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LITERATURE HANDBOOK

A GUIDE TO LITERARY ANALYSIS

ROBERT BEARDWOOD

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INTRODUCTION

The *Literature Handbook* is a guide to the analysis of English literature. It is aimed at senior secondary students who are faced with the sometimes daunting challenge of analysing a literary work without having a strong grasp of its context. That context might be historical, or generic, or stylistic, or a combination of all three. Then, too, there is the challenge of language – the language of literary analysis, which is simultaneously specific, diverse and rapidly evolving. It dates back to Aristotle, and to Greek terms such as *hubris* and *catharsis*; it became broadly humanist (and elitist) in the 18th and 19th centuries, then moved in more pluralist directions in the 20th century under the influence of various theories of language, knowledge, psychology and social organisation. Chapter 9 provides a summary of literary theories, demonstrating the range of ways in which literary texts can be interpreted, but it is important not to lose sight of the significance of historical context and of the conventions of form and genre established in the earlier chapters.

This book seeks to provide a sound basis for the numerous strands of literary criticism by explaining the main literary periods, styles and forms, always with a focus on ways in which meaning is constructed in and through language, and on how the literary critic can examine and analyse the literary work. The selection of textual examples is based on texts commonly studied in Australian classrooms, and on what might serve as an apt, and readily understood, illustration of the technique or concept being explored.

The resulting overview of English literature will hopefully serve as an introduction to the variety and constant reinvention of this art form. The task in the senior English classroom is mostly that of analysis, but underpinning this is a sense of pleasure, curiosity and wonder. If the *Literature Handbook* assists students both to write better essays and to seek to widen their reading and enjoyment of literature, it will have achieved its purpose.

CHAPTER 1

A TIME LINE OF WESTERN LITERATURE

Literature has been part of human culture for a very long time: people have always told stories and passed them on from generation to generation as a way of making sense of life and of enhancing its beauty and significance.

At first these stories were oral, remembered and recited by particular individuals. The epic narrative poems usually attributed to Homer, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, from around the 8th century BC (about 2800 years ago), were initially in this form, before they were written down for preservation. Later epics from ancient Rome – of which Virgil's *Aeneid* (written in about 29–19 BC) is the most celebrated – were written down in the act of composition, and this became the main way in which literary texts were created from around the 13th century. Many works from the late medieval and Renaissance periods – such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (around 1308–20) and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (from the late 1300s) – remain central in the literary canon.

From the time the first universities were established in the late Middle Ages (the universities of Oxford and Cambridge were established in 1249 and 1284 respectively), the literature of ancient Greece and Rome formed the basis of academic literary studies. These works were studied in their original languages: Ancient Greek or Latin. It was with the rise of the British public school system in the 19th century that the study of English literature became an integral part of the school curriculum.

English only became an important discipline in English universities in the early 20th century. Nevertheless, English literature, like the literature of every other nation, has been discussed and debated for hundreds of years, in books, magazines and newspapers, classrooms and lecture theatres, and now – in the 21st century – on radio, television and the internet.

Historical time line

1000 BC — 450 AD — 1550

	Ancient Greek and Roman civilisations	Middle Ages / Medieval period
AUTHORS & TEXTS	**Poetry:** Homer (Greek), *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad* (both 8th century BC) Virgil (Roman), *The Aeneid* (29–19 BC) Horace (Roman), *Odes* (23 BC) **Drama:** Aeschylus (Greek), *The Oresteia* (458 BC) Euripides (Greek), *Medea* (431 BC) Sophocles (Greek), *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC)	*Beowulf* (anon.), written in Old English possibly during the 8th century Dante (Italian), *Divine Comedy*: epic poem, written in an early form of Italian in the early 14th century Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*: sequence of narrative poems, written in Middle English during the late 14th century Thomas Wyatt helped introduce the sonnet to English literature in the early 16th century
LITERARY FORMS	**Epic poetry:** a long narrative poem about a hero; initially read aloud **Drama:** Greek tragedy and comedy established the basic forms for these genres	**Poetry:** narrative poetry and lyrics **Drama:** mystery plays and morality plays demonstrated Christian stories and virtues
EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS	The Greek civilisation roughly 800–300 BC: a collection of city-states linked by a common language and artistic heritage The Peloponnesian War fought between city-states of Athens and Sparta 431–04 BC Roman Empire roughly 300 BC to 400s AD	Norman conquest of England 1066 Printing with movable metal type used in Europe from 1450s Columbus landed in the Bahamas ('discovering' America) 1492 Henry VIII established the Church of England in 1534

Note: authors included in this time line are British unless otherwise indicated.

1603 1700

Elizabethan period	Jacobean period / Restoration
Poetry: Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (books I–III, 1590; republished with books IV–VI, 1596) William Shakespeare, sequence of 154 sonnets John Donne, sonnets and songs **Drama:** Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine* (1590), *Doctor Faustus* (first performed 1594) William Shakespeare,* *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *Hamlet* (1601)	William Shakespeare,* *King Lear* (1606), *Macbeth* (1606) Ben Jonson, *Volpone* (1606) John Webster, *The White Devil* (1612), *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (epic narrative poem, 1667)
Poetry: sonnets (14-line poems, usually about love) were popular; often written in sequences (known as 'cycles') and distributed in court circles **Drama:** tragedy and comedy were developed to a high level of complexity and popularity, particularly by Shakespeare	**Drama:** Jacobean tragedy in early 1600s Restoration comedy (the 'comedy of manners') in late 1600s
Queen Elizabeth I reigned 1558–1603 Consolidation of the (Protestant) Church of England English military and trade strength increased Defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 displayed English naval strength Cultural activity flourished	James I reigned 1603–25 English Civil War 1642–51 Theatres closed 1642–60 Charles I beheaded 1649 Restoration of the monarchy 1660

AUTHORS & TEXTS
LITERARY FORMS
EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

* Years given for Shakespearean plays are approximate years of first performance.

Historical time line

1700 — late 1700s — 1837

	18th century	Romanticism / Regency period
AUTHORS & TEXTS	Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* (narrative poem, 1712) Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1749) Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas* (1759) Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)	**Novels:** Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Emma* (1815) Sir Walter Scott, *Rob Roy* (1817), *Ivanhoe* (1819) Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) **Poetry:** William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord (George) Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, William Blake
LITERARY FORMS	**Novels:** the first English novels were published **Poetry:** the Augustan poets (e.g. Pope) emphasised form, restraint, elegance First English dictionary was published (1755), written by Samuel Johnson	**Novels:** Austen's novels reflect middle- and upper-middle-class lives and concerns *Frankenstein* reflects the concerns of Romanticism: love of nature, scepticism towards science and technology **Poetry:** emphasised the expression of feeling and an appreciation of beauty, especially of nature; rejected urban, industrialised society; the ode and the lyric were popular forms
EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS	Rise of the middle classes meant more educated people with money and time to read American Declaration of Independence 4 July 1776 French Revolution 1789 overthrew the monarchy/aristocracy In Australia: First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay 1788; colony of New South Wales founded as a convict settlement	Regency period 1811–20 The Industrial Revolution led to population movements from the country to the city Slavery abolished in the British Empire 1834 Rise of nationalism across Europe In Australia: colonies of Tasmania (1856) and South Australia (1834) established; Port Phillip District (1836) later became Victoria (1851) Convict transportation to New South Wales ceased 1842; to Tasmania ceased 1853

1900

Victorian period

AUTHORS & TEXTS

Novels: Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852–53)

George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–72)

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891)

Poetry: Robert Browning

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Christina Rossetti

Walt Whitman (US)

Emily Dickinson (US)

Charles Baudelaire (France)

Stéphane Mallarmé (France)

Drama: Henrik Ibsen (Norway), *A Doll's House* (1879), *Hedda Gabler* (1891)

Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windemere's Fan* (1892), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

Anton Chekhov (Russia), *Three Sisters* (1901), *The Cherry Orchard* (1904)

LITERARY FORMS

Novels: More critical than previously of social aspects, e.g. poverty and exploitation of working classes, restrictions on women's lives

Publication in serial and multi-volume formats led to wide readerships

Poetry: Dramatic monologue developed by Browning and Tennyson

Formal structures, rhyming and conventional rhythms remained important

Drama: More naturalistic forms were developed by Ibsen and Chekhov to represent ordinary people and situations

Wilde perfected the 'comedy of manners'

EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Queen Victoria reigned 1837–1901

Mass production replaced 'cottage' industries

Common land broken up into privately owned blocks

Education became universally available and compulsory in England and Wales after the *Elementary Education Act 1870* was passed

American Civil War 1861–65; slavery abolished 1865

In Australia:

- Marcus Clarke published *His Natural Life* in serial form in 1870–72
- Heidelberg School of landscape painters in the 1880s and 1890s, including Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, established a distinctly Australian style of art
- Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton published stories in late 1890s and early 1900s
- Poetry by Henry Lawson and 'Banjo' Paterson celebrated the bush lifestyle

Historical time line

1900 — around 1950

Modernism

AUTHORS & TEXTS

Novels and short stories: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

Franz Kafka (Czech Republic), 'The Metamorphosis' (1915)

James Joyce (Ireland), *Ulysses* (1922)

F Scott Fitzgerald (US), *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

Marcel Proust (France), *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27)

DH Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928)

Poetry: TS Eliot (US/UK), *The Waste Land* (1922)

WB Yeats (Ireland)

WH Auden (UK/US)

Amy Lowell (US)

HD (Hilda Doolittle, US)

Marianne Moore (US)

Ezra Pound (US/UK/Italy)

Wallace Stevens (US)

William Carlos Williams (US)

Drama: Luigi Pirandello (Italy), *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)

Bertolt Brecht (Germany), *Mother Courage* (1939), *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944)

LITERARY FORMS

Much experimentation with form and a breaking down of older ideas and conventions

World War I had a major impact on writers, undermining confidence in authority figures and in traditional social structures and institutions

Novels used 'stream of consciousness', unreliable narrators; addressed 'taboo' subjects such as sexuality

Poetry used free verse (no systematic rhyming or rhythmic scheme)

Drama broke down conventions for representing people in a realistic fashion

EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

World War I 1914–18

Spanish Civil War 1936–39

World War II 1939–45

Suffragettes campaigned for women to have the right to vote:

- achieved in Australia in 1902
- achieved in England for women over 30 in 1918

Expressionism: artistic movement; advocated the strong expression of emotion in distorted or grotesque forms

Surrealism: artistic movement; combined objects in unlikely ways and contexts

2000

Postmodernism

AUTHORS & TEXTS

Novels and short stories: Vladimir Nabokov (Russia/US), *Lolita* (1955)

Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), *Ficciones* (1962)

Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962)

Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967)

Kurt Vonnegut (US), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

Italo Calvino (Italy), *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979)

Poetry: 'Beat' poets (US): Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac

John Ashbery (US)

Frank O'Hara (US)

Elizabeth Bishop (US)

Robert Lowell (US)

Carol Ann Duffy

Jennifer Maiden (Australia)

John Forbes (Australia)

Drama: Arthur Miller (US), *Death of a Salesman* (1949)

Samuel Beckett (Ireland), *Waiting for Godot* (1953)

John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (1956)

Eugène Ionesco (Romania/France), *Rhinoceros* (1959)

Caryl Churchill, *Serious Money* (1987)

LITERARY FORMS

Continued experimentation with form, often in a more playful way than in modernist writing

Novels: use of multiple narrators, fragmented forms, ambiguity and lack of closure

Poetry: much experimentation with form, style and content, including free verse; the playful arrangement of words (and sometimes punctuation) on the page; informal and colloquial language; allusions to popular culture; and more overtly political content

Drama: Beckett and absurdist theatre abandoned traditional plot and character conventions

More interest in working-class identities and concerns

Use of colloquial language

EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Vietnam War 1959–75

Cold War from 1945: massive build-up of nuclear weapons by US and USSR followed by the collapse of the USSR in 1991

Electronic media (radio, television) became much more prominent compared to print media

Internet developed during the 1970s with rapid expansion throughout 1990s

In Australia:

- immigration from Europe (esp. in 1950s and 1960s) and Southeast Asia (esp. in 1970s)
- Whitlam government (1972–75) improved women's rights; recognised Aboriginal land rights; funded the arts and education
- Australia Council for the Arts founded in 1967; Australian Film Commission in 1975

Historical time line: 20th-century movements

	Postcolonialism	Feminism / second-wave feminism
AUTHORS & TEXTS	Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Salman Rushdie (India/UK/US), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The Satanic Verses* (1988) Toni Morrison (US), *Beloved* (1987) Arundhati Roi (India), *The God of Small Things* (1997) Mudrooroo (Australia), *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) Sally Morgan (Australia), *My Place* (1987) Kim Scott (Australia), *Benang* (1999)	Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Simone de Beauvoir (France), *The Second Sex* (1949) Betty Friedan (US), *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Sylvia Plath (US/UK), *Ariel* (1965) Germaine Greer (Australia/UK), *The Female Eunuch* (1970) Helen Garner (Australia), *Monkey Grip* (1977) Margaret Atwood (Canada), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)
LITERARY FORMS	Writers from colonies or former colonies of European nations became more prominent; often strongly critical of colonial powers and their exploitation of indigenous peoples Salman Rushdie coined the expression 'The empire writes back'; the English language became an instrument for 'writing back' (expressing the experiences of the dispossessed in the language of the coloniser)	Writing by women became increasingly prominent after World War II Experimentation with narrative point of view and style to develop a feminist or feminine writing style Feminist writers published nonfiction as well as novels, poetry and drama
EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS	Australian colonies federated in 1901; Aboriginal people counted in census from 1967 India independent of British rule from 1947 Indonesia independent of Dutch rule from 1945 Vietnam independent of French rule from 1954 East Timor independent of Indonesian rule from 2002	Following World War II, women increasingly moved into professions traditionally dominated by men, e.g. medicine, law, politics Women gained more control over reproduction through: • introduction of the birth control pill (early 1960s) • liberalisation of abortion laws (from 1967 in UK)

Global trends (popular, mainstream)

AUTHORS & TEXTS

JRR Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954)

Frederick Forsyth, *The Day of the Jackal* (1967)

Stephen King (US), *The Shining* (1977)

Thomas Harris (US), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988)

John Grisham (US), *The Firm* (1991)

Patricia Cornwell (US), *Body of Evidence* (1991)

Colleen McCullough (Australia), *The Thorn Birds* (1977)

Bryce Courtenay (South Africa/Australia), *The Power of One* (1989)

Tim Winton (Australia), *Cloudstreet* (1991)

LITERARY FORMS

Novels: traditional forms continued to be used, generally receiving wider and bigger readerships and audiences than experimental forms

Blockbuster novels sold millions of copies; often adapted to film

Poetry became less widely read and known

Drama: mainstream forms continued within national dramatic traditions, e.g. in the US (Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller) and Australia (David Williamson, Hannie Rayson)

The musical became the dominant form of theatre, e.g. Rodgers and Hammerstein (*Oklahoma!*, *The Sound of Music*); Andrew Lloyd Webber (*Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*)

EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Hollywood cinema globally dominant in terms of distribution

Indian film industry became the largest in the world

In Australia:

- Australian literature began to be recognised in universities from the 1960s
- Patrick White won the 1973 Nobel Prize in Literature
- rise of Australian film industry in 1970s, including early films directed by Peter Weir (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*), Fred Schepisi (*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*), Bruce Beresford (*Breaker Morant*) and Gillian Armstrong (*My Brilliant Career*)

Historical time line: 21st-century developments

AUTHORS & NOVELS

JK Rowling, the *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007)

Stephanie Meyer (US), the *Twilight* novels (2005–08)

Dan Brown (US), *The Da Vinci Code* (2008)

Stieg Larsson (Sweden), the *Millennium* trilogy (2005–07)

Suzanne Collins (US), the *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008–10)

Jonathan Franzen (US), *The Corrections* (2001)

Hilary Mantel, the *Wolf Hall* trilogy (2009–20)

Kate Grenville (Australia), the *Secret River* trilogy (2005–11)

Richard Flanagan (Australia), *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013)

LITERARY FORMS

Breakdown of clear distinctions between literary and other genres of writing

Many crossovers into film

Film still a dominant form but DVDs and online streaming services provide alternatives to cinemas

Increasing interest in nonfiction

Growth of online publishing and blogs

Development of multimodal texts, including graphic novels and digital books

EVENTS & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

India and China became global powers with huge labour forces; India moved to the forefront of the IT industry

Terrorists flew hijacked planes into the World Trade Center, New York in 2001, beginning the 'war on terror'

US invaded Iraq in 2003 with the UK and Australia as allies

Global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007–08 caused a severe financial downturn

Climate change began to be recognised as a major global challenge

The Arab Spring beginning in 2010 led to popular uprisings and the overthrow of dictatorships in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen

Me Too global protest movement (from 2017) against sexual harassment and assault, particularly in the workplace, through the use of the hashtag #MeToo on social media

Many Western countries legalised same-sex marriage, beginning with the Netherlands in 2001, and including Australia (2017)

CLASSIFYING LITERATURE

CHAPTER 2

Given the long history of both literature and literary criticism, it makes sense that literary texts are organised and divided into a number of forms and genres, so that similar texts can be discussed and considered together. Forms of texts include novels, short stories, poems, plays, biographies and memoirs; the form of a text greatly influences the kind of experience we will have when we read or view it.

Each form can be subdivided into genres – for example, the novel has subgroups of literary classics, science fiction, historical novels and so on. Each of these genres has its own conventions that determine how a text generates meaning and is understood by its readers or audiences.

Two other important ways of classifying literary works are by:

- historical periods
- literary movements and styles.

There are, of course, significant overlaps between these two groupings. The first highlights a text's historical context; the second focuses more on the text's language and the ideas and world views it explores.

Although literary periods and styles are logically considered in chronological order, as they are in this chapter, this doesn't imply any sense of progress or improvement. All writers work with – and against – the literary texts that have come before their own, and they in turn influence the writers who come after. They draw on existing conventions, and also adapt and subvert these conventions to suit the values and concerns of their own times.

Conventions and features of texts

Conventions are the means and ways in which each form of text:

- tells a story
- represents individuals (their thoughts, feelings and actions) and the societies to which they belong
- entices the reader or audience into the world of the text.

These conventions help us know what to expect when we read a text, go to the theatre or listen to a poem being read aloud.

The conventions and features of the main literary forms and genres are summarised in the following tables.

Form: **Novel** – a long work of fiction (usually 50 000 words or more)
Writer: **Novelist**

Main conventions	Key features	Genres
• The text is composed of chapters. • The narrative usually has a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. • Main characters are well developed, multi-faceted, and interact in complex and evolving ways. • Minor characters have special functions even if they are not well rounded; they can be stereotypes or sketches but nevertheless cast light on main characters and ideas. • There is some depiction of the characters' social, cultural and material context, the qualities of the broader society and dominant concerns of the time.	• Characters typically include a protagonist, major characters and minor characters. • The narrative voice is usually third person or first person. • The narrative leads to a climax (or sometimes an anticlimax). • Settings provide a physical context for the characters and events. There are usually several important settings and the time frame generally covers a number of years. • Symbols/images give a sense of time and place, and of the novel's broader concerns.	• literary fiction • historical fiction • crime fiction • romance • science fiction • fantasy • gothic • horror • blockbuster

Form: **Short story** – a short work of fiction (up to around 10 000 words); usually published in a literary magazine or a book-length collection of short stories

Writer: **Short-story writer**

Main conventions	Key features	Genres
• A short story is much shorter than a novel, with less development of characters and plot. • It typically focuses on a specific situation and short period of time; it can also focus on one aspect of a character. • A short story can end with a swift resolution of tension, or on a note of uncertainty about the future.	• Compared to a novel, a short story has fewer characters, generally with only one or two created in detail. • There is usually a single main setting. • Language choices are often highly significant due to the short story's condensed, concentrated form.	• Collections can be grouped in genre, e.g. science fiction-stories; mystery stories. • Collections can also be based on a theme or a year of publication, and can include stories from a range of genres.

Form: **Drama or play** – a story enacted on a stage for an audience; usually a work of the imagination but can be based on fact

Writer: **Dramatist** or **playwright**

Main conventions	Key features	Genres
• The terms 'print text' (or 'play script') and 'performance text' are often used to distinguish between the written and enacted forms of a play. • A play is composed of acts divided into scenes; shorter plays may only have scenes. • In 20th- and 21st-century drama, characters usually talk in a realistic fashion (appropriate to their class, historical period and cultural context). • In Shakespearean drama, most lines are written as poetry (in blank verse), using stylised language and a regular rhythm. • The ending usually resolves dramatic tension.	• The play script contains the characters' dialogue as well as stage directions. • Characters are played by actors, and the performance depends partly on the interaction between actors and audience. • Settings are created through sets, props, lighting and sound, including background music. These elements are often (but not always) indicated by the stage directions. • Actors enhance and supplement the meaning of their lines with gestures, facial expressions, movements, and elements of delivery such as tone and pace.	• tragedy • comedy • many variations of the above, e.g. 'revenge tragedy', 'comedy of manners'

Form: **Poem** – a stylised work, focusing on language and imagery; usually short, though epic poems are as long as novels

Writer: **Poet**

Main conventions	Key features	Genres
• The 'narrator' of a poem is referred to as the speaker. • A poem tends to have less narrative drive than prose fiction or drama. • Poetry has less character development than prose narratives. • There is a strong focus on language patterns and subtleties of meaning; connotations of words are as important as their literal meanings. • There are many levels or layers of meaning: literal, metaphorical, symbolic and philosophical.	• Line lengths are determined by the poet rather than by the width of the page. • Imagery, including metaphor and symbol, is widely used. • Rhyme and rhythm schemes (or lack of) are very important to the poem's meaning. • The sound of words is often important to their sense. • A poem can focus on a single moment, image or feeling.	• epic • dramatic monologue • lyric • sonnet • ode • haiku • elegy • free verse • blank verse

Form: **Biography, autobiography, memoir** – the story of part or all of a real person's life

Writer: **Biographer** for biography; otherwise **writer** or **author**

Main conventions	Key features	Genres
• Real people and places are described; information is primarily factual rather than invented. • The narrative is mainly chronological, although flashbacks can be used.	• One person's life is at the centre of the narrative. • The narrative voice is first person for autobiography and memoir, and third person for biography.	• biography • autobiography • memoir

Form: **Essay** – a short piece of prose writing (1000 to 5000 words) exploring and expressing the writer's view on a topic

Writer: **Essayist**

Main conventions	Key features	Genres
• Essayists give a truthful account of their viewpoint. • Statements of fact are accurate, supported by evidence and logic.	• The language style is usually formal and complex. • Opinions and judgements are expressed in a rational, reasoned manner.	• argumentative • expository • reflective

Conventions and writing

The conventions and features of literary forms are critical to the writing process. The writer is guided by these conventions in terms of how the text is constructed from its component elements and features such as:

- narrative point of view
- characterisation
- language tone and style.

