature courses at university. The chapter begins by clarifying the purpose of essay-writing before moving on to discuss the various stages of the writing process, from *planning and drafting* through to *producing* the final version. Questions such as 'How much use should I make of the critics?' and 'How do I build a coherent argument into my essay structure?' are carefully considered. The chapter ends by looking at how to *learn* from the process of writing essays and how to improve from one essay to the next.

John Williams, in 'Thinking about Language' (Chapter 4), aims to heighten the language awareness of the student of literature and to demonstrate some of the ways in which the close careful study of language – apart from being interesting and valid in its own right – can be of considerable help in studying literature. The chapter also sets out to introduce students to a few of the basic terms and concepts of *linguistics* and to acquaint them with some elementary descriptive terms and tools of analysis for their own subsequent use. By the end of the chapter the student to whom language study is relatively unfamiliar should be in a stronger position to explore and analyse the 'raw material' of the literature she is studying.

Chris Walsh's aim in Chapter 5, 'Reading Literary Texts', is to encourage undergraduate students of literature to think about what is involved in the process of reading literary texts critically. The chapter has a theoretical dimension (ideas about the reading process) and a practical aspect (suggestions about how to become a more expert reader). It emphasises and illustrates the importance of reading as the activity upon which success in studying literature is based. It posits two kinds of reading: *basic* reading and *critical* reading. The first is the kind of reading most people do most of the time; the second is more sophisticated, more *self-conscious*, and involves asking certain *questions* about one's response to the text. The questions relate to: the *writer*, the *text*, the *reading process*, the *context* and *language*. The vexed issue of *reading and evaluation* is also briefly discussed. The chapter concludes by emphasising how there is no such thing as a single, fixed, 'correct' reading of a literary text, and by stressing the pleasures of interpretation.

Glyn Turton's subject in Chapter 6 is 'Reading Poetry'. The basic approach of this chapter is to show that *how a poem is read* by somebody depends on what that person thinks poetry is as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. To this end, the chapter first of all introduces students to selected views or *definitions of poetry* which show how the conception of