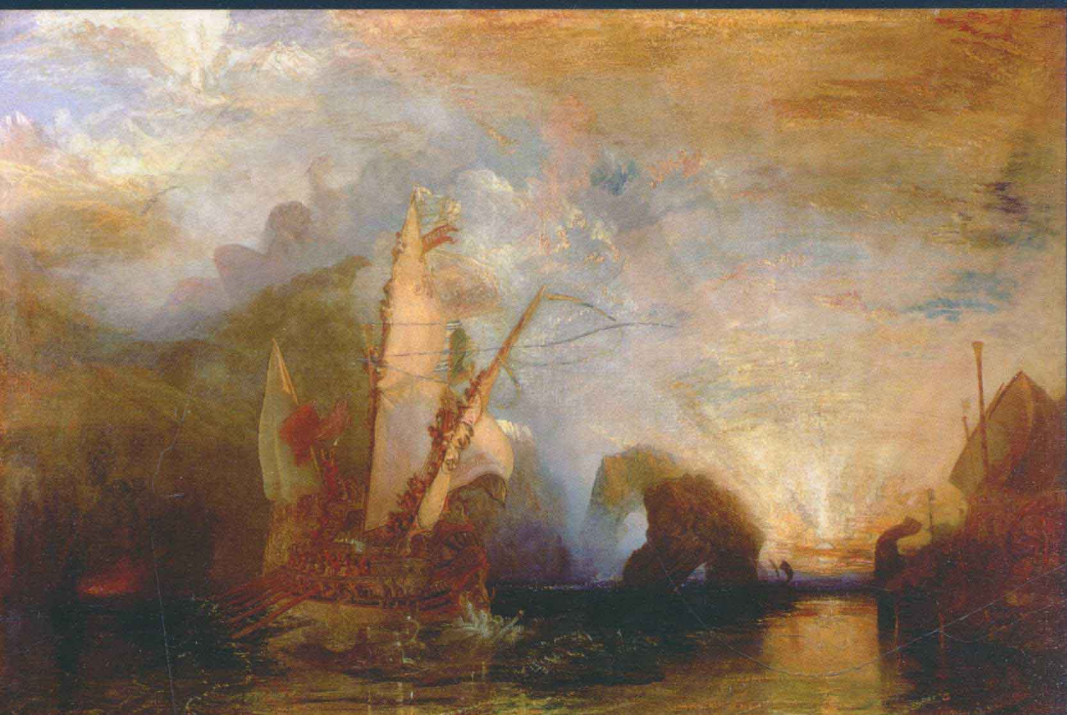


THE ENGLISH HANDBOOK

A Guide to Literary Studies



WILLIAM WHITLA

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Preface

T*he English Handbook: A Guide to Literary Studies* introduces students to the challenges, as well as the pleasure and power of literary studies in English. It is a “handbook” in the sense that it covers a wide range of topics that students are often uncertain about: they can discover pertinent information here or can locate it elsewhere by following the signposts given within. It is a “guide” because it maps contemporary literary studies in English systematically. The terms “English” and “literature” are slippery, and students are invited to join in the attractive enterprise of exploring them, first by gaining the required foundational skills, and then by applying them to the major genres of drama, prose fiction, and poetry. The study of English literature is serious and demanding, as the chapters on contemporary literary theory will make any reader realize, but it also is immensely rewarding and deeply satisfying. *The Handbook* supplies clear and accessible information about traditional materials that teachers assume students know (like sonnets, or irony, or how to analyze a poem by William Blake or Anne Sexton, or a chapter of Dickens or Atwood). As well, it provides a survey with applications of contemporary theoretical approaches – formalist, rhetorical, semiotic, structuralist, and poststructuralist – along with discussions of reading for gender issues, concerns about social status and class positions, and ethnic and other postcolonial interests. Throughout careful attention is paid to detailed reading of literary texts with numerous examples while promoting both a sympathetic response and a critical frame of mind. There are suggestions about further readings and web pages of interest; some web pages are institutional and refereed, others are personal, but usually have long-standing dependability or are housed on university or

college web sites. A description of each is given so that if the site is relocated it can be searched for. Companion web pages for this book provide additional examples, applications, and explanations, with tables and figures to further extend the topics in the book.

The introductory chapter in part I moves from general considerations about what literature is in a world of competing Englishes, through a discussion of the competition of writers and books for a place in the canon of literary stature, to an overview of literary history and the uses of literature.