Conventions and features of texts are crucial to the ways in which writers can express ideas and viewpoints. For example, plays belonging to the genres of comedy and tragedy present strongly contrasting views of human nature and society.

Comedy	Tragedy
◆ Has a happy ending (such as a marriage). ◆ Conveys a generally positive or optimistic view of society.	◆ Ends with death or the destruction of relationships. ◆ Presents a criticism of society or individual human behaviour.

Conventions and reading

Just as writers use the conventions of a form or genre when they are creating a text, readers depend on these conventions in order to make sense of and draw meaning from a text. When we read a novel, for example, we know to begin at the start of the narrative, and we expect to be drawn into an imaginary world of characters, objects, places and incidents that will be continuously sustained until the end of the book. A collection of poems, stories or essays, on the other hand, has no such continuity.

Reading a play is different again: we understand that the words on the page are meant for performance. We know that acting techniques (gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice) as well as props, costumes, sets, sounds and lighting are all needed for a full theatrical experience of the script. Many, though not all, of these features are indicated by the stage directions of the print text.

When you are analysing a text, always keep in mind its particular form and give attention to features of the text that are special to that form.

Reading for meaning

In its simplest form, the meaning of a text is its 'take-home message': it is what you are left with after you have read the text and absorbed its language and feeling, its characters and plot, its dramatic tension and resolution.

Unlike a simple message, though, a literary text can have many meanings, and different readers will not necessarily agree about what these meanings are. Moreover, what the text means to its author may not always be what its readers or audiences understand it to mean.

This is largely because literary texts produce meaning on several different levels. The surface level, the literal meaning, is straightforward; however, the other layers of meaning are not stated explicitly, but are suggested, hinted at or implied – in short, left for the reader to determine.

Literal and inferred meaning

The **literal** meaning of any text is the surface meaning: what happens, where and when it happens, and to whom. The literal meaning comes from what the text states explicitly, and from the literal or dictionary meanings of words.

Inferred meanings are those understood or deduced by the reader on the basis of what the text suggests or implies. They are not as clear-cut or absolute as literal meanings, but in some ways they are much more significant. Inferred meanings contribute to the emotional impact of a text, and they create different levels or layers of meaning.

Layers of meaning

A literary text is not like a newspaper report, which aims to deliver facts and figures to the reader. In a literary text, words and images are deliberately chosen to raise a range of emotions and ideas in the reader's mind. It is in these emotions and ideas that the text's deeper meanings and significance are found. However, because these meanings are suggested or implied, readers will identify them in different ways.

A text produces layers of meaning using a number of techniques. Four of the most important are discussed on the next page.

Connotations

Connotations are the associations of words. For example, the literal meaning of red is the colour, but its connotations include speed, passion and danger. Which connotation is evoked depends on the context: in 'the red sports car roared down the street', red suggests speed; but in 'the red roses glowed in the soft light', red suggests romance. In Sylvia Plath's poem 'Tulips', the colour red has more threatening connotations: the flowers by the speaker's hospital bed are 'too red', their 'explosions' alarm and their 'redness talks to my wound'.

Symbols

Symbols are objects with a larger meaning. In *The Great Gatsby*, a giant billboard is a symbol of a shallow, materialistic society, which can be seen as the real subject of Fitzgerald's novel.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality occurs when a text refers to other texts. This reference can be explicit (by naming another text) or implicit (e.g. by borrowing a situation, setting, character name or phrase). Intertextuality enables a text to draw some of its meaning from those other texts, with which it enters into a kind of conversation. For example, Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) draws on, and expands, the character of Bertha created in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847).

Allegory and fable

Allegory is the use of a relatively simple story to tell a parallel story with a wider meaning. Characters in an allegory are often representative 'types', and their experiences reflect broader human challenges and struggles. Arthur Miller's depiction of the Salem witch trials of the 1690s in his play *The Crucible* (1953) is an allegory for the trials and persecution of suspected communists in 1940s and 1950s America. The **fable** is a similar form, featuring animal characters (as in Orwell's *Animal Farm*) and usually conveying a moral lesson.

Historical periods

The broad categories of fiction, drama and poetry can be broken down and studied by considering the historical periods in which texts were written and published. (See the historical time line for Western literature in Chapter 1.)

For example, novels written during the 19th century can be grouped according to whether they were written during the Regency period (1811–20, when Prince George ruled as the regent due to the ill health of his father, King George III), or during the Victorian period (1837–1901), when Queen Victoria reigned.

Novels from the Regency period

- *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (1813)
- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (1818)
- *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott (1819)

Novels from the Victorian period

- *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1847)
- *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens (1850)
- *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1874)

Similarly, plays from around 1600 are often classified as Elizabethan or Jacobean (from Jacobus, the Latin word for James) according to whether they were written during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) or James I (1603–25).

Elizabethan plays

- *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd (first performed 1587)
- *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe (first performed 1594)
- *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare (first performed 1601)

Jacobean plays

- *Volpone* by Ben Jonson (1606)
- *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare (1611)
- *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster (1614)

Although it is important to know the meaning of terms such as 'Jacobean' and 'Regency', especially when considering the context in which a text was created, the texts written in a given historical period can have diverse styles and present contrasting views of the world. In the Regency period, for instance, the novels of Jane Austen, Mary Shelley and Sir Walter Scott convey very different ideas and values. For this reason, it is often more useful to group works according to the relevant literary movement or style.

Literary movements and styles

Literary movements are closely related to particular historical periods, but the time frame is less definite. For example, English poetry of the 18th and early 19th centuries can be divided into these two broad groups:

Augustan (early to mid-1700s) poems and poets

- *The Campaign* by Joseph Addison (1705)
- 'A Description of a City Shower' by Jonathan Swift (1710)
- *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope (1712)

Romantic (late 1700s and early 1800s) poems and poets

- *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1798)
- 'The Ruined Cottage' by William Wordsworth (1800)
- *Don Juan* by Lord Byron (1819)

Such movements are defined partly by their historical time frames, and partly by their underlying ideas and values, and the language styles shared by the writers. These styles are sometimes anticipated by writers from an earlier period and are frequently used by writers in later periods.

The key features of some of the main literary movements are outlined in the following sections.

The French Revolution of 1789 influenced many writers of the Romantic period. This work by an anonymous painter, *Taking of the Bastille* (c. 1790), captures the revolutionary feelings of the age.

Augustan or neoclassical period

In English literature, the Augustan period refers to the first half of the 18th century – coinciding with the reigns of Queen Anne, George I and George II. The main features of Augustan literature are:

- restraint and balance
- elegance and refinement
- a strong sense of form, especially of harmony and proportion
- the expression of reason and good judgement.

The name 'Augustan' comes from a strong interest at this time in the literature of ancient Rome during the reign of Augustus (27 BC – 14 AD), including the work of Horace, Virgil and Ovid. This Roman period is also known as 'Augustan' and represented a high point in the literary output of the Roman Empire.

The Augustan period in English literature is sometimes known as the **neoclassical** period, due to the interest in the values and literary forms of 'classical' Rome ('neo' meaning 'new'). The time frame for neoclassical literature can be taken as reaching back into the late 1600s (including the poetry of John Dryden) and extending into the late 1700s (including the work of Samuel Johnson, who wrote the first English dictionary).

The poetry of Alexander Pope epitomises the values and features of Augustan literature. *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) expresses Pope's views on the qualities of good writing as well as good criticism, **stressing the qualities of balance, restraint and reason**:

> Avoid extremes, and shun the fault of such
> Who still are pleased too little or too much.
> At every trifle scorn to take offense:
> That always shows great pride, or little sense.
> Those heads, as stomachs, are not sure the best,
> Which nauseate all, and nothing can digest.

The verse form Pope uses here is the heroic couplet (see page 146), which generates a measured and well-ordered pattern of rhythm and rhyme – mirroring the qualities of balance and harmony Pope looked for not just in writing, but in life more generally.

Romanticism

Romanticism was an artistic and philosophical movement from the end of the 18th century through to the mid-19th century. It valued:

- the spontaneous expression of feeling and the power of the imagination
- the natural world and human activity that involved close contact and harmony with the natural world, such as rural life
- the experience of childhood as a time of innocence and wonder, uncorrupted by artificial social conventions
- individual freedom and liberty, especially from political oppression.

Romanticism can be seen as a reaction against the neoclassical emphasis on form and reason, although it was also a product of social and political events (such as the French Revolution of 1789). Form remained important to the Romantics, but if formal constraints limited the expression of feeling then those constraints could be modified or abandoned.

Romanticism has been an extremely influential movement, and its key ideas can be found in much fiction and poetry written since the 19th century.

Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' (1807) is **typical of the Romantic view of childhood and nature**. The first stanza reflects on the vivid, precious impressions formed in childhood:

> There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Appareled in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.
> It is not now as it hath been of yore—
> Turn wheresoe'er I may,
> By night or day,
> The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Here, childhood is seen as a precious time when a divine ('celestial') reality can be seen in ordinary – especially natural – things. As time passes and the innocent child becomes a worldly adult, this capacity is lost. The poem thus expresses a nostalgic longing for the time of childhood, and for its insights and revelations, which are no longer possible.

In this poem, Wordsworth expresses deep feeling using a conventional poetic form (the ode) with a strict rhyme scheme. In longer narrative poems such as 'The Ruined Cottage', he uses the more flexible, unrhymed form of blank verse, which allows the poet to produce a rhythm and a style similar to those of ordinary speech. (See Chapter 6, pages 143 and 151–2 for more on the poetic forms of blank verse and the ode.)

Realism and naturalism

Realism in fiction refers to the truthful representation of human behaviour and society. The writer aims for a balance between the creation of individual characters and a depiction of the wider society.

Realism developed in the 19th-century novel partly as a reaction against Romanticism, as writers wished to focus more on their characters' material and economic circumstances, and to portray a wider range of social classes. In realism, there is a tension between an individual's desire and ability to exert control over their own lives, and the constraints that social circumstances impose on the course of an individual's life. These constraints are seen to be especially limiting for members of the lower classes, and for women of all social classes.

The realist movement in fiction also reflects the dominant concerns and ideas of its time. The 19th century was marked by great technological progress and also by strong movements for social progress. The realist novel aimed to accurately depict this world from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, a guarantor of certainty and objectivity in a changing world.

- The French novelists Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal and Gustave Flaubert (especially in *Madame Bovary*, 1856) led the development of realism in fiction.
- In English literature, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) is regarded as a classic realist novel. There are strong realist elements in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and, to a lesser extent, Charles Dickens, who also utilised elements of caricature and sentimentality. All three novelists drew attention to social inequities and injustices.
- In drama, realism was associated with a move away from contrived plots and mannered styles of acting. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen was a central figure in this movement during the 1880s and 1890s.

Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) presents a **realistic account of New York's upper-class society in the 1870s** – a society in which Wharton grew up. Wharton captures the minutiae of this world, from the physical details of furniture and clothing to the intricate hierarchies, rituals and protocols that govern the characters' lives:

> After dinner, according to immemorial custom, Mrs. Archer and Janey trailed their long silk draperies up to the drawing room, where, while the gentlemen smoked below stairs, they sat beside a Carcel lamp with an engraved globe, facing each other across a rosewood work-table with a green silk bag under it, and stitched at the two ends of a tapestry band of field-flowers destined to adorn an "occasional" chair in the drawing-room of young Mrs. Newland Archer.

The protagonist, Newland Archer, regards his wife, May, as a 'terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in'; he feels that her ideas are so thoroughly and unquestioningly absorbed from her environment that 'never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion'. In this, Wharton might seem to be exploring ideas from **naturalism** (see the next page), which sees heredity and environment as determining everything about an individual.

However, Newland does not turn out to be completely correct about May, who demonstrates more perceptiveness and insight than he imagines her capable of. Newland, too, is far from a simple 'product' of a social system, and has the capacity to reflect on, understand and even radically alter his life circumstances. Indeed, his inclination to adopt the role of a semi-detached and disenchanted observer of his social class makes him a typical **modernist** figure: a person who seeks a rich, fulfilling life but feels alienated from their world, which seemingly lacks cultural and intellectual enrichment.

The Age of Innocence, then, can be seen as a realist text that also incorporates ideas from other movements.

George Bellows' realist painting *New York* (1911) shows a dynamic and diverse city.

Naturalism developed from realism in the late 19th century. Naturalistic fiction:

- focuses on the harsh realities of life, drawing attention to its unjust, sordid and oppressive elements
- sees the individual as formed entirely by heredity and social circumstances, with very limited capacity (if any) to determine their own destiny.

Naturalism, much more so than realism, depicts the experiences of the poor and those who are socially marginalised. It exposes injustices in society but takes a very pessimistic view of human freedom and denies the existence of free will, presenting the bleak view that people are essentially unable to change their situation in life.

- The French novelist Émile Zola is regarded as the most important naturalistic writer, and *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) is his earliest work in this style. Its second edition includes a preface in which Zola responds to the novel's controversial reception. He describes his approach as being a 'kind of scientific analysis', and his characters as 'people completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will, drawn into each action of their lives by the inexorable laws of their physical nature'.
- In the United States, naturalism was less harsh in its view of human nature than its French counterpart. Naturalism was mainly defined in relation to realism in US novels of the 1870s and 1880s, which centred on the lives of the middle classes. In the later decades of the 19th century, the focus of the naturalistic movement in the United States was on the lives of the lower classes, often immigrant communities in industrialised cities.

John Constable's painting *The Hay Wain* (1821) is one of the most famous examples of naturalism in English painting.

Modernism

Modernist works were written from the end of the 19th century to the mid-20th century. They are characterised by a sense of alienation and despair at the loss of traditional sources of meaning. They can have one or more of the following features:

- an unreliable narrator
- multiple narrators
- passages of interior monologue or 'stream of consciousness' narration
- a fragmented structure, including sudden shifts in time or place
- ambiguity
- experimentation with form and/or language
- many allusions to (including quotations from) other literary works, both from earlier periods and from other cultures – a feature known as intertextuality.

The modernist movement extended across literature, art and music, and responded directly to the traumatic events of the time. The most important of these was World War I (1914–18), which caused widespread destruction and massive loss of life, for what many felt was little or no gain. Developments in science also caused radical shifts in the understanding of human consciousness and the wider physical universe. In physics, the relativity theories of Albert Einstein showed that there are no privileged observers in the universe, and the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics introduced the idea that there is an inherent limit to how accurately we can know physical quantities. Perhaps even more influential for writers was Sigmund Freud's work on the unconscious, including the role of repression in causing some types of mental illness and the theory that dreams express the contents of the unconscious mind (see pages 230–1).

Two ideas – that truth is relative rather than absolute, and that the unconscious mind is at least as important as the conscious mind in accounting for human behaviour – became key underlying concepts in modernist literature. Writers continued to work with existing forms, but adapted them in order to express and explore these new ideas. For example, novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf brought the narrative viewpoint into much closer alignment with the perspectives of their characters, generating a more subjective view of the world and thus reflecting the widespread sense of alienation and the loss of traditional certainties.

James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) contains many of the **characteristic features of modernist texts**, although Joyce develops them to a point of greater complexity than most of his contemporaries. Indeed, many people find much of *Ulysses* unreadable, or at least difficult to follow. There are multiple narrative perspectives, phrases in other languages such as Latin and French, incomplete sentences, neologisms (made-up words), mythical references (especially links to Homer's *Odyssey*) and a seemingly chaotic structure.

The **stream-of-consciousness** narrative technique, which represents the sequence of thoughts and images flowing through a character's mind, is used extensively. In this example from Episode 4, the protagonist, Leopold Bloom, contemplates his back garden:

> He bent down to regard a lean file of spearmint growing by the wall. Make a summerhouse here. Scarlet runners. Virginia creepers. Want to manure the whole place over, scabby soil. A coat of liver of sulphur. All soil like that without dung. Household slops. Loam, what is this that is? The hens in the next garden: their droppings are very good top dressing. Best of all though are the cattle, especially when they are fed on those oilcakes. Mulch of dung. Best thing to clean ladies' kid gloves ...

The reader can follow this sequence of thoughts easily enough – more easily than in other passages of *Ulysses* – but the sentence fragments, and the abrupt shifts from one image to the next, clearly contrast with the logical, orderly flow of ideas in the 19th-century realist novel. In this way, Joyce and other modernist writers suggest that human thought and behaviour is rarely rational, conscious and coherent – it is more often irrational, unconscious and fragmented.

Although *Ulysses* can seem rambling at first, there is an overall shape to the narrative: the novel charts the movements around Dublin of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus on a single day (16 June 1904 – a date now known as Bloomsday). Moreover, the links between *Ulysses* and Homer's epic *The Odyssey* suggest that, however chaotic life may seem, it is possible to see an overarching pattern or meaning. This sense of mythical dimensions, of there being a larger shape to human life – sometimes expressed in terms of a quest narrative – is also a feature of modernism, although characters rarely arrive at a final destination or obtain an ultimate truth.

Postmodernism

Postmodern works, in contrast to modernist ones, are marked by a more playful approach to language, as well as greater fragmentation and experimentation with form. They also, broadly speaking, take a more positive view of the breakdown of traditional ideas, beliefs and structures (e.g. the nuclear family, the church), and of the coexistence of multiple viewpoints and attitudes.

Postmodern texts can have one or more of the following features:

- the absence or elusiveness of any objective truth or reality
- the rejection of traditional hierarchies and moral 'certainties'
- a sceptical view of the true motives of those in positions of power and the means by which they attained and retain power
- unexpected juxtapositions of places, objects and cultures
- ambiguity and open-endedness
- the presence of multiple perspectives and voices that historically have been suppressed.

As the term suggests, 'postmodernism' refers to the historical period following modernism, or roughly since the end of World War II (1939–45). However, deciding whether a text is postmodern or modernist involves more than simply knowing when it is written: postmodern features can be seen in texts written in the first half of the century (such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*), and many texts written since 1945 are more modernist – or even realist – than postmodern in style. It can also be a matter of interpretation as to whether a particular literary work is regarded as primarily modernist or postmodern. (See Chapter 9, pages 233–5, for more on postmodern readings.)

It is important to remember that, while postmodern texts are often marked by a sense of play, they can also be overtly political. For example, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) are seminal postmodern novels that are powerful anti-war statements as well as being extremely funny.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is regarded as a classic postmodern novel. It contains various postmodern features and also examines elements of contemporary society that mark it as postmodern: for example, the **fragmented nature of experience and the saturation of everyday life by electronic media**. The narrative often conveys a sense of playfulness, especially with language, as in the following exchange between the protagonist/narrator, Jack Gladney, and his fourteen-year-old son, Heinrich. Rain is falling, but Heinrich has heard on the radio that it will not rain until later, and so argues with his father that what they are seeing might not actually be rain:

> "Is it raining," I said, "or isn't it?"
> "I wouldn't want to have to say."
> "What if someone held a gun to your head?"
> "Who, you?"
> "Someone. A man in a trenchcoat and smoky glasses. He holds a gun to your head and says, 'Is it raining or isn't it? All you have to do is tell the truth and I'll put away my gun and take the next flight out of here.'"
> "What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone in orbit around a neutron star? Maybe if these people could see us through a telescope we might look like we were two feet two inches tall and it might be raining yesterday instead of today."
> "He's holding a gun to *your* head. He wants your truth."
> "What good is my truth? My truth means nothing. What if this guy with the gun comes from a planet in a whole different solar system? What we call rain he calls soap. What we call apples he calls rain. So what am I supposed to tell him?"

This passage plays with the idea that truth is relative and subjective – in a way that suggests any attempt to determine the truth, even a seemingly obvious and banal one, is futile. Jack would like to have certain knowledge about reality, but it is Heinrich who has all the answers – which are actually further questions – and who is as comfortable with truths obtained through the media as through the evidence of his own senses. Throughout *White Noise*, the characters' attempts to determine the truth about their world are largely unsuccessful, compromised by their awareness that there are no sources of objective knowledge but only a constant stream of information that is no more meaningful than 'white noise'.

Subverting conventions

Conventions are not binding rules that writers break at their peril; rather, they are like the elements of a template or framework that the writer manipulates to suit their own purposes. Writers can and often do choose to place pressure on the conventions of a form – perhaps because those conventions convey a particular, privileged view of the world that the writer wishes to challenge; or perhaps the writer finds those conventions too well-worn and in need of a fresh approach.

By subverting the conventions of a form, a writer can create a range of effects, including humour, surprise and pathos. Often, too, the reader will be prompted to re-evaluate their own assumptions.

One of the earliest examples of a text that subverts the conventions of its form is Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, published in 1759. Sterne incorporates numerous digressions from the main story, as well as rows of asterisks and dashes, a variety of fonts, blank pages (Chapters 18 and 19 in Volume IX contain no text) and pages of solid black. Interestingly, in an **early example of self-reflexive writing**, some of the narrator's digressions comment on the narrative itself:

> I have dropped the curtain over this scene for a minute,––to remind you of one thing,––and to inform you of another.

While *Tristram Shandy* is in some ways a parody of the novel form, it also greatly expanded the possibilities of the form at a time when novels tended to have linear narratives and to be realist in style.

Sterne's innovations were unusual for his time, but manipulating and transgressing the conventions of novel-writing became much more common in the late 20th century. Italo Calvino's postmodern novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (first published in Italian, 1979) **plays with the reader's expectations of the novel form** from beginning to end. The opening sentence establishes the tone: 'You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller.*'

It becomes clear that this opening chapter is merely a kind of preamble to the real beginning of the novel, but the next chapter starts with the unexpected phrase 'The novel begins …', subverting the convention that novels don't refer to themselves in the third person. Later, the reader discovers that every second chapter begins an entirely new storyline, defying the reader's expectation of narrative continuity.

Throughout the novel, Calvino sustains jokes about similarities between the desire for reading pleasure and the desire for sexual pleasure, and about **the role of narrative gaps and interruptions in both provoking and frustrating desire**, with great ingenuity and wit.

There have also, of course, been notable plays and poems that subvert conventions. The modernist play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello (1921) blurs the boundary between reality and illusion. The cast includes parts for a Stage Manager and Technician (who are normally hidden from view in a play production) while the Characters initially appear not to belong to the play at all, but to have walked in off the street.

Poetry has a long history of experimentation, in terms of its subject matter, its use of rhyme and rhythm, and its appearance on the printed page. American poet EE Cummings played with conventions of syntax and punctation (as the title of his poem 'somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond' shows); the prose poems of Australian poet Ania Walwicz subvert the convention that lines of poetry should have a specific length, rather than running to the right-hand margin. Here is the opening of her 'Little Red Riding Hood' (1982), which also subverts the convention that this fairytale character is calm and passive:

> I always had such a good time, good time, good time girl. Each and every day from morning to night. Each and every twenty-four hours I wanted to wake up, wake up. I was so lively, so livewire tense, such a highly pitched little. I was red, so red so red. I was a tomato. I was on the lookout for the wolf.

At times, the conventions of a form are challenged by a group of writers or by social and historical circumstances in such a way that the form changes; all literary forms have evolved with time, reflecting changes in the societies that produce them.

Conventions are also subverted in other art forms, such as painting. Vincent van Gogh used vivid, contrasting colours not as a way of capturing reality but of conveying emotion. *The Sower* (1888), for example, depicts a natural scene in unnatural colours – particularly the green of the sky.

CHAPTER 3

SETTINGS AND CONTEXTS

Settings and contexts connect the world of a text with the world outside the text. The places and communities represented in a text are, at least to some extent, reflections of real places and communities at particular times. And texts are themselves products of the places and communities in which they are created; they reflect and sometimes challenge the ideas and attitudes circulating in that community.

In other words, texts – and people– don't exist in isolation. Moreover, the reader's context influences their responses to the individuals and events depicted in a text.

This chapter looks at some of the ways in which place and time can be represented in literary texts, and the contextual factors that shape texts and our responses to them.

Settings

The **setting** of a text is the time and place in which the events of a story occur.

- A novel or film can be set in many locations and over a long time frame, possibly many decades.
- Short stories and plays tend to be more compact, focusing on one or two settings and a shorter time frame – perhaps only a day, or even just hours.

A description of a setting can create a physical sense of place. It can also convey information about the psychological states of characters and contribute to the development of a theme.

Physical settings

The physical setting – the place or places represented in a text – is much more than a backdrop to the action. Descriptions of landscapes are always 'loaded' with key images and symbols, and with positive or negative associations.

In this way, an author can use the setting to develop a text's main ideas, images and values. Multiple settings within a narrative text such as a novel or play are often contrasted in order to develop a central tension or difference in the text. Typical contrasts include city and country; indoors and outdoors; and inland and coast.

Characters and settings

The landscape near Moss Vale, New South Wales, was the basis for Meroë in Patrick White's novel *The Aunt's Story*.

How comfortable or uncomfortable a character feels in particular settings reflects that character's values and their attitudes towards their society and their physical surroundings. In literary fiction, we are usually encouraged to sympathise with characters who care for and find pleasure in the natural world.

In Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story* (1948), **the descriptions of the rural landscapes around Meroë evoke a harsh but enduring beauty** that Theodora loves and feels she belongs to. Her feeling for the land is, however, shared only with her father:

> They walked through the paddocks, through the yellow tussocks, where the sloughed snakeskin chafed and chattered, through the grey, abstracted, skeleton trees, and past the big black boulders that the hills had tossed out before they cooled.

In contrast, when Theodora and her mother move to Sydney following her father's death, the suburban landscape is characterised by narrowness and insularity: the house is 'thin and red' with '*thin* gardens', and the view from the 'cramped lower balcony' is 'devoid of complexity'. Huntly Clarkson, at home in this world with his beautiful possessions and the paintings that he collected 'for their value', never entirely wins the reader's sympathy, since he is incapable of perceiving the natural world as Theodora does.

Psychological and symbolic aspects of settings

In addition to creating a sense of place, a setting can function as a psychological projection of a character's mental state, or provide a symbolic representation of a character's or a society's situation.

When the setting has these functions, the author is less concerned with the physical reality of the setting than with the correlation between qualities of the setting and aspects of a character or plot.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606), the king's abandonment by his daughters Goneril and Regan, and the corresponding loss of his worldly powers, lead to his being caught in a wild storm. This setting is significant on several levels.

Firstly, it reflects Lear's general situation: all the things that have previously provided him with comfort – both material and emotional – are now stripped away. The hostile elements seem to be his daughters' 'servile ministers'; **his vulnerability to wind and rain mirrors his defencelessness against his daughters' cruel indifference to his fate**.

Secondly, Lear's fury is almost a match for the wildness of the storm, which he urges on to greater levels of intensity: 'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!' The storm thus functions as a **projection of the rage within Lear's troubled mind**.

Lastly, the storm is an entirely natural phenomenon, and is therefore free of the duplicity that characterises most of the human relationships in the play. Lear remains defiant, but the storm exposes him to a more fundamental reality than his loss of entitlements: 'I am cold myself', he eventually admits. In such a setting, Lear is gradually forced to acquire a new humility and an appreciation of the true value of things.

One setting that has had literary significance for hundreds of years, from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), is that of an island.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), the island setting is significant in at least four ways.

Firstly, it **reflects Prospero's general situation**: he is in exile, isolated and remote from Milan, and thus deprived of his worldly power and material comforts.

Secondly, the island takes all the shipwrecked survivors out of their familiar environment and **forces them to negotiate a new world**. The boundary between reality and illusion becomes blurred, before all pretences are stripped away and the rightful order is restored.

Thirdly, it **raises the issue of colonialism**, since the island's indigenous inhabitant, Caliban, is enslaved by Prospero. The play does not provide a strong critique of the European practice of colonising other lands and using their populations as captive labour forces. However, Caliban's justifiable resentment – 'You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse' – at least asks some questions about what was, in Shakespeare's day, an increasing source of English wealth and power.

Lastly, the island is a space analogous to the space of the theatre. Surrounded by water, it **lies outside the normal operations and conventions of society**: Prospero can wield his magical powers here, making the imagined become the real. Similarly, the theatre is a space in which a playwright's imagined world can be realised and enacted. The parallels between Prospero, the old magician, and Shakespeare, who was nearing the end of his career, are fascinating, although the question of whether Shakespeare intended them is unresolved.

Contexts

Context is a more inclusive term than setting, incorporating not just physical aspects of an environment but also human aspects. Four main kinds of context are:

- social
- historical
- cultural
- ideological.

The ways in which these four kinds of context operate in texts are considered in detail on the following pages.

It is important to be precise about what is being discussed in relation to its context. That is, there are contexts for:

- the characters and events being depicted
- the author's life and work and the text's production (the context of production)
- the reader and their interpretation of the text (the context of reception).

Contexts represented in a text

Just as we are products of the societies into which we are born and in which we live, characters in novels, plays, films and biographies are represented as products of their societies. This does not mean, though, that they always adopt or agree with the conventions and dominant attitudes of their society.

Although the time and place in which a narrative is set are very important, it is not possible to completely separate the physical setting from the kind of society, and the related attitudes and values, represented in the text. Settings and contexts are therefore closely linked.

For instance, in the example from *The Aunt's Story* on page 33, the novelist is not so much interested in producing an accurate account of the paddocks and rocks in a certain part of New South Wales as in how his characters relate to this landscape, and how this relationship reflects and informs their human relationships.

The question of setting in literature is invariably a *human* question, rather than one of natural history, geology or geography.

The author's context (context of production)

Texts are not simply products of an author's imagination and creative prowess; texts and authors are produced by a network of ideas, social circumstances and material conditions that are current at a particular place and time. For this reason, the context in which an author lives and works, and in which a text is written and first published, needs to be taken into account.

- The author's context might be very close to the social and cultural milieu represented in the text.
- Alternatively, the author's context might be completely different from the context depicted in the text – as is necessarily the case in historical fiction and science fiction.
- The author's context will include their own **personal context** (their education, family circumstances, economic situation etc.) as well as the broader context of the society they live in.

The reader's context (context of reception)

Readers have their own contexts that significantly influence how they read, understand and are affected by a text. A reader's context will be a combination of their personal context and the wider context of their society.

- The context in which a text is read can be very different from the context in which it was initially written and received.
- Readers might occupy very different social and cultural contexts as a result of living in different parts of the world or belonging to different cultural or racial groups. This can have a strong bearing on how they interpret a text: questions of which characters are sympathetic or unsympathetic, or whether the tone is humorous or serious, might be answered quite differently by readers whose contexts vary significantly.
- Contrasting political and social contexts can mean that a text embraced by one society may be censored or even banned in another.

Our own contexts will inevitably affect how we view the characters and situations portrayed by the author. Although it is impossible to remove such effects from our reading, we should always try to be aware of how they impact on our interpretation of a text.

Social contexts

Social context refers to the features of a society that shape a person's behaviour, relationships and material circumstances. Aspects of a society that contribute to social context include:

- class structure and how strictly class boundaries are enforced
- how gender roles are defined and the degree of gender equality
- how children are treated
- the nature of work and opportunities to work
- the division of wealth and the possibilities that exist for improving one's financial situation
- societal attitudes towards race, sexuality, politics and religion, and the impact of these attitudes on minority groups.

Jane Austen's novels, written in the early 19th century, frequently depict the **constrictive effects of a rigid class system** underpinned by patriarchal notions of property ownership and inheritance. Such a social structure could be especially limiting for women whose capacity to inherit or marry into money was limited.

In *Emma*, for instance, Miss Bates is 'neither young, handsome, rich, nor married'. As a result, she has no opportunity in this society to improve her standard of living; that she lives happily is due to her resourcefulness and temperament, but Austen makes clear that even if she was unhappy, she would be unable to alter her circumstances. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne are effectively disinherited by their sister-in-law, significantly diminishing not merely their ability to live comfortably, but their chances of achieving happiness in marriage.

Austen's 19th-century readers would have been very familiar with the potential for women to experience a rapid and irreversible decline in social status through no fault of their own. Two hundred years later, though, we often need to remind ourselves of the social (and legal) changes that have taken place concerning women's rights to economic independence.

Motherhood by French painter Marguerite Gérard, a contemporary of Jane Austen's.

Historical contexts

As the discussion of Austen's fiction shows, it is impossible to disentangle social contexts from historical contexts. Every society changes with time; its underlying conventions and protocols are inevitably historically specific.

The author's historical context

Historical contexts come to the fore when significant changes in society have occurred between the writing of a text and its contemporary reading. In these cases, it is important for the reader to understand the historical context in which the author lived and created a text, in order not to assess it solely in terms of contemporary preoccupations and concerns.

The close focus on women's lives in Austen's novels can make us aware of **how women's rights have changed**, and the lives of Austen's female characters can appear severely limited by our own standards.

But Austen often makes it clear that there were many pleasures available to women even within the relatively modest horizons of their world. That intelligent women often marry intelligent men in Austen's novels suggests a certain optimism about marriage, even as its frequent shortcomings are also exposed. Within this historical (and social) context, what matters in Austen's fiction is not so much the liberation of women from male domination, but that people behave with respect, consideration and compassion for one another.

Indeed, Austen's novels repeatedly suggest that the snobbish attitudes and malicious actions of individuals are far more destructive than the social structure – and such individuals are as likely to be women as men.

Similarly, Shakespeare's exploration of the role of the king – not just in history plays such as *Richard III* and *Henry V*, but also in the tragedies *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* – might suggest that only members of royal families were considered worthy of such complex, heroic roles.

However, in the historical context that produced Shakespeare's plays, the monarch was an extraordinarily powerful figure, and much of the nation's cultural as well as political life was based in and around the court. The plays reflect this historical context while also humanising the figure of the king, acknowledging his strengths as well as his human flaws.

Historical settings

Historical contexts also need to be considered when a text is set in an earlier period. Historical fiction views the past through the lens of the present; the author revisits the past imaginatively, but their own context is inevitably part of the work just as much as the historical context represented in it.

Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) is set during World War I, and takes a real historical encounter between two men as the basis for its **imaginative reconstruction of the past**. Much of its interest comes from its study of men whose work subsequently became famous (the war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen) and of the early application of psychoanalysis – the 'talking cure' – to the treatment of soldiers traumatised by their experiences of trench warfare.

The historical context explored by the novel is thus different from the context in which it was written. This historical perspective leads to a representation of wartime Britain which is quite unlike accounts written during or shortly after the war. In particular, Barker portrays relationships between men, between men and women, and between social classes with the nuance and complexity characteristic of late 20th-century fiction but much less so of writing from, say, the 1920s.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) also uses a wartime setting, with most of the novel set shortly before (1935) or during (1940) World War II – over sixty years before the novel's publication. Although the characters are fictitious, the descriptions of the Allied retreat to Dunkirk in Part Two, and the influx of wounded soldiers to the hospitals in Part Three, are extremely realistic and based on detailed historical research (as evidenced by McEwan's acknowledgements).

McEwan succeeds in re-creating a crucial episode in English history, but it is important to remember that **McEwan's historical context is very different from that of his characters**. It also contrasts with the context of writers from that period, such as Virginia Woolf. In particular, McEwan is able to write about sex, and sexual desire, in language that is more explicit than prewar writers could use in mainstream publications. This greatly heightens our sense of the bond between Robbie and Cecilia, and thus magnifies the import of Briony's crime.

The historical context in which the novel was written becomes even more critical in the final section, 'London, 1999', when postmodern ideas about the relationship between fiction and 'reality' come to the fore.

Cultural contexts

Culture has various meanings. Three current, popular meanings are:

- literature and the fine arts
- a particular state or stage of civilisation, such as the culture of ancient Greece
- ways of living followed by a society or group.

In the first definition, culture has an elitist connotation: it includes 'high art' (e.g. literary classics) but excludes 'popular culture' (e.g. comics). However, the term 'culture' is often used in a broader and more inclusive way: we would usually think of television programs, computer games and the internet as forming part of our culture, too.

As well, culture can refer to a 'way of life', including the social conventions, religious beliefs and cultural practices that are widely shared in a social group. In other words, the following can also be regarded as aspects of culture:

- how people identify themselves, e.g. in terms of their race, ethnicity and/or nationality
- the kinds of food people eat (or don't eat)
- times and days on which religious worship takes place
- dress codes a society regards as appropriate or inappropriate
- ways of speaking to others that are regarded as polite or impolite.

It is this broad conception of culture that we adopt here.

The culture of ancient Greece included popular performances of comedies and tragedies in open-air theatres.

Looking for cultural features in texts

There are three important questions to ask in relation to the cultural contexts of texts:

- What kinds of culture does the text describe?
- Are some cultural forms and practices associated with certain characters and not others?
- Is the text critical of or sympathetic towards the cultures it represents?

In *Bel Canto* (2001), Ann Patchett draws on a real conflict with a political basis – the 1996–97 Japanese embassy hostage crisis in Lima, Peru, involving a Marxist revolutionary group. Rather than foregrounding the politics, though, Patchett focuses on the characters' cultural associations, connections and differences. She combines characters from strongly **contrasting cultural contexts**: the Japanese businessman Mr Hosokawa; the American opera singer Roxane Coss; the Latin American terrorists; and other guests from France, Italy and Russia.

At first, the gap between the wealthy and the poor, the conservative middle-class captives and the political revolutionaries, appears unbridgeable: only the translator's knowledge of Spanish makes communication possible.

Gradually, though, the characters find that, despite their diverse cultural backgrounds, more unites them than divides them. In particular, European classical music – Chopin's piano pieces and operatic arias from the 18th and 19th centuries – is represented as a universal language that binds all the characters together. When Kato first plays Chopin, 'all over the house, terrorist and hostage alike turned and listened and felt a great easing in their chests'.

Roxane's morning recitals have a similar effect: 'for those hours no one gave a single thought to their death'. These cultural forms are thus presented not as specific to a certain period or class, but as universal, transcending differences of education, nationality and politics.

Ideological contexts

Ideology means the underlying system of ideas and beliefs that form the basis of our attitudes and behaviour.

- These ideas and beliefs can be shared widely throughout a society, or they can be contested by different groups within society.
- Political parties are underpinned by ideologies; so too are social conventions and everyday routines.

Some prominent and overtly political forms of ideology include the following.

- **Nationalist ideology** – the idea that the nation is the most important social entity and should be kept pure and strong at all costs.
- **Capitalist ideology** – the idea that capitalism (the exchange of labour for capital, i.e. wages) is the best way to organise the production of goods and provision of services, and to generate wealth in a society.
- **Marxist ideology** – the idea that capitalism unfairly concentrates wealth in the hands of the few, and exploits working people for the benefit of the dominant groups in society.
- **Communist ideology** – the idea that the wealth of a society should be equally distributed throughout that society; that is, held 'in common', without private ownership.
- **Liberal ideology** (or **liberalism**) – the idea that all people are fundamentally equal and should have control over their own destinies with minimal interference from governments. Liberalism is the dominant ideology in the Western world.

Wall Street, New York, has become a symbol of capitalist ideology; as the flags in this image suggest, it is also central to American nationalism.

How texts present ideological contexts

Texts can present ideological contexts either *implicitly* or *explicitly*. In either case, they usually adopt a position, or express a viewpoint, on the ideologies they address.

Literary texts about war invariably address an ideological conflict of some kind – perhaps between the two sides, or even within the minds of the soldiers as they question the legitimacy of their actions. Novels such as Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) express a fairly clear view on the conflict they portray (World War I), suggesting that violent conflict is ultimately futile.

Some texts depict movements for political and social change; these, too, address ideological questions explicitly, since the setting foregrounds the conflict of ideas and beliefs. The novels of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell engage with social issues arising from the Industrial Revolution, and often draw the reader's attention to individuals who are marginalised or left behind as a result of social and economic change.

On the other hand, ideological concerns can lie below the surface in texts. Characters might not openly state their beliefs – about, say, the right of individuals to freedom of expression and religious faith, or the injustices of colonialism, or the pleasures of materialism and financial gain. However, such beliefs are implied by what they think, say and do.

Considering contexts holistically

The table on the next page shows how the contexts for different forms of text fall into the four main categories discussed in this chapter. Seen in combination, or holistically, it is clear that these contexts are not entirely distinct but closely connected, and sometimes overlap considerably, whenever a writer presents a multifaceted view of human experience.

Try creating a similar table for the texts you are studying. Are some contexts easier to identify than others? What does this suggest about the author's main interests and concerns?

	Emma (novel by Jane Austen, written in 1814–15)	*Hamlet* (play by Shakespeare, first performed in 1601)	'Tulips' (poem by Sylvia Plath, written in 1961)
Social context	• Upper-middle-class families and landed gentry in rural England. • Strict class system; there was limited social mobility. • Limited social and economic opportunities for women – pressure to make an advantageous marriage.	• The nobility and those close to the court. • Individuals had fixed positions in the social order. • Men held most positions of power, both in government and within the family.	• The nuclear family was regarded as 'normal', with women expected to stay at home after marriage. • Women had more access to education than previously but not always better opportunities in the workplace.
Historical context	• Regency England (1811–20). Because of the ill health of King George III, his son ruled as the prince regent. • The Napoleonic Wars, between Britain and France, ended in 1815.	• Written and performed in early 17th-century England: the last years of the long, stable reign of Elizabeth I. • Set in Denmark during medieval times.	• The 1950s followed World War II (1939–45). Initial hardship was followed by greater affluence and confidence. • The Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union led to opposition to the nuclear arms race.
Cultural context	• Great value was placed on refinement in manners, arts and architecture. • Romanticism emphasised feelings and an appreciation of nature; Austen was not part of this movement but draws on ideas from it.	• Older ideas: fate and gods ruled people's lives. • Newer ideas from Renaissance humanism: problems are created and solved not by gods or cosmic forces but by men and women.	• The confessional movement in US poetry encouraged expression of personal experiences and feelings. • Poetry and other art forms became more experimental and political.
Ideological context	• Patriarchal society: men owned and inherited property. • Strong, conservative rule (Tory government). • Growing working-class reform movement in the towns – not featured in Austen's novels.	• Central importance of the monarchy – if the monarch is corrupt, the entire society will suffer. • Transition from an old social structure (feudalism) to a new system (capitalism).	• Traditional ideologies and values began to break down. • Patriarchy was questioned as women gained more prominence in professions and in the arts.