Part II on foundational skills devotes three practical chapters to introduce literary study progressively. The second chapter, on ways of reading and annotation, shows students how to progress from a literal reading for content through analytical reading methods for form, argument and theme, associations, and context. Chapter 3 shows how to undertake research using printed resources, new library and computer technologies, and internet research capabilities. Chapter 4 demonstrates how to write a variety of writing assignments, particularly analytical or academic essays, from initial planning through the thesis statement to final revisions and submission. Throughout attention is given to computer skills that students can use in their own research, critical reading, and writing.

The three chapters of part III concern the major genres, drama, prose fiction, and poetry. They and their subgenres are defined and explained, their elements are summarized, and each chapter has a brief sketch of the genre's literary history. Traditional and contemporary approaches to analysis and interpretation of each genre are outlined.

Part IV, on theory consists of three culminating chapters. Chapter 8 surveys three fields that are foundational for English studies: linguistics, rhetoric, and stylistics. Chapter 9 traces the contemporary theoretical approaches to literature that derive from the study of language in the twentieth century: genre, formalism (both Russian Formalism and New Criticism), semiotics, and an overview of the impact of structuralism and poststructuralism. *The Handbook* concludes with chapter 10 on the politics of reading, dealing with the controversial topics of gender, class, and ethnicity (considering especially feminist, materialist, and postcolonial literary strategies).

Because it gathers together a wide range of traditional and contemporary materials often hard to locate in a systematic form, *The English Handbook* will be useful for both senior secondary-school students, those beginning English studies at college or university, and more advanced students throughout their careers.

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Several generations of students at York University have smoothed the edges of earlier drafts of this *Handbook*. My graduate students in literary theory have offered questions, discussions, definitions, explanations, and helpful commentary. Undergraduate classes in English studying literature and theory and the major genres, and Humanities classes in comedy, tragedy, and fantasy; and in various period courses from the classics to the moderns – all have suggested improvements. Special thanks go to Victor Shea for valuable editorial help, and to Marilou McKenna for suggestions and clarifications, as well as to Stacey Allison-Cassin, Ann Drake, Terry Garfield, Stuart Gelzer, Ruth Griffiths, Arthur Haberman, Lisa Haberman, Peter C. Herman, Meredith Hill, Greg Kelly, Pauline Kestevan-Smith, Greg Pruden, Carol Ricker-Wilson, Lynda Robinson, Dylani Shea, and the anonymous and knowledgeable referees and appraisers from Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, whose thoughtful suggestions have improved the book in many ways. My editors at Wiley-Blackwell have been sources of help and support: Isobel Bainton, Emma Bennett, Louise Butler, Caroline Clamp, and Hannah Morrell, as well as Belle Mundy with gratitude for copy editing, and the Wiley-Blackwell production staff. My family has been wonderfully loving and supportive throughout, especially Nancy, more than she knows.

W. W.
Toronto

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PART I

Introduction

Introduction

Chapter 1 introduces the complex changes of the two central terms in English Studies, *Literature* and *English*. Literature is often under siege for being elitist, or, the opposite, for involving too many books of questionable merit. English is being transformed by new words, idioms, and accents, as well as by conflicts between street and classroom English. Within these changing values, the first chapter looks at the ways that literature can be both useful and enjoyable, how it is involved in battles over what constitutes the literary for different kinds of readers, and how these disputes are not new in the history of literature. Indeed, a study of the history of literature serves to contextualize these debates in fresh and interesting ways. One key way involves the Internet, where the debates are everywhere evident, and whose almost inexhaustible riches are causing vast changes in how research can be conducted and in what materials are available for literary study. The companion web site associated with this book gives much further information on the contents of each chapter, with relevant links to a multitude of web resources. Finally, the introductory chapter draws some distinctions between the interpretation of literature and the analysis of particular texts, anticipating that students will find gratification and satisfaction in each.

1

What is English and What is Literature?

To study “English” might mean to study the language to learn to speak or write it; or it might mean to study English literature. But would that also include American or Canadian literature? Is “British” literature different from or a part of English Literature? And by “literature” do we mean only literature written in English? What about French or Spanish literature, or African or European literature? Our questioning can push us even further. Does “literature” mean only the masterpieces, or can popular fiction be included? Who draws the line, and where?

“English” and “Literature”: The Subject in Question

Both “English” and “Literature” are not straightforward terms. In fact, both have become subjects of controversy in recent years, as different language groups seek to redefine “English” to be more inclusive than just the language or languages spoken by the people of England, and “literature” to become more than a nation’s great books. Indeed, “English” as an adjective is often elevated into the status of a noun (English as the English language, or English Literature, or English culture). As “the English” it may refer to the people of England, or the English as opposed to the Celtic peoples, or the whole of the people of Britain, perhaps including the whole of Ireland, perhaps not.