CHAPTER 4

NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

Novels and short stories have been part of human culture for as long as the printed book. They remain prominent forms of literature and entertainment in today's global, digital age. As imaginative works, their subject matter is limited only by the author's imagination; however, they almost always reflect the concerns of the writer's culture and society. They can also capture, and illuminate, the concerns of societies in the far distant past or even (in speculative fiction) in the future.

Through their capacity to represent the thoughts, feelings, memories and motivations of individual characters, novels and short stories invite us to see the world from new and diverse perspectives: to be alive both to the differences between people and to the elements of human experience that transcend time and place.

Narrative structure

Novels and short stories are examples of narrative fiction: they tell a story that is primarily a work of the imagination. The *way the story is told* is just as important as its subject matter, and has a powerful influence on how the reader responds to the characters, situations and events.

The **structure** of a novel or short story means the way in which the whole narrative is built from smaller units or sections.

Chapters are the most common units of narrative content within a novel. They are sometimes grouped together in 'books' or 'volumes' to indicate larger subsections of the narrative.

Chapter breaks usually denote one of the following:

- a break in time
- the beginning of a new phase in the life of the protagonist
- a switch to another narrative thread.

Shorter novels of around a hundred pages, known as novellas – such as Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) – often just use a dinkus (a symbol such as a diamond or asterisk) to indicate breaks.

Plot and narrative shape

The **plot** is the arrangement of story events into an order that generates interest, surprise, suspense and relief. The plot consists of a sequence of events that are causally related – that is, there is a cause-and-effect relationship linking together all the events in a novel or short story.

Jane Austen further developed the novel form in the early 19th century.

The plot enables the novelist or short-story writer to give the narrative an overall shape, to make its dramatic tension rise and fall in particular places.

A **linear narrative** proceeds in a chronological fashion, building in tension and developing towards a climax. In linear or chronological narration, the order in which events are related to the reader is the same order in which they occur in the 'world' of the characters. This is typical of most 19th-century fiction, such as the novels of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot.

However, many novels have **nonlinear narratives**. For example, they might begin in the middle or even near the end of the story, and then jump back to an earlier event before progressing chronologically. Other nonlinear narratives can be much more fragmentary and episodic: they resist linear development and the subsequent resolution of tension, preferring to represent life as characterised by ebbs and flows, cycles and repetitions.

Moving backwards and forwards in time

To heighten the reader's interest and sense of involvement in the story, novelists frequently move the narrative backwards and forwards in time. This means that:

- events are related out of order
- the reader does not initially receive all of the information necessary to comprehend why the characters think and act in certain ways.

Moving between the narrative present (the 'now' of the story, the time in which most of the action takes place) and either the past or the future enables the writer to achieve various effects.

- Moving backwards in time can cast light on the reasons for a character's physical or emotional state.
- Jumping forwards in time – which is relatively uncommon in narrative fiction – can show the consequences of a character's actions for themselves or others.

Kurt Vonnegut uses the idea of time travel to move between past, present and future in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). The novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, comes 'unstuck in time', randomly shifting between his experiences in World War II, his life as a husband and father in the 1950s and 1960s, and his time as a kidnapping victim of the Tralfamadorians, an alien race who know every instant of their lives.

This constant shifting backwards and forwards in time conveys something of the disorientation caused by a traumatic experience – in Billy's life, as in Vonnegut's own, by becoming a prisoner of war and being held captive in the German city of Dresden when it was firebombed by the Allies in 1945. The narrative weaves together events in Billy's life, showing not just how readily his past can reclaim him – as if he is literally reliving it – but also how little control he has over the course of his life.

The use of memory

The author can move the narrative backwards in time through a character's memory of earlier events in their life. This can introduce a key piece of information that enhances our understanding of characters or events, perhaps in an unexpected way. A character's recollection of the past also reveals how the present has been shaped by the past.

In Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), memory is both a means of presenting earlier experiences in the characters' lives and a subject of the narrative. In Part One, Briony, aged thirteen, becomes central to events that result in Robbie, a young man, being imprisoned despite being innocent. In Part Two, Robbie has served his sentence and, as a soldier in World War II, often recalls key moments in his past while travelling through war-torn France, partly because they provide him with a sense of hope and purpose, and partly as an attempt to understand his troubled life. One such memory is of Briony, aged around ten and learning how to swim, jumping into a river in order to make him save her. In answer to his fury, she declared she had wanted him to save her 'because I love you'. For Robbie, this intensity of feeling might partly explain Briony's betrayal three years later. For the reader, the incident gains extra resonance with its echo of Cecilia jumping into a fountain to retrieve the fragments of a vase, and because the reader knows Briony has 'written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her'.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing means that an event that will happen later in the narrative is anticipated by a statement or an image.

The use of foreshadowing reminds the reader that the narrative is constructed. It can also help to create verisimilitude by contributing to a sense that the unfolding of events is natural and inevitable.

One way in which a novel's ending can be foreshadowed is through a **framing narrative**. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) begins with a series of letters by the explorer Walton to his sister, in which the setting and events of the novel's conclusion are introduced and anticipated. We gain a brief glimpse of the monster – 'a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature' – and an introduction to (the unnamed) Frankenstein, who hints at a life of calamity and loss. Frankenstein

says to Walton, 'I have, doubtless, excited your curiosity', which might also be Shelley's words to her readers at this point, before Frankenstein commences his story.

A more conventional way of foreshadowing later events is **a simple statement about what will happen**. Although this might seem to remove narrative tension and suspense, it has the effect of arousing the reader's interest in *how* events will turn out this way. In Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* (2001), the ending of the novel is partly anticipated by the phrase 'in fact it was the terrorists who would not survive the ordeal'. The effect of this foreshadowing is to reassure the reader that the characters for whom the novelist initially invites us to develop sympathy – the hostages – will be safe. At this point in the narrative 'the terrorists' are simply that – anonymous, malevolent, terrifying; by the end of the novel, their deaths take on much more meaning and are far more moving than the reader might initially imagine they would be.

Interweaving narrative threads

A novelist can create a more complex narrative structure by combining two or more interrelated plot lines. Plot lines developed in less detail than the main plot are known as **subplots**. These can be set in different times or places from the main narrative thread, but they are usually linked by common characters or events.

- Shifting between narrative threads allows the novelist to use each to cast light on the others while holding back key information or delaying plot development.
- Points at which these narrative threads intersect allow for key revelations or conflicts to be played out.

Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852–53) contains numerous plot lines, all of which are linked through the court case *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*. The story of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock proceeds in parallel to the story of Esther Summerson and her household of Ada Clare, Richard Carstone and their guardian, John Jarndyce. Each of these two main plot lines has a different narrator, and the narrative shifts between the two throughout the novel. The narrative threads rarely intersect; however, each shows how the slow and inefficient Chancery court system impacts on the many lives caught up in a case, and they are linked powerfully by the revelation that Lady Dedlock is in fact Esther's mother.

Key terms for narrative structure

There are five key terms for describing significant points in a conventional narrative.

- **Crisis point** – a point at which the tension rises to a temporary peak due to a problem or challenge.
- **Turning point** – a major change in direction, carrying the narrative towards its climax, or a point after which there is a subtle but significant shift in the options available to characters.
- **Climax** – the point of greatest tension; a moment of crisis; usually occurs towards the end of the narrative.
- **Denouement** – a French word meaning 'unknotting'; the events immediately following the climax; untangles the narrative threads and allows conflicts and uncertainties to be resolved.
- **Resolution** – follows the denouement; relaxes narrative tension; produces a sense of closure.

Sometimes the writer can subvert the reader's expectations with a **twist** that leads to an unexpected conclusion.

In *Atonement*, there is an early **crisis point** when Robbie sends Cecilia a letter declaring his love for her in explicit terms – a letter he had meant to throw away but sends to her by mistake. Later, the crucial early **turning point** occurs when the thirteen-year-old Briony asserts that she has seen Robbie raping her cousin Lola. This accusation has a devastating impact on the lives of Robbie and Cecilia, and affects Briony's own life and work in ways she cannot begin to imagine at the time.

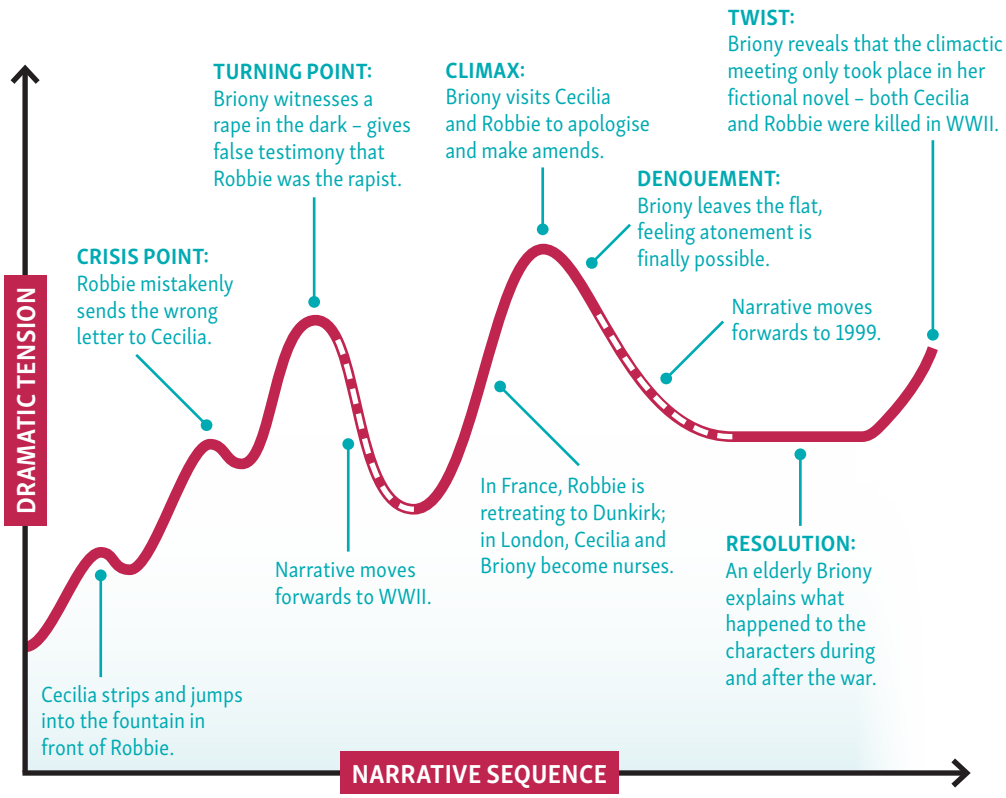
The novel's **climax** occurs when Briony, as a young adult, visits Cecilia in order to apologise and declare her willingness to make amends as far as she can. The confrontations between Briony and Cecilia, and then between Robbie and Briony, are full of tension, anger, loss and remorse. This scene brings the three protagonists together in a way that exposes the conflict and the intensity of feelings between them, and that also hints, however tentatively, that a form of reconciliation might in the end be possible. A brief **denouement** follows as Briony leaves the flat feeling calm and serene, seeing the possibility of 'atonement' before her.

The final section of the novel, 'London, 1999', is effectively a **resolution** as it explains what has happened to all the characters in the years during and after the war. However, it contains a surprising **twist**

that, rather than bringing about narrative closure, opens up the entire narrative for questioning and reconsideration. The revelation that Robbie died in France, and that the meeting in Cecilia's London flat never took place, casts the novel's climax in an entirely new light – positioning Briony as the controlling author-narrator of the entire story, foregrounding the narrative's status as fiction, and ending on a note not of serene acceptance but of irredeemable loss.

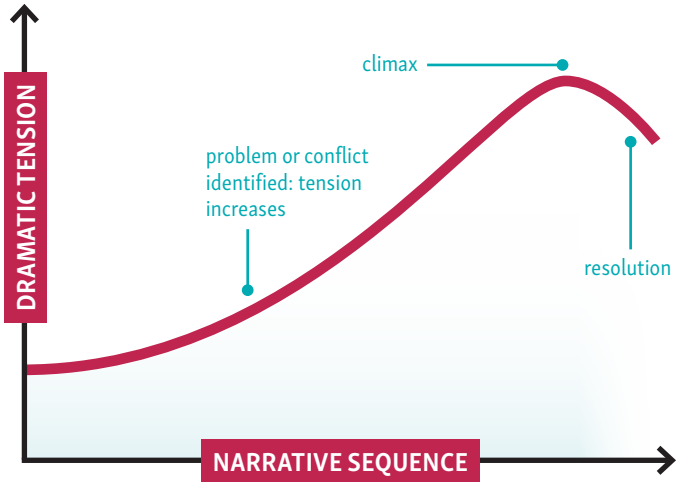
The diagram below charts the rise and fall of narrative tension in *Atonement*, identifying the key points in the narrative structure.

Narrative structure of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*



Short-story structure

A short story is more focused and condensed than a novel: the time frame is shorter and there are fewer settings and characters. Since a powerful effect must be produced within a few pages, the narrative structure also tends to be more concentrated. In a novel, narrative tension may rise and fall a number of times before the climax is reached and conflict is resolved. In a short story, though, you are more likely to find a pattern similar to that shown on the graph below: a conflict is introduced almost immediately; the resulting tension builds progressively towards the climax; tension relaxes as the conflict is resolved.



The **horror story generally follows this classic short-story structure**, creating a feeling of horror or terror in the reader that builds progressively towards the climax. Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1842) begins with the narrator being sentenced to death and placed in an utterly dark chamber: the problem or conflict he faces is, of course, how to survive. The sense of terror increases when the narrator discovers an extraordinarily deep pit at the centre of his cell, and then finds himself bound to a wooden frame, above which is a swinging blade that is gradually descending towards him.

Finally, at the story's climax it seems inevitable that he will fall to his death in the pit. However, resolution is swiftly achieved with an unexpected twist – a dramatic last-minute rescue by the French army.

In the 20th century, many short-story writers resisted this conventional narrative structure, preferring to capture a powerful moment or conflict that remains unresolved. Such stories can suggest that life's challenges rarely have easy answers or definite conclusions.

Many of Russian writer Anton Chekhov's short stories present a **fragment or episode from a character's life** in which significant events occur, but which stop short of revealing their full consequences or the way in which future events might play out in that character's life. The stories end not with a clear resolution or answer, but with the raising of new questions and uncertainties.

For example, in 'The Lady with the Little Dog' (1899), Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna begin an affair that seems at first to be a pleasant but brief liaison. However, as time passes, each finds they are unable to forget the other, and realises that 'this was no short-lived affair'. The story ends with something resolved – that their commitment to each other will be ongoing – but with 'the most complicated and difficult part ... only just beginning'. The true nature of their lives is brought into focus, but how their lives will proceed from this point is unknowable: it is simply another beginning, with the hoped-for destination 'far, far away'.

An illustration by Kukryniksy for Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Little Dog', from an illustrated edition of Chekhov's stories published in Russia in around 1954.

Narrative viewpoint

In most novels and short stories, the narrative viewpoint is one of the following: third-person omniscient, third-person limited or first person.

- Authors can use multiple narrators or narrative voices within the one text. Shifting the narrative viewpoint creates contrasting perspectives.
- Occasionally, authors use the second-person 'you' to refer to the main character, or to directly address the reader.
- The narrator or narrative voice in a novel or short story is just as much a construct as the characters – it is simply a device used by the author to tell a story and convey a particular view of the world.

Third-person omniscient narration

An **omniscient narrator** knows everything about the characters and everything that happens in the world of the text: omniscient means 'all knowing'.

- Access to such complete knowledge gives the narrative voice a reassuring quality.
- An omniscient narrative perspective constructs the illusion that universal, absolute knowledge of human affairs is obtainable.
- There is a crucial distinction between *knowing* everything and *telling* everything: even omniscient narrators withhold information (thus generating suspense, concern, anticipation, pathos, humour and so on).

Omniscient narrators can shift perspective

An omniscient narrator usually shifts the narrative perspective between a 'wide angle' or 'long shot' view of events, and 'close-up' shots depicting the individual viewpoints of characters.

In *Emma* (1815), Jane Austen uses **omniscient narration** both to give an overall impression of the middle-class English society of her time, and to create vivid, compelling portraits of her characters.

The novel begins with the view of an interested, but detached, observer:

> Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

To develop and generate reader sympathy for the characters, Austen's narrative voice becomes more closely aligned with the thoughts and feelings of those characters. In Chapter 2, for instance, when we are told that 'dear Emma was of no feeble character; she was more equal to her situation than most girls would have been', **the narrative voice presents Mrs Weston's view** of Emma, rather than an objective statement about Emma's character.

As other characters are introduced, we see them increasingly from Emma's point of view. Through her eyes, we see that Harriet Smith is 'a very pretty girl' and 'altogether very engaging'; that Robert Martin 'looked like a sensible young man, but his person had no other advantage'; and that Mr Elton is 'quite the gentleman'. In this way, we learn not merely about the other characters, but about Emma's views of them and the underlying values that inform these views.

Omniscient narrators can use the first-person 'I'

The first-person 'I' is sometimes used by an omniscient narrator. This narrator figure is not part of the world of the text, but adopts the viewpoint of an external observer who stands apart from it, 'god-like'.

An omniscient narrator using 'I' is entirely different from the 'I' of a first-person narrative, in which the narrator is frequently the central character or protagonist (see below).

Omniscient narrators referring to themselves as 'I' achieve two contrasting effects:

- The first effect is to draw the reader into the action, encouraging a stronger sense of involvement and identification with the characters.
- The second, simultaneous effect is to remind us that we are readers responding to the author's use of language and to a fictional, constructed world – this subtly distances us from the world of the text.

Austen uses this narrative strategy in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) when she states: 'I come now to the relation of a misfortune, which about this time befell Mrs. John Dashwood.' Here, the adoption of a more formal register – as if something quite serious and weighty is about to occur – is in fact a source of humour, since only Fanny Dashwood would regard having to send her carriage for her sisters-in-law as a genuine 'misfortune'.

Third-person limited narration

A **third-person limited** narrative point of view presents characters and circumstances as they are experienced and perceived by a particular character.

As we have seen, this technique is often used as part of a third-person omniscient narrative; however, using the third-person limited perspective predominantly or exclusively achieves a quite different effect. Because it relates the narrative from the viewpoint of a particular character, it limits our knowledge of events and of the other characters to what that character sees and to their perceptions of others.

- This narrative voice reflects the view – which is perhaps the author's view of human experience – that each person is fundamentally constrained in what they can know about other people.
- A third-person limited narrative voice can shift from one character to another to present contrasting or even conflicting views – with no external, objective perspective to indicate which view is more 'correct'.
- Third-person limited narration presents a fundamentally *subjective* view of the world, as opposed to the *objective* view presented by an omniscient narrator. This emphasis on subjectivity is a feature of much modernist literature from the early part of the 20th century.

See the discussion of narrative viewpoint in Katherine Mansfield's short story 'Prelude' on page 58.

James Joyce uses **first-person limited narration** in the story 'Eveline' from *Dubliners* (1914). Consider the sentences: 'Then she would be married – she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then.' These represent not the opinion of an external observer, confidently and reliably predicting Eveline's psychological destiny, but Eveline's own private thoughts about her future.

Later, the narrator states: 'Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted.' Again, this presents Eveline's view of Frank, a viewpoint that may well be distorted by her own deep-seated desires for love and for an escape from her constrictive family life.

In such a text, there is **no access to a reliable, objective view** of the characters or their society. Even at the story's end, it is not clear whether Frank represents a real opportunity for Eveline to achieve happiness, or is simply someone onto whom she projects fantasies that will never be fulfilled.

First-person narration

A **first-person narrative** presents the world of the text exclusively from one character's perspective. The narrator/character uses the first-person pronoun 'I' to refer to themselves; the author is thus able to create an extremely intimate and complex portrait of this character, but is constrained by only being able to present information that the narrator/character would possess.

A text narrated in the first person inhabits the mind of a single character, giving an extremely subjective view of the world. This reflects the view that knowledge is inherently limited and dependent on context.

Unreliable first-person narrators present a view that is not absolutely correct. This could result from:

- the narrator repressing knowledge or memories of traumatic events
- the narrator's biases and prejudices leading them to present a distorted view of the other characters
- the narrator not having access to all the facts, or not grasping the significance of certain facts, perhaps due to mental illness or other psychological factors.

Nick Carraway in F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a classic example of an **unreliable narrator**. When Nick states that Gatsby's heart 'was in a constant, turbulent riot' and that 'grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night', the reader cannot take these to be absolute truths. Rather, they are Nick's speculations about Gatsby's private thoughts and feelings, rendered in Nick's own overblown, poetic style: it is impossible to separate out the 'truth' of Gatsby's emotional life from Nick's personal investment in Gatsby's circumstances.

Nick's lack of objectivity regarding the other characters, and Gatsby in particular, is a key element in Fitzgerald's construction of a world that is driven largely by fantasy and desire. Nick is fascinated and intrigued by Gatsby, who in turn builds a glamorous existence based on little more than dreams and illusions. However, with only Nick's version of events to go on, the reader too is drawn into this world of beguiling surfaces and readily available pleasures. When all the characters are forced to confront reality at the novel's conclusion, its impact is all the more shocking.

Multiple narrative perspectives

The use of multiple narrators or narrative perspectives enables the author to shift the reader's view of the characters and events, perhaps forcing the reader to re-evaluate their attitudes towards certain characters or situations.

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) has fifty-nine chapters, **each narrated in first-person by one of the fifteen characters**. On the death of Addie Bundren, her husband and five children transport her coffin to Jefferson, Mississippi, so she can be buried with her relatives, honouring a family promise despite the extreme difficulty of this mission. Incidents such as the overturning of the cart in the flooded river are seen from several perspectives, producing a kaleidoscopic view of the journey and giving mythical overtones to the family's plight.

Shifts in the narrative perspective can also be achieved using third-person limited narration. In this case the change in perspective need not be signalled by a new chapter or section, but can occur seamlessly within a passage.

Katherine Mansfield uses third-person limited narration to create **shifting narrative perspectives** in the short story 'Prelude' (1918). At first the narrative viewpoint is that of the children Lottie and Kezia, who, on this day of tremendous change, see familiar objects with a new intensity. The storeman who takes them to their new house is 'an old friend' but now, in Kezia's eyes, appears magnified and larger than life: 'He was a very big man. He wore brown velvet trousers, and he had a long brown beard. But he never wore a collar, not even on Sundays.' These simple sentences convey not simply an image of the man, but Kezia's thoughts and feelings as she looks at the world in a state of heightened awareness and sensation.

Later, the narrative perspective shifts to represent the **contrasting viewpoints of the adult characters**. Stanley wakes the next morning 'enormously pleased' with the weather, his new house and even 'his firm, obedient body', while his wife, Linda, looks around the room at her belongings and wishes she was 'driving away from them all in a little buggy'.

In such a text, there is **no single external, objective view** of the characters or their circumstances. Although they belong, in one sense, to the same world, the narrative suggests that in another sense they inhabit very different realities, each experiencing their new situation in a unique and ultimately private way.

Characters

The success of prose fiction depends largely on how compellingly its characters are drawn. The characters in a novel (and, to a lesser extent, a short story) may be developed with widely varying degrees of complexity, from briefly sketched, possibly stereotypical minor characters through to the multifaceted main characters.

Anna Karenina is one of the most famous protagonists in literature. Here she is performed by Keira Knightley in Joe Wright's 2012 film of Tolstoy's novel.

Main characters/protagonists

In a novel there is sufficient scope for at least one character to be represented as a complex, three-dimensional subject with whom the reader can identify and about whom the reader has a degree of concern and sympathy.

The **protagonist** is the central character in the narrative; the events of a novel or short story are mostly presented from the protagonist's viewpoint.

There is also scope for the protagonist, or for several of the major characters, to change in response to their circumstances and experiences.

Minor characters and their functions

Each character, even the most minor, has a function or role within the narrative – their psychological depth and complexity is usually slight, which could lead to their real importance being underestimated.

Most long narratives contain minor characters that have one key function: for example, bystander, confidant, messenger or trickster. The role of minor characters in a novel is not to represent the complex nuances of human experience; rather, it is to perform functions that reflect aspects of interactions and exchanges in society. The role of the bystander, for instance, often provides us with special information about the main characters, or a perspective on the world of the text that is overlooked by the other characters.

Techniques used to create characters

The author can use the following textual elements to create a character:

- the character's thoughts
- what the character says (or doesn't say)
- how the character talks – speech patterns, tone, vocabulary and use of language
- what others say about that character
- the character's appearance, mannerisms, clothes, house and other aspects of their environment
- the character's actions – especially their interactions with others
- specific imagery to denote the character's inner life and to reveal or suggest the character's attitudes and opinions
- the character's name, which can suggest aspects of their personality, social status, values and so on.

Reader responses to characters

Characters interact in ways that are *dynamic* – changing, evolving – and *dramatic* – involving tension and harmony, conflict and resolution. This means that our responses to characters in a novel will shift and develop as the story unfolds.

- Some characters are drawn sympathetically, eliciting the reader's affection and concern; others are depicted more critically, provoking the reader's feelings of anger, horror, fear or disgust.
- The most celebrated characters in literature are usually a mix of many human qualities, flaws as well as virtues. The novelist's skill often lies in making an unsympathetic character seem interesting and worthy of the reader's sympathy, or in taking a very likeable character and teasing out their flaws and contradictions.
- Complex representations of individuals suggest that it is unwise to categorise people by such clear-cut terms as 'good' or 'bad'; instead, they encourage compassion, understanding and empathy in our relations with others.

Of course, the way the *writer* views the characters may not be the same as the ways in which *readers* view the characters, especially hundreds of years after the text was written.

Characters' viewpoints

Characters can represent viewpoints on social or philosophical issues through their:

- statements about those issues
- adherence to a belief system
- life choices.

This means that the author can convey a viewpoint on an issue through characterisation.

Illustration of Mr Collins by Hugh Thomson for an 1894 edition of *Pride and Prejudice*.

In general, Jane Austen's depictions of characters who are concerned mostly with accumulating personal wealth or elevating their social status – such as Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs Elton in *Emma* or Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* – are unsympathetic: **Austen encourages us to laugh at these characters and thus to reject the values they stand for.**

On the other hand, Austen's depictions of characters who seek mutual understanding and respect in their relationships, whose views of others are free from prejudice and who place personal integrity and restraint above wealth or the pursuit of pleasure, are sympathetic. Such characters include Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr Knightly in *Emma* and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*; Austen encourages us to admire these characters, to hope they achieve happiness and to endorse the values they stand for.

Short-story characters

In a short story, character development is constrained by the length of the text; the character must be created much more economically than in a novel.

- A short story often focuses on a particular incident or situation in a character's life, perhaps a crisis point, crystallising aspects of their broader life experience or personality.
- Whereas a novel typically suggests that people can change and develop over an extended period – perhaps several years or even decades – short stories often suggest that life is episodic and fragmented, that in fact life lacks any clear sense of a beginning, middle and end.

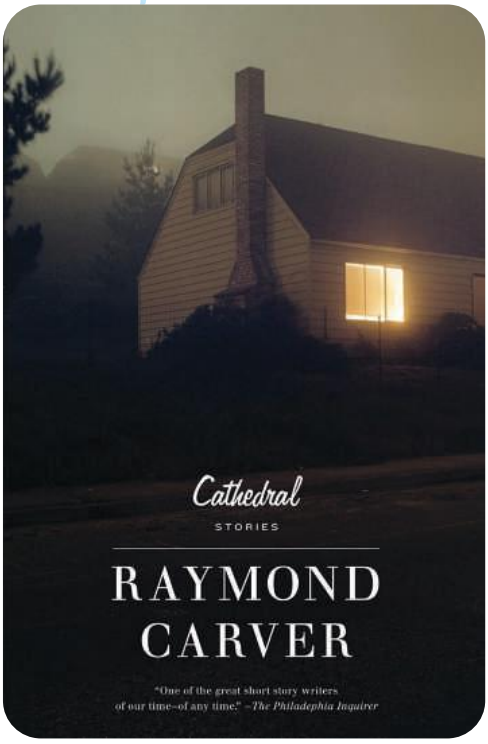
The acclaimed American short-story writer Raymond Carver was influenced by Anton Chekhov, and his stories often emphasise the **fragmentary and ambiguous qualities of life** through characters who lack strong sources of meaning and purpose – or who lose these sources of meaning due to a random stroke of fate.

One of Carver's most acclaimed stories, 'A Small, Good Thing' (in *Cathedral*, 1983), is longer than most, allowing for some development of the central characters. Ann and Howard Weiss are middle-class parents whose eight-year-old son, Scotty, is hit by a car, bringing crisis and trauma into otherwise ordinary, uneventful lives. There is nothing innately striking or memorable about any of the characters, but Carver creates them with a few simple words and phrases: the baker making Scotty's birthday cake is 'an older man with a thick neck'; the nurse at the hospital is 'a big Scandinavian woman with blond hair' and 'the trace of an accent in her speech'. These brief sketches also convey a sense of how these characters are seen by Scotty's parents, particularly his mother, Ann: not as full individuals, but as isolated fragments, snapshots of lives that remain out of view.

Often characterisation is achieved more through dialogue than description. The doctor's revelation that Scotty's skull is fractured is almost an afterthought:

> "But he's all right, believe me, except for the hairline fracture of the skull.
> He does have that."
>
> "Oh no," Ann said.

In this way, the doctor's attempts to reassure Ann and Howard are undermined, and his anxiety – and the real seriousness of Scotty's condition – is revealed. In Carver's stories, it is often the things that are not said – the gaps and silences – that create character depth and complexity, allowing the reader to enter into the characters' physical and emotional worlds.



The cover of the Vintage edition of *Cathedral*.

Language, tone and style

The precise use of language in a novel or short story is crucial to the effects it creates, the impact it has on its readers and the meanings it conveys.

Style is the way in which words are used and combined. It is a very broad term and can have three separate, but related, meanings:

- the level or register of language use – formal, informal or colloquial
- the complexity or simplicity of the phrases and sentences – e.g. ornate and descriptive, with many adjectives and adverbs; or minimalist, with few descriptive words
- the literary movement the text belongs to (such as Romantic or modernist), which informs both an approach to language and the underlying ideas (see Chapter 2, pages 19–28 for an overview of the major literary movements).

Tone is the mood or 'sound' of the writing, and conveys an attitude towards the characters, scene or events being described. Tone is an important element of the narrative voice, since it contributes to the impression that someone is talking directly to the reader.

Formal and informal language styles

Formal language means the use of correct, complex sentences, a generally serious tone, and a wide-ranging, sophisticated vocabulary. In other words, the style is more ornate and the tone more serious than that in which most people speak or think.

The use of a formal tone and style for literary fiction was common throughout the 19th century; it carries the implication that the educated classes have the best knowledge and understanding of human behaviour. The lower or 'working' classes are invested with much less complexity and interest in this form of writing.

The novels and short stories of Henry James focus on the lives of the upper-middle class in the late 19th century. He developed a **complex prose style** to evoke a world of tangled social forces, strict protocols for speech and behaviour, and often frustrated desires for freedom and happiness. Consider this example of a single sentence from the opening of *Washington Square* (1880):

> He was a thoroughly honest man – honest in a degree of which he had perhaps lacked the opportunity to give the complete measure; and, putting aside the great good-nature of the circle on which he practised, which was rather fond of boasting that it possessed the 'brightest' doctor in the country, he daily justified his claim to the talents attributed to him by the popular voice.

Note the range of punctuation, the convoluted style and the rather pompous tone, which conveys the character's sense of his importance and high intelligence.

During the 20th century, novelists and short-story writers deployed a wider range of styles, including informal and colloquial language styles, in order to give voice to a greater variety of human experience.

Informal language means the use of words, phrases and punctuation appropriate in everyday contexts and situations. It is more relaxed than formal language and closer to how people usually speak.

Colloquial expressions are used in conversational speech; they vary with such factors as time, social class, age and nationality. The use of colloquialisms is a key element of the **vernacular**, which is the everyday language used in a particular place and time.

Writers use colloquialisms and the vernacular in prose fiction, especially in dialogue, to create a strong sense of time, social context and place. This has been particularly so in English-speaking countries other than England, where the development of a distinctive national literature has often reflected national or even local patterns of speech.

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is **narrated in the first person** by Huck, whose language reflects his lack of education, his sceptical view of authority figures and formal learning, and his social context on the Mississippi River in the southern United States. The opening sentences establish Huck's personality and language style:

> You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary.

Twain also gives a significant amount of dialogue to Jim, the escaped African-American slave who becomes Huck's travelling companion on their journey down the river. In Jim's dialogue, Twain seeks to capture and represent the distinctive speech of African-Americans in that place and time:

> "What's de use er makin' up de camp-fire to cook strawbries en sich truck? But you got a gun, hain't you? Den we kin git sumfn better den strawbries."

Huck and Jim on their raft, an illustration by EW Kemble from the 1884 edition of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain himself was not African-American, and now we might see such a representation as being little more than a patronising caricature. However, it is important to see *Huckleberry Finn* – or any novel – in its historical context, and to understand that when Twain placed those on the margins of society at the centre of his novel, he needed to use language in a new way.

Irony

Irony means that the real meaning of the words is different from their literal meaning. It is an extremely important aspect of tone in literary fiction.

Irony can be produced in different ways, and can achieve varying effects.

- Irony allows the writer/narrator to convey information to the reader that also carries an opinion about certain characters. Often this generates a mocking or 'knowing' tone, linking writer and reader in a privileged view of the characters and events.

In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, when John Dashwood proposes giving his stepmother and half-sisters an annuity of 'a hundred [pounds] a year', the narrator states that Fanny 'hesitated a little, however, in giving her consent to this plan'.

The real meaning of these words is that Fanny *never* intends to consent to this proposal; the **effect of the irony** is not merely to reinforce the meanness of Fanny Dashwood's character, but also to demonstrate how determinedly manipulating and deceptive she is, even with her own husband.

- Irony can also elicit the reader's sympathy for characters. In this case, irony is generated not so much by the real meaning being the opposite of the literal meaning, but through drawing attention to the absurdities of human behaviour in an understated, detached fashion.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen frequently deploys an **ironic tone** in her characterisation of Marianne, whom the reader is meant to like but at whose emotional vicissitudes the reader is often invited to smile.

When Marianne is abandoned by Willoughby, she spends the morning 'indulging the recollection of past enjoyment and crying over the present reverse'; the ironic tone is generated by the paradox that Marianne is unhappy but, rather than trying to cheer herself up, chooses to dwell on her unhappiness.

Yet Marianne's inability to control her emotions is part of what makes her such a sympathetic and endearing figure, and here Austen's ironic tone works to promote, rather than undercut, our affection for her.

- **Situational or dramatic irony** is another important form of irony. This is generated when the reader and one or more characters know things that other characters do not. This creates dramatic tension, as the reader anticipates the moment at which all is revealed to the characters. This is more commonly deployed in drama than in narrative fiction.

See Chapter 5, pages 102–3 for more on dramatic irony.

Imagery

Imagery refers to two kinds of language use:

- descriptions of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile qualities of the world of the text
- figurative language (e.g. metaphor) that draws connections between objects, feelings and concepts.

Unpacking the meaning of images in novels and stories is one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of literary analysis, since it casts light on both the writer's craft and the way in which the broader meaning of the text is conveyed.

Images are important in the following ways.

- They evoke a sense of time and place.
- They contribute to characterisation – images associated with a character suggest aspects of their personality, life experience, attitudes and values.
- They help to generate the atmosphere, tone and mood of the narrative.
- They link together different parts of the narrative, generating unity and coherence; characters and events can be related not simply in a causal fashion, but symbolically, through common images associated with them.
- They convey the text's larger themes, allowing the events and characters depicted to be seen in terms of more abstract, possibly universal, concerns.

For more on imagery, including an explanation of metaphor and symbol, see Chapter 6, pages 159–67.

In Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), the image of the glass church **changes its meaning and emotional significance**, mirroring the fluctuating fortunes of the two protagonists. At first it is only Lucinda's dream of building 'something Extraordinary and Fine from glass and cast-iron', then a small prototype that Oscar sees as 'the gross material most nearly like the soul, or spirit', and then a shared 'glass vision' in which Oscar and Lucinda see 'that which cannot be seen – wonder, joy, the transparent traceries of angels dancing'.

However, it is a vision that *only* Oscar and Lucinda share: the opposition to their plan not only to build the church but also to transport it to northern New South Wales reflects the values of a narrow, materialistic society. The ambitious surveyor and explorer Mr Jeffris, for example, regards the church as 'the silliest thing he had ever heard of'. Eventually, the symbol of hope and love turns into a symbol of failure and despair, as the panes of glass 'cracked and hung like ice-knives' while Oscar floats it up the Bellinger River. When it finally sinks it becomes Oscar's tomb, the weight of its 'gross material' overwhelming the heavenward trajectories of the 'soul' and 'angels dancing'.

Close analysis of a novel

This section shows you how to write a close analysis of a passage from a novel, relating features of the passage to an interpretation of the text.

There are two main aspects to the close analysis of a novel, both equally important:

- **close *reading*** – focusing on one passage in order to gain a more complex and in-depth understanding of the novel
- ***writing* a close analysis** – writing about a section of the novel in detail. This is the best way of providing supporting evidence for an interpretation of the text's wider meaning; it is often required in assessment and examination situations.

Essential elements of close analysis

There are three main areas to focus on when preparing to write a close analysis of a passage. These are:

- language
- significance of the passage
- connections between features of the text.

In addition, you must ensure that your writing follows the **conventions of analytical writing**. That is, it:

- refers closely to the text throughout, including brief quotations integrated into your writing
- explains the meaning and significance of textual evidence
- uses a serious, formal tone.

See the table on pages 72–5 for a detailed explanation of these elements in relation to a sample passage from F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

How to read a passage closely

The following key questions will help you to gather and organise information as you read carefully through a selected passage.

Identify the context of the passage

Briefly contextualise the passage.

- Does the passage contain an event or idea that is significant within the novel as a whole?
- Is there a significant event or idea that 'happens' just before or after this passage?
- What dramatic impact is created by the placement of this passage at this particular point in the novel?
- How are some of the main concerns of the novel revealed in this passage?

Look closely at the characterisation

Consider the presentation of the characters in the passage.

- What is revealed about them through their dialogue, thoughts or authorial comment?
- Are the sources of this information reliable?
- What do characters' silences, gestures or expressions reveal?
- Throughout the novel, how and why do characters develop (or not develop) from one passage to another?

When you are examining dialogue, ask yourself questions about the relationship between what characters say and what they really believe.

- Is one character's voice dominant over another's?
- What is revealed about relationships between characters by the way they talk to one another?
- Is this consistent with what the rest of the novel tells us about the characters?

Consider the importance of the setting

A passage will usually have a single setting (time and place) in which the action occurs.

- How does the setting contribute to your understanding of the passage?
- Are particular settings linked closely to particular characters?
- What do settings reveal about characters?

Look for special language features

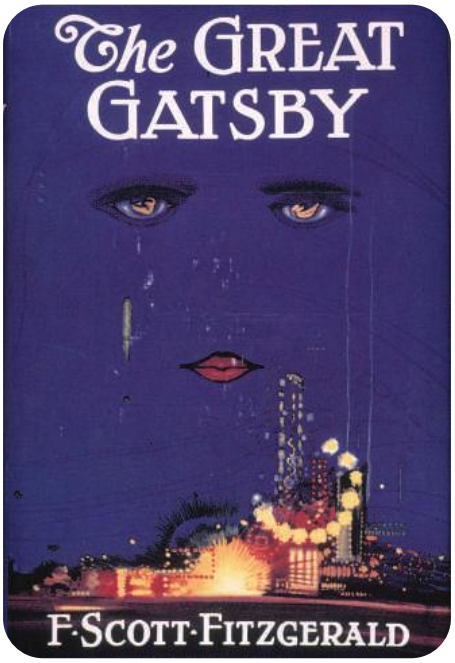
Comment on language and imagery, including:

- metaphor, simile, personification
- symbolic images
- dialogue, conversation, inner reflection
- sentence structure
- assonance and alliteration
- adjectives and verbs (these help set the tone and mood)
- irony (verbal, dramatic)
- allusions (classical, biblical, historical, literary etc.)
- sensory imagery (things that are seen, heard, felt, smelled or tasted by characters).

For definitions and examples of assonance and alliteration, see Chapter 6, pages 134–5.

Sample passage from *The Great Gatsby*

The following passage is from the opening of Chapter 2 of F Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Read it carefully then see the elements identified for close analysis in the table that follows.



Francis Cugat's cover for the first edition of *The Great Gatsby*.

About half-way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.

But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic – their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.

The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a small foul river, and, when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour. There is always a halt there of at least a minute, and it was because of this that I first met Tom Buchanan's mistress.

The fact that he had one was insisted upon wherever he was known. His acquaintances resented the fact that he turned up in popular cafés with her and, leaving her at a table, sauntered about, chatting with whomsoever he knew. Though I was curious to see her, I had no desire to meet her – but I did. I went up to New York with Tom on the train one afternoon, and when we stopped by the ashheaps he jumped to his feet and, taking hold of my elbow, literally forced me from the car.

'We're getting off,' he insisted. 'I want you to meet my girl.'

I think he'd tanked up a good deal at luncheon, and his determination to have my company bordered on violence. The supercilious assumption was that on Sunday afternoon I had nothing better to do.

Essential elements from the passage

The table below sets out the aspects of a text that require detailed attention in order to write a thorough and perceptive close analysis.

- The first column, headed **Identify important elements**, sets out what to look for in each of the four main areas: language; significance of the passage; connections between features of the text; and conventions for writing a close analysis.
- The second column, headed **Explain the effects of elements**, gives examples of the important elements and explains some of their effects, drawing on the passage from *The Great Gatsby*.