English and Englishes

While English is the language that some users of this book can call “my own language,” it is also “the Queen’s English” or the “official” language

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in different parts of the world. English refers to what is commonly accepted at schools and universities as “Standard” written English (SWE), often called “formal English,” namely the form of English that educated English speakers around the world agree about. As a language, English is made up of a large body of Teutonic vocabulary dating from when the Britons were conquered by the Angles and Saxons in the fifth century, and it was greatly modified by French words (along with Latin) from the time of the Norman conquest (1066 CE). Since then, English has been modified by all of those nations with whom it has interacted, with the languages of Europe, India and South-East Asia, China, Africa, and more recently, the United States and Canada. It is far from “pure” then, and has many levels of speech and writing, from formal to colloquial, from slang and swearing to oaths and law courts, from baby talk to political rhetoric, from e-mail shorthand and constantly changing street jargon to elegy and prayer. Standard written English, then, is not a fixed form of the language. Variants of SWE are constantly introduced, from numerous ethnic language groups, from regional dialects and accents, and from local practice in a city neighborhood. These variants, particularly when they become more or less established on their own, have been given the name “Englishes” to signify both their relation to SWE and also their partial independence from it.

Literature

When the Latin writer Quintilian wrote the *Institutes of Oratory* (c.95 CE) he translated the Greek word for grammar (*gramma*: letter) as *litteratura* (Lat. *littera*: a letter). So *litteratura* originally meant grammar, and a *litteratus* was a learned person who knew the rules of grammar. From the time of the Italian Renaissance, letters meant not only knowledge of reading and writing, but also knowledge of the languages of the classical world, Greek and Latin. So knowing your classical letters meant knowing the literature and the culture of the ancient world of the Greeks and Romans. By extension, literature came to refer also to the works read by a learned person. When Renaissance thinkers, especially in fifteenth-century Italy, recovered the classical heritage, they extended the meaning of letters and literature to include writings in Italian, and sixteenth-century English writers took over these notions, labeling what they considered important writing as English literature.

Hence, literature became a means of passing on to the present age the values and the cultural system from generation to generation; it even included the criteria of beauty and the morality of the classical texts. By a further extension, literature meant the passing on to succeeding generations of everything

written that was held of value in a national culture (whether that of England, the United States, or any other country). Each nation, then, understood literature as a primary means of passing on one's cultural heritage through written texts that were valued above their rivals. Such works were called the "classics" of a culture. By this means, an inherited culture that was valued and passed on came to be understood as the "best" that a nation could produce, the summit of its literary art. This view sets literature off from other forms of writing as a culture's highest expression. Literature by this account is a repository of high art, and is a chief means whereby a cultural elite is formed to dominate the cultural institutions in a society. This view of literature, developed by Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century, was extended by the social critic and poet T. S. Eliot in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and these views prevailed in the literary period known as Modernism.

Arnold's famous notion that literature or culture is "the best that has been thought and known in the world" has been attacked for aligning literature with a social elite, an aristocracy of learning, comprising those who have learned the best books at the best schools and so are thereby prepared to govern the best country (say, Britain or America) in the best way. Attacks on such elitism have broadened and democratized the sense of what literature is, to include various kinds of writing and performance, ranging widely over social classes, and historical periods and geographical areas: popular literature, documentations of all kinds, newspapers, dialect writing, personal jottings, and even pornography.

English literature as a school and university subject emerged in the nineteenth century in the United Kingdom, the British Empire, and the United States (see Baldick 1983; Eagleton 1996; Graff 1987). Teaching literature until the end of the nineteenth century consisted chiefly of one of three methods: an application of modes similar to those used in studying the Greek and Latin classics through minute philological and grammatical analysis line by line; a declamation of passages from Shakespeare, Milton, or some other author with a little commentary; or impressionistic thoughts expressed in the presence of a text. Little attempt was made to offer detailed comment on content or argument, or to relate any work to its author or historical context, all methods that became commonplace in the twentieth century. It was a difficult task to make English literature into an academic subject of scholarly application and critical analysis.

English literature is different from "literature in English," which might include American, African, or Caribbean literature. Shakespeare wrote at the time that the Virginia colony was being established in what would become the United States, but well before the establishment of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa – yet students in these countries