Use this table to prepare your own close analysis by completing the two columns for a passage you are studying. The questions and points for language, the significance of the passage and connections between features of the text can be used for analysing a passage from any novel or short story.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
Language	• Note any word choices that strike you as unusual.	• The alliteration (repetition of 'g') in '**grotesque gardens**' emphasises the juxtaposition of unlike terms, reinforcing the sense that nature is corrupted and inverted in this landscape. • The phrase '**powdery air**' contains an apparent contradiction: how can air be 'powdery'? This word choice makes the air seem almost solid, suggesting pollution and an unnatural merging of the 'crumbling' men with their environment.
	• Look for the connotations of words. • How do these connotations affect our view of characters, settings and events?	• What words suggest can be as important as their literal meanings. • The term 'ash-grey' describes the men's lack of colour, but also carries the connotation of lifelessness – indicating that these workers are lacking in vitality and vigour.
	• What is the significance of recurring images? • Are they symbols (images that stand for larger entities)?	• **Recurring images of eyes** suggest that a text is exploring different ways of seeing things. • Images of eyes and references to seeing emphasise the subjective nature of 'reality'. • The '**enormous yellow spectacles**' of T. J. Eckleburg substitute for the face; they are symbolic of the loss of human individuality in this society and the excessive value it places on commodities.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
	• What kind of tone does the author use in the narrative voice? • What tone is used by the characters in their dialogue, and what does this reveal about them?	• Tone is an important aspect of language use that has a direct impact on meaning. • **Nick's sarcastic tone** when discussing Tom, generated through derogatory terms such as 'tanked up' and 'supercilious', conveys his lack of respect for this character.
Significance of key passages	• What is the context of the passage? • Look for beginnings, turning points, crisis points, resolutions. • Relate the context of the passage to characterisation, narrative development, central ideas and concerns.	• **Beginnings** establish characters, settings, ideas. • The passage from *Gatsby* **introduces a significant setting**, including the powerful image of Eckleburg, and reveals a repugnant side to Tom's character. • **Turning points** can reveal changed attitudes or circumstances. • **Crisis points** often take the form of an unexpected challenge that causes changes in attitudes, circumstances or expectations. • **Crisis points** can be used to test a character and show strengths and flaws in their make-up, reveal social attitudes or bring conflicting forces together. • **Resolutions** can contain solutions to a problem, reinforcing values and revealing 'true' character.
	• Look for important insights into characters' motivations, values, goals.	• A **conversation between two characters** who trust each other can reveal their real hopes and feelings. • A **lengthy description of a landscape or an interior setting** will be rich in images and information about social and cultural context.
	• Look for typical aspects of the writer's style, such as the use of recurring images and words, and the use of narrative voice.	• **Images of eyes recur** in *Gatsby*, as does the image of T. J. Eckleburg. • Following Myrtle's death, Wilson says 'God sees everything' while looking at the billboard; it is as if this society has replaced God with an image from an advertisement.
	• Explain links between the *way* the text is written and *what* is being said.	• The **long, meandering second sentence** in the passage from *Gatsby* **reflects** the lack of definition and coherence in the landscape and the merging of life and death, human and non-human. • The **many commas** in the second and third sentences cause the rhythm of the prose to **mimic** the slow, uncertain movements of the men and the train.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
	• How does structure affect the reader's experience?	• The **order of events in the plot** might not be chronological; this can produce suspense, interest, surprise etc.
Connections between features of a text	• How is characterisation related to the views and values being presented and explored in the text?	• **Whether characters are 'punished' or 'rewarded'** reflects the text's position on the views and values associated with these characters, or on the dominant views and values of the society depicted. • Tom's drunkenness and infidelity reflect his selfishness and lack of compassion, yet he survives with his marriage and wealth intact (link to plot); this suggests a lack of moral values and real justice in the society.
	• How does imagery convey central preoccupations and ideas?	• **Images associated with death** ('ashes', 'ash-grey men') indicate the workers' lack of vitality and individuality (link to views and values) and foreshadow Myrtle's death (link to plot).
	• How does the narrative voice position the reader?	• The **narrative voice** can encourage the reader to be sympathetic or unsympathetic towards characters. • **Nick's narrative** in *Gatsby* elicits sympathy for Gatsby, but not for Tom (link with character).
	• How does the narrative create the mood or feeling of a passage?	• The mood could be reflective, sad, tense, exuberant, playful etc. • **Adjectives and adverbs** help to establish tone. In the passage from *Gatsby*, adjectives such as 'desolate', 'ghastly', 'solemn' and 'dismal' generate a serious, foreboding tone, foreshadowing the fatal accident later in the narrative (link to plot).
Conventions for writing a close analysis	• Don't describe; analyse!	• **A sentence that is simply descriptive** is: 'The passage gives an account of the gloomy landscape near Wilson's garage and the important image of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg.' • **A more analytical sentence** is: 'Fitzgerald's depiction of the ugly, dehumanised quality of American society is encapsulated in this landscape of ashes and the disembodied, faceless image of T. J. Eckleburg's eyes and spectacles.'
	• Use evidence from the text to support your statements.	• **Make detailed, specific references to the text; avoid general, sweeping statements** such as '*Gatsby* portrays the dark side of the American dream.'

Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
• Always explain the significance (and, if necessary, the meaning) of the quotes you use.	• **Avoid long quotes** and don't use a quote as an entire sentence, e.g. 'Nick makes plain his dislike of Tom's sordid private life. "I had no desire to meet her – but I did."' • Instead, integrate the quote within your discussion: 'Nick's dislike of Tom's sordid private life is conveyed by his assertion that he "had no desire to meet" Tom's mistress.'
• Use a serious and formal tone – avoid being too conversational or chatty.	• **Use a wide vocabulary** so that your word choices are as precise as possible. • **Don't use expressions such as** 'in my opinion' and 'it is my belief that'.

How to write a close analysis: a three-step process

Follow this three-step process for developing a close analysis of a passage. The extract from *The Great Gatsby* reproduced on page 71 is used for illustrative purposes.

1. **Read the passage carefully and make annotations** identifying features of the text such as language use, characterisation, setting and imagery; link these to key ideas in the text.
2. **Order your annotations** so there is a logical sequence of ideas in your close analysis – move from specific features of the text to its broader ideas, views and values.
3. **Write the analysis**.

Step 1: Read closely and make annotations

Use the table on pages 72–5 as a model for making notes on the key elements and their effects.

Another very useful technique is to annotate the passage itself, writing brief notes on the elements and techniques used by the writer. You can then expand on these notes in your close analysis.

Use a highlighter or coloured pen to mark up the passage, selecting different colours for different features of the writing:

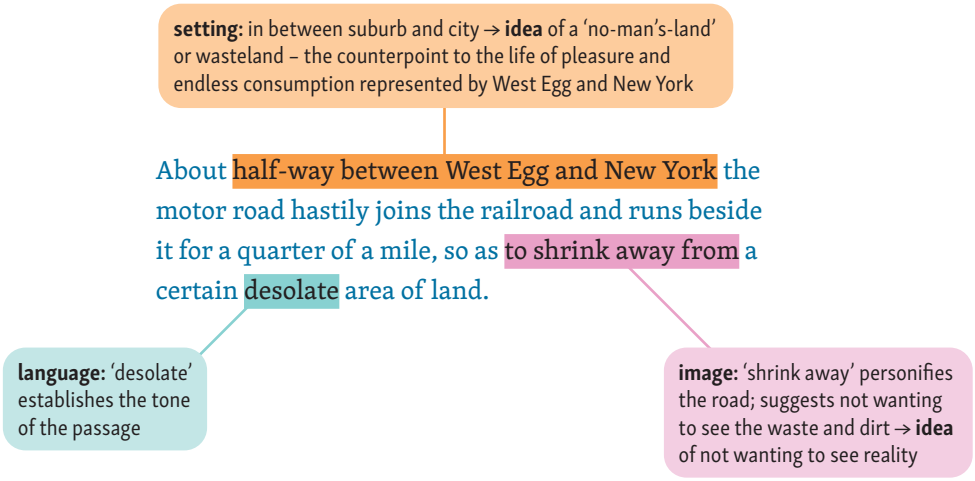
- characterisation
- setting
- aspects of language (e.g. tone, style, unusual word choices)
- key images.

Here are four sentences from the *Great Gatsby* passage on page 71, using the following code:

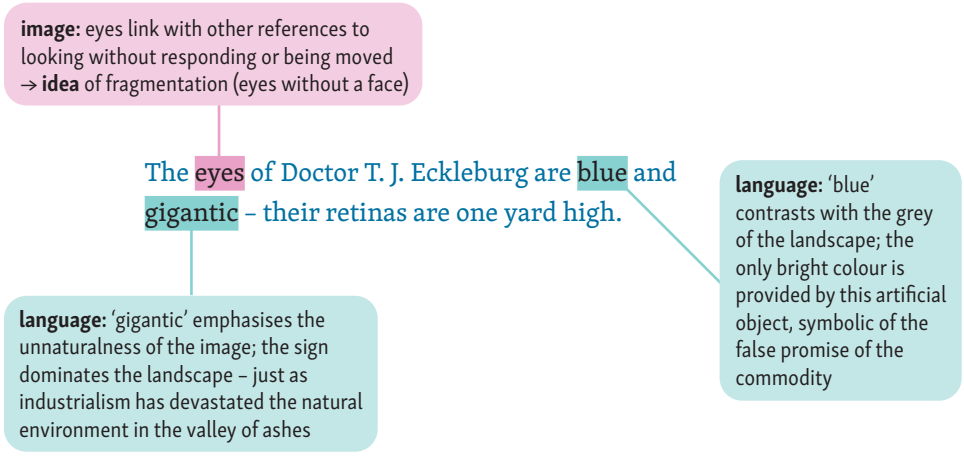
- characterisation
- setting
- language use
- images.

In the annotations, an arrow → shows how you can move from an element of the passage to a key idea that the writer is exploring – a very important part of your analysis.

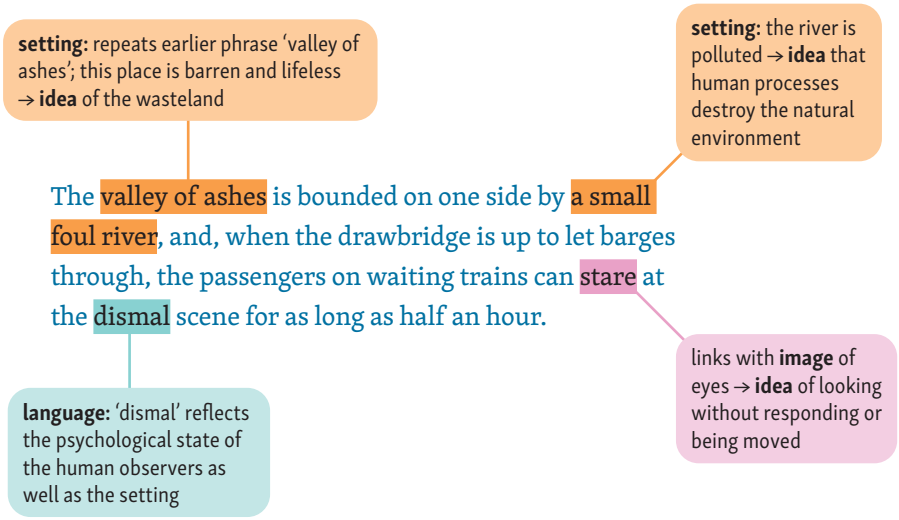
Sentence 1



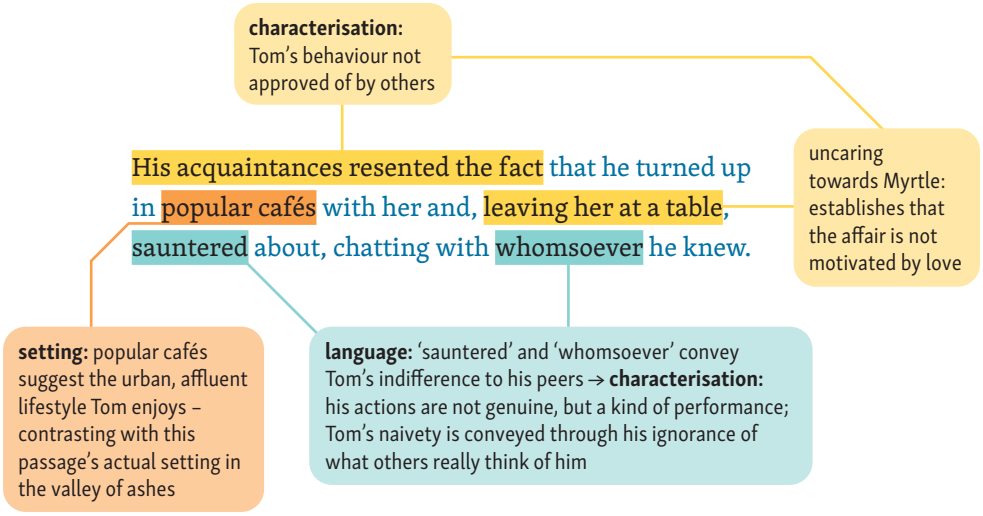
Sentence 2



Sentence 3



Sentence 4



Step 2: Order the annotations

Once you have annotated the passage, look for ways to organise and order your observations and comments. Aim to link specific features to the text's broader concerns – the values and viewpoints it presents and examines. The table below gives three examples of this.

Ways to order comments	Example using the passage
start with **language use** ⇓ show how language is the key to understanding characters and ideas ⇓ views and values	The adjectives 'desolate', 'ghastly', 'dismal'. ⇓ Idea of wasteland: it is not just physical but emotional; characters (e.g. Tom, Nick) lack emotional strength and seek short-term pleasures. ⇓ View of affluent American society as selfish and destructive, lacking values of emotional commitment and compassion.
start with a central **image** ⇓ show how the image encapsulates one or more ideas ⇓ ideas explored through characters, settings ⇓ views and values	Image of 'eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg' disconnected from a human face. ⇓ Idea of social fragmentation and alienation: people are reduced to constituent parts and do not relate in meaningful ways. ⇓ Tom's attempt to lead a glamorous social life is vain and shallow; he has no genuine human bonds. ⇓ View of social ease and sophistication as little more than an attempt to disguise the real ugliness of modernity.
start with a **character** ⇓ show how the passage places that character in a context ⇓ ideas are introduced and developed ⇓ views and values	Tom's mistress lives in the valley of ashes: this setting exposes the sordid reality at the core of their relationship. ⇓ The workers in the valley are 'ash-grey', as if more dead than alive. ⇓ In this context, rather than in his own home, Tom can also be seen to be living without real feeling or a sense of purpose. ⇓ Idea of the wasteland as a symbol of the broader society; a view that materialistic society might have an attractive veneer (for some people and places) but its focus on production (for the workers) and consumption (for the wealthy) robs people of sources of meaning and fulfilment in life.

Each of these starting points could also be developed differently by:

- focusing on other aspects of language, imagery and character
- making alternative connections between language, imagery, setting, characters and concepts
- interpreting these features and expressing ideas and views in different ways.

Ultimately, there is no one right way to construct a close analysis. Aim to express *your* viewpoint by making logical connections between features of the text and clearly basing each of your points on evidence from the passage.

Step 3: Write the analysis

The sample close analysis below follows the first of the above approaches – beginning with language use, then moving on to a central idea (the wasteland), characterisation (Tom Buchanan) and imagery (the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg).

Although it appears at the start of only the second chapter of The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald's compelling account of the bleak 'valley of ashes' casts a pall over the entire novel. The valley is completely leached of colour, and any life within it is oppressed to a death-like state. The use of a series of adjectives such as 'desolate', 'ghastly' and 'dismal' conveys the grim appearance of the landscape and generates a distinctive, haunting mood. The 'ash-grey men' who work here are so lacking in vitality that their physical being appears to be disintegrating, 'crumbling' into the thick air. It is a landscape of the living dead, where all of nature – plants, people, air and water – is smothered and suffused with industrial waste. There is no hope or joy here, only perpetual drudgery and a sense of resignation to one's fate.

What Fitzgerald paints here is a portrait of a society that has had its surface beauty and excitement stripped away. Just as the landscape is 'half-way between West Egg and New York', this scene is located in between a description of the Buchanans' glamorous, luxurious lifestyle in their East Egg mansion and an account of Tom and Myrtle's decadent cocktail party in a New York apartment. The wasteland of the valley of ashes is the

Brief contextualisation of the passage, indicating its significance within the narrative as a whole.

Language: setting and mood generated through choice of adjectives.

One- or two-word quotations integrated smoothly into the writing to support the discussion.

Moves from language to wider meaning of the **setting** – the idea of the valley of ashes as a wasteland.

Introduces names of characters, setting up the analysis for a discussion of **characterisation**; shows relevant knowledge of the wider text.

negative side (and logical consequence) of such conspicuous consumption, just as the lifestyles of the wealthy depend on the manual labour of the working classes. It is also a space which precludes any kind of pleasure in life, and the adjectives 'bleak' and 'desolate' seem to apply as much to the psychological states of those who work here, or who wait and 'stare at the dismal scene', as to the physical attributes of the landscape.

Continued attention to **language** used in the passage to support the interpretation.

Idea of wasteland broadened to identify its wider significance: emotional not just physical.

It is, then, entirely understandable that those with money and social status take every opportunity to avoid being confronted with the reality of the wasteland – to distract and amuse themselves with the gleaming surfaces and pleasant sensations of the city and affluent suburbs. Tom Buchanan indulges himself with a mistress and frequent appearances in 'popular cafés', where he mixes with and wants to impress others in his social class. Yet the disdainful tone of Nick's narrative voice suggests that Tom is vain rather than genuinely sociable, and that his pursuit of pleasure is quite free from ethical concerns (such as for the feelings of others). The superficial nature of Tom's affection for Myrtle is suggested by his casual habit of 'leaving her at a table' when they go out; he appears less attracted to Myrtle as an individual than to the promise of novelty and convenience that she represents. In this she is much like any other commodity that Tom might buy or trade – a symbol not of human passion but of the reduction of people to objects in a materialistic and consumption-orientated society.

Characterisation of Tom: the focus moves back into close analysis of the passage, continuing the **idea** of an emotional wasteland.

Links Tom's relationship with Myrtle (characterisation of Tom) to one of the text's broader concerns.

Just as the gleaming surfaces of civilisation are stripped away in this passage to reveal 'the grey land' that lies beneath, the protective layers of family and home are removed from Tom to show his duplicitous and largely amoral nature. The social class to which Tom belongs may not inhabit a physical wasteland, but in a moral and emotional sense the lives of those from East or West Egg are as barren, squalid and monotonous as those of the 'ash-grey men'. This link between the wasteland and the metropolis is crystallised in the image on an advertising billboard of a pair of 'blue and gigantic' eyes and a corresponding pair of 'enormous yellow spectacles'. The unnaturalness of the image – conveyed by the use of adjectives emphasising the extreme size and the lack of a nose or other typical facial features – corresponds to the unnaturalness of

Moves from the characterisation of Tom to the text's view of the society as a whole.

Uses this social perspective to move back into the passage and focus on the central image.

the whole society. The human face has been fragmented in this image, leaving only the components relevant to the marketplace; for so long the sign par excellence of human identity and expressiveness, the human face here is transformed into the definitive symbol of a dehumanised society.

Analyses the image in order to offer an interpretation of its meaning.

The 'eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg' are a sign both of what this society does best – the production of images, of fantasies – and of what it most lacks: a substantial, meaningful reality behind the appearance of success and glamour. Once the veneer of wealth and material privilege is stripped away, what is left is the reality of the wasteland, a life and a world lacking in meaning or purpose. It might seem that such a world exists only in this 'desolate area' in between the suburbs and the city; yet the wasteland in The Great Gatsby has a wider resonance, a relevance not just to the physical qualities of human life but to its emotional and moral content. A valley of ashes; a polluted river; an advertisement; a tawdry affair: these are the things, Fitzgerald suggests, that truly reflect the qualities and the values of American society. Everything else – the cocktails, the bright lights, the smart clothes and expensive furnishings – is a facade, a diversion, a reason to avert one's gaze, however pointlessly or fleetingly, from the 'solemn dumping ground' of life.

Moves from discussing the image into a concluding paragraph by making a comment on the novel's view of society.

The party scene from Baz Lurhmann's 2013 film *The Great Gatsby*.

Checklist for close analysis of a novel or short story

Any close analysis of a passage from a work of prose fiction should include the following elements.

- ☑ Detailed references to the passage.
- ☑ Some short direct quotations, integrated smoothly into your sentences.
- ☑ Discussion of how the writer uses setting, narrative point of view, language and imagery.
- ☑ Discussion of how the writer creates characters, and associates ideas and values with the characters.
- ☑ Analytical comments about the ideas and values being explored.
- ☑ Some references to the wider text, showing an understanding of how the passage is structurally and thematically significant.
- ☑ A well-ordered and logically developed argument about and interpretation of the text.
- ☑ A variety of sentence structures and lengths, and a sophisticated, precise vocabulary.

CHAPTER 5

DRAMA

Plays have been written and performed for thousands of years, going back, in the West, to the ancient Greeks such as Sophocles and Euripides in the 5th century BC. India, China, Japan and other Asian nations also have strong theatrical traditions with equally long histories. There have also been countless oral traditions, in which a story is told by performers, often involving movement, music and dance, and presented within a designated performance space. Although this chapter focuses on Western drama, it is clear that the broad concept of drama has been integral to a very wide range of cultures over many centuries.

Drama shares a great deal with prose fiction, including many of the features of characterisation and structure discussed in Chapter 4. Like prose fiction, a play tells a story about characters and events that are usually imaginary but sometimes based on real individuals. Conventionally, the narrative develops around one or more sources of conflict or tension leading to a major point of crisis, followed by a denouement and resolution.

However, because plays are written to be performed, there are some crucial differences between drama and prose fiction. This chapter explains the special features of drama, including a section on how to write an analysis or review of a play performance.

Narrative techniques

In a sense, the print text of a play is only a 'partial' text: it requires a performance in order to be fully realised. Aspects of the performance that are crucial elements of the narrative techniques available to a playwright include:

- props and sets
- sound and lighting
- gestures and facial expressions of characters
- positions and movements of characters, including spatial relationships and dynamics between actors, and between actors and set elements
- the manner in which lines are delivered
- costumes and make-up.

We consider the impact of several of these on how meaning is constructed and conveyed to an audience in the section 'Stage directions and performance' below (pages 92–9).

Dialogue

Much more depends on what is *said* by the characters in a play than it does in narrative fiction. In drama, there is usually no narrative voice that describes people and places, provides a unifying perspective, explains background details or takes us directly into the minds of characters. The audience looks at a character in much the same way as other characters do – without the special insights provided by a narrator.

In many contemporary or 'experimental' theatre works, there may in fact be characters who play with the idea of a narrator, perhaps speaking directly to the audience from onstage or in a voice-over. Even in such cases, though, the spoken word remains of primary importance.

Soliloquies

A **soliloquy** is a speech in which a character directly informs the audience of their innermost thoughts and feelings. Usually the character is alone on the stage, and it is understood that no other character hears what is said.

This technique brings the audience into a special relationship with the character delivering the soliloquy, as the audience gains an insight into the speaker that no other character can have.

A soliloquy temporarily places the audience in a position similar to that generated by a first-person narrator in a novel. The overall effect, though, is closer to that of an omniscient point of view. Special insights into one character's mind are interspersed with ensemble scenes showing characters in various situations and groups, as well as with soliloquies and asides (see below) from other characters. The audience thus knows everything, or a great deal, about the major characters, whereas the characters only know a limited amount – at least until the end of the play.

A soliloquy is usually a significant speech: Hamlet's famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is thirty-four lines in length, for instance. Such speeches temporarily hold up the action to focus the audience's attention on the character's state of mind rather than on the unfolding of events.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (first performed around 1601), **soliloquies** give the audience an insight into the emotional states, deliberations and schemes of the protagonist that no other character possesses. At first Hamlet is angry and defiant; later he ponders his inaction, and plans a course of action – to write a play to 'catch the conscience of the King' – but then reveals the depth of his despair, questioning the nature and purpose of existence. Taken together, Hamlet's soliloquies convey his psychological complexities and wide emotional range, so that the unfolding drama is as much interior, occurring within Hamlet's mind, as it is exterior, involving physical and verbal conflict between characters.

Hamlet's Vision by Pedro Américo (1893).

Asides

In an **aside**, the character speaks directly and briefly to the audience – in a few lines at most – without the other characters leaving the stage.

The theatrical conventions are that:

- other characters do not hear what is said
- asides are indicated in a stage direction so that the actor knows to address the audience.

Although briefer than a soliloquy, an aside achieves a similar effect. The audience learns the character's true intentions – which might well be contrary to those indicated by their statements to other characters – but because an aside is short, the narrative continues to move forwards.

In *King Lear* (first performed in 1606), Edmund reinforces his duplicity throughout the play in a series of **asides**, such as when he tells Cornwall he feels a divided loyalty but then informs the audience how he will find further evidence of his father's 'suspicion'. Edgar, Goneril and Regan also make regular asides, letting the audience know the full extent of the gap between their outward appearances and their real feelings.

Structure and form

Plays are almost always broken down into **acts** and smaller units, **scenes**. Acts are groups of scenes that share a physical setting or are close together in their temporal settings; that is, events within acts happen roughly within the same time period.

- Shakespeare's plays have five acts, each with several scenes.
- Chekhov's major dramatic works have four acts but no internal divisions into scenes.
- In the 20th and 21st centuries, continued experimentation with form has led to a loosening of conventional structures, and one-act plays have become relatively common. However, longer structures of three or four acts are still often used.

When referring to a play comprising acts and scenes, it is usual to give the number of the act first, then the number of the scene within that act.

The modern convention is to use Arabic numerals for both acts and scenes, e.g. Act 1 Scene 3, or in abbreviated form it can be written as 1.3. Older conventions used large Roman numerals for acts and either normal numbers for scenes, e.g. I.3, or small Roman numerals, e.g. I.iii. You will often see these older conventions used in commentary on Shakespearean drama.

Narrative structure

See Chapter 4, pages 50–1 for definitions and examples of these key points in narrative structure.

The key terms **climax**, **denouement** and **resolution** apply to the narrative structure of plays just as they do to novels and short stories.

The **exposition** occurs at the beginning of the play and provides background information on characters and situations. The key sources of conflict and tension are also established in the exposition. It is an element of narrative structure that is more specific to

drama than other narrative forms, though it also occurs in novels and films. Usually background information is conveyed through dialogue and character interactions so the action of the play can proceed at the same time, but other techniques, such as directly addressing the audience, can also be used.

The exposition of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (first performed in 1960) occurs in the opening two scenes. Common Man begins the play by directly addressing the audience, establishing the temporal setting and introducing most of the main characters, including his employer, Sir Thomas More. The idea that any man has his price (and More's rejection of this principle) is raised, and the family's wariness of Thomas Cromwell is evident. In this way, **the exposition sets up the play's central ideas and conflicts**.

In the second scene, More's exchange with Cardinal Wolsey fills in much of the political background, including King Henry VIII's desire for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn, and the perceived need for a male heir. Finally, the demise of Wolsey, described by Common Man at the end of this scene, shows Henry's ruthlessness and anticipates More's own fate at the play's conclusion.

Tragedy and comedy

In traditional drama there are two main 'shapes' to the narrative structure, corresponding to the two main forms of classical Greek and Shakespearean drama: tragedy and comedy. These two forms still exert a very strong influence on the writing and performing of plays, although there have been many variations on their basic shapes.

In a comedy, the overall pattern is essentially the reverse of that for a tragedy: a comedy can be seen as a fall, then a rise, whereas a tragedy comprises a rise, then a fall.

Tragedy	Comedy
◆ The action rises to a point of crisis (the climax), then falls. This results in a sense of catharsis or resolution. ◆ The tragic hero is at first successful and acclaimed. ◆ The hero then errs, falls from grace and ultimately dies, along with those close to the hero.	◆ A problem is presented within an otherwise harmonious atmosphere. ◆ Misunderstandings or conflicts lead to separation and anxiety. ◆ Finally, the confusion is ended and relationships are restored – usually in the form of a marriage or double marriage.

Special features of tragedy

Aristotle's *Poetics* (written in the 4th century BC) describes a number of defining features and conventions of tragedy that have remained important to the form, although many playwrights have varied or subverted them. The following are the key terms and concepts in Aristotle's theory of tragedy.

Aristotle's understanding of tragedy, outlined in his classic work *Poetics*, is still relevant today.

- The hero has a tragic flaw or makes a terrible error of judgement (*hamartia*), possibly involving *hubris* (excessive pride and confidence), leading to their own suffering as well as the suffering of others.
- The hero experiences a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) and arrives at a profound moment of recognition and understanding (*anagnorisis*).
- The action will evoke pity and fear in the audience, ending with a cleansing or purification followed by a release from tension (*catharsis*).

Classifying plays

It can be difficult to categorise plays written from the late 19th century onwards as either tragedy or comedy.

For example, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (first performed in 1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (first performed in 1891) may be seen as tragedies, although both feature a middle-class woman as the central character – far removed from the kings and princes of Shakespearean tragedy. Moreover, rather than being the victims of a 'fatal flaw' within their characters, these women are just as convincingly seen as victims of an overly constrictive, patriarchal society.

Twentieth-century American playwrights Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller also use elements of tragedy in their plays but focus on the lives of ordinary individuals, such as Willy Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (first performed in 1949). Like Ibsen, they often depart from the conventions of tragedy by placing as much weight on the limitations of the characters' social and cultural contexts as on their personal flaws.

Similarly, although Chekhov labelled some of his late plays 'comedies' and others 'dramas', the two types are not as clearly demarcated as in Shakespearean drama. *The Cherry Orchard* (first performed in 1904), for example, is subtitled 'A Comedy in Four Acts', but rather than ending with a marriage or other celebration, the play closes with the disappointment of an expected marriage proposal that fails to eventuate, an apparent death and the poignant sounds of an axe striking a tree.

Contemporary plays can be even more difficult to categorise. They may feature an intense character-driven drama as in a tragedy, but use several characters of equal importance rather than one central character with supporting minor characters. They may also not follow a conventional progression towards a resolution.

As discussed in Chapter 2, literary texts can also be classified according to the historical period or stylistic movement they belong to. Two important theatrical movements of the 20th century are discussed below and on the next page.

The epic theatre of Brecht

In the 1930s and 1940s, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht developed a form of theatre which, like tragedy, dealt with serious themes, but appealed more to the audience's reason than to their feelings. Whereas tragedy aims, in Aristotle's terms, to evoke pity and fear, Brecht sought to make the audience feel somewhat distant from the action in order to reflect on the ideas being presented. The main qualities of Brechtian theatre include:

- the detachment of audiences from the play's action, which Brecht called *Verfremdungseffekt,* or the 'alienation effect'
- the minimisation of dramatic tension through the use of loosely connected scenes without a clear dramatic climax, placards summarising the action, and musical and comic elements
- highly stylised acting to heighten the audience's awareness of watching a play (rather than maintaining an illusion of reality).

Many later playwrights have been influenced by Brecht's approach and have incorporated Brechtian elements into their work – Common Man in Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* is one well-known example.

The Theatre of the Absurd

A twist on the conventional form of comedy can be seen in plays belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd. This loose movement of the 1950s and 1960s used comic elements to express serious feelings of confusion and purposelessness. Plays such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (first performed in 1953), Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (first performed in 1959) and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (first performed in 1966) included scenes of disjointed, repetitive, random or meaningless behaviour that left audiences simultaneously amused and bewildered. In this way, the Theatre of the Absurd used the techniques of comedy to convey themes and ideas more usually associated with tragedy.

Characterisation

Playwrights construct characters using much the same techniques as writers of narrative fiction, with one major exception: **there is no narrative voice to provide the reader or audience with additional information.**

Consequently, dialogue is a much more important element of characterisation in drama than in novels and short stories. However, the playwright also uses a range of non-verbal techniques to construct and develop characters, which the director and actors realise and add to in performance.

For instance, a range of visual elements, such as lighting, costumes, make-up and personal props, can convey information about characters. These elements can be particularly effective in terms of locating characters within a social and cultural context.

Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh in the 1951 film version of Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Elia Kazan.

Acting style

An actor's interpretation of a character is expressed through acting techniques that supplement and clarify the meanings of their lines. These techniques include:

- an actor's use of tone of voice, volume, pitch and pace
- the ways in which an actor stands and moves around the stage
- an actor's facial expressions and hand gestures (and whether these are seen or unseen by other characters).

Interactions between characters are very important, and are often non-verbal. For example, characters can:

- stand close to or at a distance from one another
- look dominant or appear submissive
- interact physically, such as by touching, caressing or striking one another.

Although some aspects of acting style are indicated by stage directions, most are left to the director and actors to 'flesh out'; they might well vary from production to production. This is just one important way in which the performance of a play can result in a very different text from the print version.

Character groupings

Changing the groups of characters onstage at any one time is an important technique of characterisation in a play. Such changes and movements are usually clearly indicated in the script. This technique allows the playwright to bring different aspects of characters' personality to the fore, showing:

- how their behaviour alters according to who else is present
- contrasts between public and private identities
- how the characters respond to changed circumstances.

The playwright can also convey important information about a character while they are offstage, through what other characters say and do in that individual's absence. This provides an external perception of a character which is not mediated by their own voice or presence.

At the other end of the spectrum, some contemporary plays are written for quite abstract arrangements of characters who might be identified only as 'Voice 1', 'Voice 2' and so on. In such texts, the director and actors have very little information about how the characters relate to one another.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare brings together most of the main characters in the opening scene, but varies their interactions in such a way as to **bring key relationships to the fore and expose defining elements of the characters' personalities**.

The first speeches of Regan and Goneril conform to the formalities and conventions of the court, and they express precisely the sentiments that their father expects to hear. However, when the two are alone at the end of the scene they speak frankly to each other, revealing to the audience their true (and much less sympathetic) natures.

Stage directions and performance

Stage directions are italicised in the print text of a play. They include three main kinds of information:

- details of the layout and appearance of the stage, e.g. props, settings and lighting
- descriptions of music or sound effects
- directions to guide the presentation and performances of the characters, e.g. physical appearance, movements on and off the stage, and the actors' gestures and tone of voice at key moments.

Stage directions are critical to understanding a play when reading the print text, and to realising the play as a performance text. Originally they were 'leftover' rehearsal notes from the stage managers which then became part of the published script. Most pre-20th-century plays contain relatively few stage directions, so many features of the text that directly affect its meaning are ultimately in the hands of the director. In the 20th century, playwrights included more detailed and extensive stage directions: British comedies from the 1950s, for example, can include several pages of stage directions with extremely specific instructions about props and set design. Again, the director plays a very important role in deciding how faithfully to follow these instructions; in some cases, they might choose to disregard them altogether.

Props and sets

Props and **sets** include all the objects placed on the stage, pictures hanging on walls, the stage scenery and backdrops (which can incorporate doors and windows). **Personal props** are objects carried onstage by actors at any point.

Sets can be rich and detailed, perhaps reflecting an affluent household or a vibrant, dynamic society; or they can be minimal, inviting the audience to see whatever items are present as symbolic, signifying larger forces or contexts.

In Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City* (first performed in 1973), the set re-creates the mayor's parlour in Derry, Northern Ireland. The detailed stage directions describe a **set that immediately conveys a critical view of the city's leaders and their values**: the adjectives '*dated*', '*heavy and staid*', '*artificial*' and '*forgotten*' suggest that those in authority are out of touch with present realities and with the lives of ordinary citizens. The Union Jack flag also reminds the audience of who is ultimately in power – the British.

In contrast, Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (first performed in 1998) does not describe the sets in the stage directions – in fact, there are no stage directions at all. This gives the director considerable freedom to decide how much, or how little, context is given to the characters' lives and the events depicted.

The **use of minimalist sets** in *Copenhagen* **emphasises the universal aspects of the play's concerns**. For example, theatre critic Robert Butler notes that the first production used 'a stage that was circular, white and clinical ... free from any period trappings' ('Commentary' in the Methuen student edition of the play script). The lack of any specific socio-historical context in the set also facilitates the play's several shifts in time, between the 1920s, the 1940s and a vague 'present day' in which the characters are actually deceased. The effect is, as the character Margrethe puts it, that 'the past becomes the present inside your head'.

Kevin Kordis and Matthew Zahnzinger on a minimalist set in the Flat Earth Theatre production of *Copenhagen* in the Factory Theatre, Boston, in 2012.

Costumes and physical appearance

Specifications for costumes and the general appearance (approximate age and physical demeanour) of characters are much more likely to be included in drama written since the 19th century.

- Costumes and personal accessories such as jewellery, watches, hats, canes and handbags all suggest aspects of a character's personality. These qualities might not be otherwise immediately apparent, or they may be repressed in the characters' conversations, lying beneath the surface of their words.
- These aspects of character can be further highlighted by make-up and lighting, according to how the director and actors seek to interpret and realise the characters.

In Shakespearean and classical Greek tragedy, such directions are minimal or absent. In Sophocles' *Antigone* (around 441 BC), for instance, we are told only that Ismene and Antigone are '*daughters of Oedipus*' and that Teiresias is '*a blind prophet*'. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero is listed simply as '*the right Duke of Milan*' and Miranda as '*daughter to Prospero*'.

Ibsen, however, is very particular about indicating what his central characters are wearing, and describes characters very precisely. In *Hedda Gabler*, the stage direction preceding Hedda's first entry provides a **very detailed description of her appearance**. Hedda's age, complexion, eye colour, expression, hair colour and clothing (a '*loose-fitting morning costume ... in good style*') are all specified.

These physical attributes and visual signifiers convey Hedda's aristocratic background, which sets her apart from her middle-class husband and their friends, although it is barely hinted at in her conversations with others.

Cate Blanchett as Hedda in a Sydney Theatre Company production of *Hedda Gabler* in New York, 2006.

Character positions and movements

In almost all plays staged in a conventional theatre, the characters are confined to a single stage area, directly in front of the audience. This is a significant difference from a novel or film. The novelist can change the reader's perspective on the action by shifting the narrative point of view; the filmmaker does this by changing camera positions and angles. In a play, though, the playwright – and, in any given production, the director – depends on manipulating the characters' movements to achieve similar effects.

- Characters can shift between the front and rear of the stage (downstage and upstage respectively) so that the audience focuses on certain characters at different times.
- Entries and exits enable character groupings to be varied so that different relationships can be explored and the plot developed.
- A character delivering a soliloquy can roam the otherwise empty stage, emphasising that the audience has sole access to that character's inner feelings and motivations.

Character movements and positions are usually only specified at key points in the narrative; such directions ensure that the characters' interactions and relationships are clearly conveyed to the audience.

> Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (first performed in 1901) begins with the three lead characters alone onstage. Chekhov's stage directions indicate what the characters are doing, the colours of their dresses, and that Olga and Irina are standing while Masha is sitting. This immediately **establishes a distinction** between Masha and her two sisters, while presenting the three as a group.
>
> The events of the play draw the sisters even closer together; at the end, the stage directions indicate that they '*stand huddled together*' for support and comfort in a changing and increasingly violent world.

In Greek and Shakespearean drama there are few stage directions describing movement; those present indicate little more than the characters' entrances and exits, their most basic actions ('*kneeling*', '*fights*', '*dies*') and to whom they speak.

However, plays written in the 19th and 20th centuries use more frequent and detailed stage directions, including specific information about the characters' gestures and facial expressions, and even the way in which certain lines should be delivered.

In Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, **stage directions often indicate the precise emotion** with which a line should be delivered or a gesture performed. This is particularly so in the tense final scenes, in which many of Hedda's actions are specified by directions such as: '*suppressing an involuntary smile and imitating Tesman's intonation*' and '*letting her hands stray gently through Mrs Elvsted's hair*'.

By writing such meticulous stage directions, Ibsen ensures that the actor's performance conveys Hedda's fluctuating and often frustrated emotional life, which the words alone do not express.

Interpretive decisions

Where stage directions are absent, the director and actors must decide how the characters should move and be positioned in order to best convey the meaning and significance of the play's actions and language.

Normally, such decisions merely complement or emphasise what is already apparent from the dialogue. Sometimes, though, the characters' movements and expressions are crucial to the meaning of a scene, yet are not clearly signalled by their dialogue.

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (first performed in 1604), Isabella says very little in the final scene of the play, in particular not expressing her view on her impending marriage to Duke Vincentio. This means that **the text of the play does not let the reader know** whether she is grateful or resentful of the Duke's presumption that she will agree to his proposal, which is all the more surprising since for the entire play Isabella has declared her intention to remain a virgin and become a nun. Any production of the play must make an interpretive decision as to how to represent Isabella's response to the Duke's proposal.

In this way, the meaning of the text is largely determined: Isabella will be shown either as independent, rebellious and resentful of male power; or as meek and subservient in accepting her fate. However, many of Shakespeare's feisty heroines do not readily accept fates that are at odds with their desires and principles.

In contrast, some playwrights use stage directions to make strong interpretive comments about the significance of the characters' attitudes, beliefs and actions, and indeed about the meaning and wider significance of the play as a whole.

Arthur Miller uses detailed stage directions and commentary in the published script of *The Crucible* (first performed in 1953) to **elaborate on themes, historical details and contemporary political events.** In fact, in the Penguin Classics edition there are nearly five pages of notes before the first line of dialogue. In this introductory material and in notes throughout Act 1, Miller reflects on Salem society in the late 1600s; the nature of a witch-hunt; the historical individuals on whom his characters are based; and the concept of the devil in the modern (mid-20th-century) world. There are only indirect references to the 'witch-hunt' of Miller's own time, hearings about alleged communist activities held by the House Un-American Activities Committee (at which Miller refused to testify). Perhaps Miller used these notes to prevent an overly simplistic reading of the play as an allegory concerned purely with contemporary political events.

Lighting

Lighting has several important functions in the theatre.

- It draws the audience's attention to a character or group of characters.
- It creates a mood or ambience (e.g. soft and intimate or harsh and alienating).
- It signals a shift in location and/or time during a scene change, through the lights going down and then coming back up.

See pages 108–9 for technical terms and features of lighting used in a play performance.

Lighting can also have a symbolic function, especially when the source of the light is one of the props.

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the **contrast between light and dark** is central both to the staging of the play and to depicting 'right' and 'wrong' codes of conduct.

In Act 2, when Dr Rank arrives to see Nora, Ibsen's stage direction indicates that '*it begins to grow dark*'. Eventually, in darkness, Rank confesses his love for Nora; she is shocked and asks her maid to 'bring the lamp', asking Rank: 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself, now that the lamp's come in?' Here, the light represents the harsh reality of social expectations and proprieties, and the way in which they must be maintained at the expense of genuine feeling.

By the end of the play, though, Nora has rejected the hypocrisy inherent in these values. Her final confrontation with her husband, Torvald, takes place not in darkness, but in the light cast by the table lamp – she is no longer prepared to live with the darkness of deception and pretence, preferring instead the 'light' of emotional honesty and truth.

Sound effects

Sound effects can heighten the sense of realism at dramatic moments, adding to the play's construction of the illusion that the characters inhabit not merely the stage, but a larger 'world'. They can also provide a symbolic element that highlights the wider significance of the action.

The gunshot near the end of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the sound of an axe at the conclusion of *The Cherry Orchard* are crucial elements of the narrative that also **signal the ending of a way of life**. Both occur offstage, but significantly affect the audience's response to the onstage action.

Music

Music can be part of a play's action – as when a character sings or plays a piano – or it can be background or incidental music. In either case, it can:

- create a mood
- reinforce aspects of the characters' social, cultural and historical context
- enhance characterisation by showing an aspect of the character that they cannot or will not express in words.

Hattie Morahan as Nora and Dominic Rowan as Torvald in a 2012 production of *A Doll's House* at the Young Vic Theatre in London.

At times, especially in contemporary works, a particular song can be referenced in the stage directions because the lyrics (or other elements of the music) comment directly and specifically on the action, characters or relationships. More usually, though, the exact nature of the music is not specified, allowing the director considerable freedom in constructing the meaning of the performance for the audience.

Ibsen uses dance music played on a piano in both *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*. In the former, Torvald plays while Nora dances a tarantella; her wild performance contrasts with her husband's instructions to slow down, a difference entirely characteristic of their divergent temperaments. In *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda goes offstage to play '*a wild dance tune on the piano*'. Her energetic performance suggests a vigour and capacity for creative self-expression that are evidently suppressed in her daily life, and thereby renders her suicide – which follows immediately – all the more shocking and tragic.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (first performed in 1947), Tennessee Williams uses music to establish a sense of time and place, to create a mood and to convey information about characters. Music for the Varsouviana (a polka-like dance) is heard on several occasions, in each case **reflecting Blanche's memories and emotions**. Blanche and her husband, Allan Gray, were dancing the Varsouviana on the night of his death, and the music is first heard when Blanche is describing to Mitch her marriage and its tragic ending. Whenever the music is heard subsequently (as in Scene 9) it signals to the audience that these memories, and the associated feelings of loss and dread, are dominating her mind. Finally, when the Doctor and Nurse arrive to take Blanche to a mental institution, the music is heard '*filtered into a weird distortion*'. The Varsouviana thus comes to symbolise the hold the past has on Blanche, tracking her slow but inexorable decline into madness.

Language

When reading the print text of a play, the language of the characters – rather than their appearance or movements – is foremost in the reader's mind. Even in a performance, when sounds and visuals are more prominent, the language used by the characters is usually the main medium by which meaning is communicated to the audience.

This is further enhanced – in a way that is difficult to convey in print – by the volume, pitch, accent and tone of the actor's voice, and by how quickly or slowly, fluently or hesitantly, they deliver their lines. As discussed above, some playwrights seek to control these aspects of performance through detailed stage directions, while others leave them open to interpretation.

The functions of language

Because there is no narrative voice in drama, the language used by the characters must fulfil several functions:

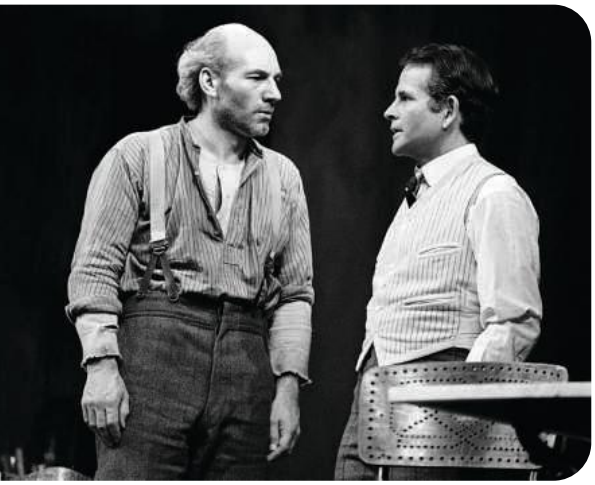
- develop characterisation
- move the plot forwards
- convey intimacy, distance, tension etc. in relationships
- express the main ideas and concepts circulating in the play
- contain the main images that link various characters and parts of the play together in a coherent whole
- help to establish historical, social and cultural contexts, both for individual characters and for the play as a whole.

Although the characters' language in a play often appears realistic and natural, it is invariably multi-layered, and often as condensed and evocative as poetry.

Everyday speech

Compared to literary fiction, the language of many plays is much closer to the language of ordinary people. Although classical Greek and Shakespearean drama use very stylised and poetic forms of language, most drama written since the late 19th century has aimed for greater realism, and has increasingly adopted the style and tone of everyday speech.

Of course, the way in which characters speak varies greatly with their context – the time and place in which they 'live'. Moreover, differences between national theatrical traditions are often very marked.



Patrick Stewart as Larry Slade and Ian Holm as Hickey in a production of *The Iceman Cometh* by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1976.

Dylan Thomas' radio play *Under Milk Wood* (first broadcast in 1954) captures the idioms and lyrical rhythms of **provincial Welsh English**; it includes songs and ballads, and has a rich, flowing poetic style. **Alliteration** is a feature of these lines – Mrs Cherry Owen tells her husband he was 'as drunk as a deacon with a big wet bucket and a fish-frail full of stout' – and the characters' dialogue is as fluent and rhythmical as music.

Similarly, the Australian playwright Ray Lawler, also writing in the mid-1950s, reacted against the dominant English presence in Australian theatre with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (first performed in 1955). Lawler's play features the speech patterns of **ordinary, working-class Australians**; the characters border on being inarticulate, and their sentences are frequently abrupt and incomplete. Nevertheless, their aspirations and disappointments evoke the larger human concerns of hope for the future, fear of change, and the redeeming qualities of loyalty and love.

Eugene O'Neill was one of the earliest American playwrights to make **extensive use of the vernacular**. *The Iceman Cometh* (first performed in 1946) features several characters based on people O'Neill either knew well, or knew of; the language and idioms of these characters reflect their personal qualities as well as cultural and social contexts O'Neill was very familiar with. For example, the bartender Rocky is a 'Neapolitan-American' (that is, an American of southern Italian origin), and his opening speech clearly shows O'Neill seeking to capture a particular accent and style of speech as accurately as possible:

> Don't want de Boss to get wise when he's got one of his tightwad buns on ... 'Not a damned drink on de house,' he tells me, 'and all dese bums got to pay up deir room rent. Beginnin' tomorrow,' he says. Jees, yuh'd tink he meant it!

The use of the vernacular became a feature of 20th-century American drama as playwrights such as O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller established a distinctive national theatre capable of representing a complex and rapidly changing society.

The language of Shakespearean drama is mostly poetic in form, and we consider this in more detail in the section 'Imagery' on page 103.

Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony occurs when the audience and perhaps one or more characters possess knowledge that the remaining characters do not. Playwrights use this technique to enhance the dramatic effect of certain key moments and scenes, since it engages the audience more directly in the unfolding action.

This narrative technique shows characters at their most vulnerable – the audience can see how limited the characters' knowledge of the world is, and how feeble their attempts at comprehending and controlling their circumstances really are.

The effect of dramatic irony can be either tragic or comic, depending on the nature of the misunderstanding and the degree of sympathy elicited by the characters.

Shakespeare uses dramatic irony extensively in his plays. In *King Lear*, Gloucester is guided by his banished son, Edgar, but because Gloucester is blind and Edgar is disguising his true identity, only Edgar and the audience know the true situation. This shared knowledge draws the audience and Edgar closer together, and also increases sympathy for Gloucester, who is reduced to a childlike dependence and bewilderment.

The pathos of these scenes is intensified by Gloucester's line: 'If Edgar live, O bless him', an expression of love and remorse that Edgar hears yet cannot acknowledge to his father. A similar use of dramatic irony to create tension and pathos occurs when the mad Lear seems unable to recognise his banished daughter, Cordelia, at the end of Act 4.

For much of *Hamlet*, the audience knows that Hamlet is only pretending to be mad, while the other characters struggle to understand his behaviour. At times this **use of dramatic irony produces a comic effect**, such as when Hamlet banters with the earnest Polonius in Act 2 Scene 2: Polonius thinks Hamlet is 'far gone', perhaps out of love for Polonius' daughter, Ophelia; the audience, though, can see how easily Hamlet manipulates the thoughts of the older man. In this way we are encouraged to laugh at Polonius, although his observation that Hamlet's madness has some 'method in't' suggests he is a little shrewder than he sometimes appears.

A more complex and moving scene occurs when Polonius and Hamlet's father, Claudius, arrange for Ophelia to meet with Hamlet while they

eavesdrop on the conversation (in Act 3 Scene 1). Even though we know that Hamlet is maintaining his 'antic disposition', it is extremely difficult to discern Hamlet's true motives or feelings in this scene. In this case, **dramatic irony creates tension and sadness** as we gain a heightened sense of Hamlet's isolation and vulnerability. Ophelia's despairing cry, 'O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown', sums up our sense that Hamlet's loss of reason and purpose is no longer entirely feigned.

Imagery

Just as in novels and short stories, patterns of imagery are used in drama to convey the dominant ideas and to generate a sense of coherence and unity. Recurrent words and images in the language of the characters – such as frequent references to time in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* – often foreground the playwright's main concerns.

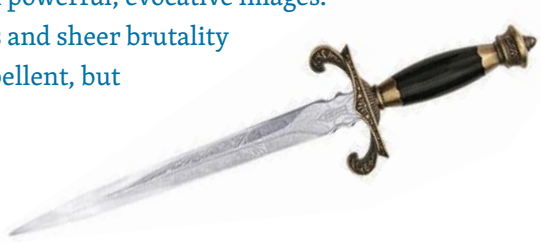
For more on imagery, including explanations of simile, metaphor and symbol, see Chapter 6, pages 159–67.

Imagery 'colours' the language used by a character, and can therefore cast them, or the attitudes and beliefs they hold, in a positive or negative light. It can also suggest a complexity to a character's situation that leads the audience to view them more sympathetically.

The many images of blood in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (first performed in 1606) operate on a number of levels, from signalling Macbeth's state of mind at various points in the play to reflecting Scotland's unnatural state of violence and bloodshed.

These images include Macbeth's early vision of a bloody dagger, and his later sense of being 'in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er'.

Such images **convey Macbeth's psychological state**, yet they do not condemn him unambiguously. He is immersed in the blood of others as a direct result of his own actions; in this he is the stereotypical dictator, ruthlessly abusing his power for self-preservation. However, he is able to reflect on his situation and express it in powerful, evocative images. It is this fusion of poetic self-awareness and sheer brutality that makes his character not simply repellent, but complex and compelling.



Close analysis of a play performance

There are two main ways to discuss a production of a play:

- ***analysing* a production** – discussing the performance, with the aim of analysing the 'text' (the playwright's work)
- ***reviewing* a production** – evaluating the way that the production has brought the play to life.

This section primarily addresses the first possibility.

From page to stage

A **performance** is a single event: the version of the play seen on any given night. A **production** describes the rehearsed and prepared version of the play.

Usually the production will be performed in a **season** (anywhere from several nights to many months).

You attend a *performance* of a particular *production* of the play.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, a dramatic text is written primarily to be performed rather than to be read. So while reading a play is a valid way to appreciate the text, it can never provide a complete perspective on the work.

Whereas literary works tend to be considered the products of their author or authors – even though they usually have editors and publishers who may make significant contributions – productions of dramatic works are seen as collaborations. When analysing a production rather than a script, it is important to remember that a production is nearly always the work of many creators, who together comprise the **production team**. This includes:

- the playwright or author (responsible for the central element: the text itself)
- the director (responsible for everything the audience sees onstage)
- the producer/s (often a theatre company, sometimes individuals; responsible for various 'big-picture' aspects of a production, including finance)

The work behind the scenes of a play production can be crucial to the success of what happens on the stage.

- lighting, set and costume designers
- composers, sound effects designers or musical directors
- technical operators (e.g. lighting and sound – though they are usually executing others' creative decisions and plans)
- last, but not least, actors.

With very large or complex productions there may also be many other individuals and departments involved, such as choreographers, fight directors, milliners, voice or accent coaches and even animal handlers.

Each member of a production team makes many creative decisions throughout the rehearsal process, and the production is the culmination of all these decisions. Although every production of a script will differ (due to the involvement of so many individuals), decisions during a rehearsal process are always made with the intention of bringing the play to life as effectively and powerfully as possible. So when you are analysing a performance, you can consider all these elements as contributions to the text.

The **director** is ultimately responsible for decisions at every level (even decisions that are delegated), from small details such as the way an actor handles a prop, to larger interpretive decisions such as where and when the play is set. Some scripts, especially contemporary works, offer directors detailed instructions about such decisions, in the form of stage directions or production information (such as technical instructions, or background information about characters and relationships).

Interpretation of the script

A production is sometimes called an **interpretation** of the play. This does not mean that the production makes changes to the script (although this can occur). It means that the production represents a particular director and production team's reading of the playwright's text.

Just as literary analysis needs to be supported with specific, relevant evidence from the text, a director must support their interpretation with evidence from the text when making decisions about how to interpret lines, scenes and entire plays.

Nevertheless, even when stage directions are present in the text, directors are free to make decisions about how closely to follow these instructions – if at all. Productions, especially of older scripts, may depart significantly from

the text (even to the extent of editing or altering dialogue). Such decisions are sometimes called 'interpretive decisions', because they contribute to the production's overall interpretation of the play.

> A director can alter the stage directions' suggested timing of an actor's entrance or exit, which could have a significant impact on the scene's meaning. In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, for example, **the director may choose to have Willy overhear his sons, Biff and Happy,** talking about him in the bedroom, although this is not called for in the stage directions. This would influence the audience's view of Willy, because he otherwise seems stubbornly unaware that his family is worried about his mental state.

Broader interpretive decisions include the cultural, geographical or chronological setting of the play. Consider the many contemporary Shakespearean productions set in modern times and in different cultures – how do these decisions contribute to our understanding of the meaning and significance of the play? Sometimes interpretive decisions are highly personal and potentially controversial; any *evaluation* of such choices belongs in a **review** of a production.

> A Bell Shakespeare Company production of *Romeo and Juliet* (in 1999, directed by Wesley Enoch) situated the well-known tragedy in contemporary Australia, casting the Montagues with an Indigenous background and the Capulets as a non-Indigenous family. An **analysis** might discuss how the decision highlighted Shakespeare's themes of social conflict. In contrast, a **review** might discuss whether or not this interpretation was 'successful': did it offer a valid perspective on the script, and did it offer us any new insights into the themes? Or did it cause casting difficulties, or challenge notions of political correctness, therefore distracting or detracting from the script itself?

Theatrical language

When analysing a written text, you work with the author's use of language features such as metaphor, sentence structure, symbolism and alliteration to discuss characterisation or themes. When analysing a performance, remember that the script still makes use of such techniques, but there are also many non-linguistic elements that form part of the language of the play. These include lighting, sound effects, and the vocal pitch and pace used by the actors in delivering their lines.

Just like features of written language in prose or poetry, these features of theatrical language help construct characters and relationships, explore ideas and convey meaning. They also create the 'mood' of the production, which is similar to 'tone' in a written text – not one single element, but a useful way of describing the effect achieved by the combination of elements.

The main features of theatrical language that will help you to analyse a performance are discussed in more detail below. In an analysis (or review) it is not necessary to mention every feature: you only need to discuss those relevant to your arguments.

Sets

The sets used in a production should not be confused with 'setting' (the play's social, cultural or historical context, and the physical or geographical location of the action, whether defined by the script or imposed by the production). Set elements include props, furniture and backdrops. Sets may be complex or minimal, realistic or symbolic/abstract, striking or subtle. Think about the use of colour, shapes and levels.

Costume

The term 'costume' refers to any clothing worn by actors, and also encompasses hair and make-up. Costumes can be simple and naturalistic, or striking and dramatic. You might identify qualities such as:

- colour and texture
- consistency with the era of the script, or an intentional anachronism (the use of items from another time)
- contrasts between characters' dress.

Movement

Blocking refers to the patterns of movement that a director has determined and rehearsed with actors. It can also include movements of props, furniture and even sets (such as during scene changes, which are sometimes done by actors and integrated into the performance).

Movements include any formal choreography (set dance steps), characters' individual styles of movement and the blocking of scenes. With the exception of more-experimental contemporary productions, all the movements made by an actor are carefully planned and rehearsed with the director. They are usually also recorded in the script by a stage manager, forming what is

known as the **prompt copy** of a script. Sometimes specific physical directions developed as part of a production make their way into published scripts as stage directions.

Think about a descriptive analysis of characters' movements – speed, coordination, intensity, fluidity etc. – and relate these qualities to your analysis of characters and relationships. The way in which actors use the space of the stage is also important. For example, they can draw the audience's focus with their position onstage in relation to the other actors.

Useful terms for describing space and movement include the following.

- **Downstage:** the area of the stage closest to the audience, towards the front of the space; important action generally takes place downstage. (The terms 'upstage' and 'downstage' originate from early theatres when stages were 'raked' or sloped upwards towards the back.)
- **Upstage:** the area of the stage furthest from the audience – the term 'upstaging' describes actors who should be in the background (upstage) but are moving or speaking in ways that distract and divert attention from important action downstage.
- **Stage left/right:** the left or right from the actors' perspective (the opposite to the audience's perspective).
- **Centrestage:** the central part of the stage.
- **Theatre-in-the-round:** an alternative to the traditional proscenium arch theatre (with the front open to the audience); a play staged 'in the round' allows audience members to be on all (or most) sides of the performance space.

Lighting and visual effects

A **lighting plot** is a plan or map of the quantity, position, colour, style and sometimes intensity of the theatre lights, or 'lamps', to be used. It may be outlined in the script but is usually designed for each production.

Visual effects include video/digital projections or other multimedia, as well as electric lights (sometimes augmented by candles or other light sources). The absence of light can also help to illustrate themes.

Useful terms for describing lighting include the following.

- **Lighting state** – the static combination of lights.
- **Blackout** – a change from a lit state to an unlit state (usually between scenes, but sometimes for dramatic effect); a **partial blackout** can give the audience the impression of a blackout while allowing actors and crew enough dim light to move safely onstage.
- **Cross-fade** and **snap** – a cross-fade is a gentle change from one lighting state to another; a snap is a very quick change.

Sound

Soundscapes comprise music, amplification and sound effects (including both naturalistic and symbolic or atmospheric sounds). Silence, or absence of effects, can also be a powerful technique.

Acting

The performers are the central tools in a production's presentation of a script. The section on 'Acting style' on page 91 provides information for analysing performance. Remember that any two interpretations of a role will differ significantly. Rehearsed, 'technical' qualities (such as vocal tone, accent, pitch, pace, body language and timing) infuse a performance and shape an interpretation of character. So too do physical characteristics such as the actor's height and colouring, and less tangible qualities including the actor's personality.

Casting creates particular combinations of actors that also contribute a great deal to the impact of a production.

Adetomiwa Edun as Romeo and Ellie Kendrick as Juliet in a 2009 Shakespeare's Globe production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Other features

The following questions indicate other key production features to observe when you are analysing a theatrical performance.

- How closely does the production **adhere to the script**? For example, does the setting differ from that described in the script? If so, how does this convey the play's meaning and themes?
- What are the effects of any **changes** (e.g. in lighting, costume, tone of voice, pace of dialogue)? These will usually signify important moments of character development or critical moments in the plot.
- Are there **interpretive decisions** that challenge audience expectations? For example, we expect Shakespeare's Julius Caesar to be a powerful figure; however, if a director chooses to place this actor upstage during a key scene, or to have the actor speak very softly, it might demonstrate that Caesar is capable of power even when he is not physically dominant.

Analysing a performance

Use the following practical tips if you are analysing a theatrical performance.

- Read and understand the play before you see the show, so that you can recognise and analyse the interpretive decisions.
- Read any other information about the production to help you prepare – for example, publicity material and directors' notes in programs.
- Take notes quietly during the performance.
- Practise writing without looking so you can take notes in the dark. Track where you're up to by using a finger on the page.
- Use abbreviations, large letters and few words on each page – this will make your notes easier to read when you are ready to write your analysis or review.
- Make sure you have a program so you can check details later (e.g. actors' names).

When you come to writing your analysis, many of the conventions of analytical writing previously discussed will still apply.

- Refer closely to the text, integrating brief quotations into your writing. In some places you can refer to *performance* aspects rather than quoting lines. (For example, 'In the first scene, all the actors are dressed in black.')
- Explain the meaning and significance of performance aspects. (For example, the actors' black costumes in the first scene might foreshadow a death later in the play.)

Reviewing a performance

A **review** is an informed, critical but often subjective analysis of a production. Rather than focusing on the significance of the play as a literary text, a review concentrates on the success of the production.

There are many schools of thought regarding the ethical and moral implications of reviews: some believe that reviews should be objective (free from personal bias) while others feel that reviewers' own opinions are an important component of reviews.

The traditional theatre review, as a form, has been shaped by its practical restrictions. Commercial reviews tend to be short – often just a few hundred words – and must be written swiftly in order to satisfy tight journalistic print deadlines, often within an hour (though independent or online reviewers may be able to afford more time and space). Reviews have tangible power, and critics' opinions and positive or negative reviews can sway audiences: a review can, in a very practical sense, 'make or break' a production.

Readers

A review must serve multiple audiences: it offers direct feedback to the creative team responsible for the production, and often functions as part of the publicity machine for producers, venues and promoters. It should appeal to those who have already seen the production, as well as to those considering whether or not to attend a performance. Reviewers need to be sensitive to all these audiences – for example, it is important to analyse the entire work and yet not spoil surprises for audiences yet to see the show.

Tips for writing a review

Use the following tips to improve your review of a theatrical performance.

- Be careful when attributing responsibility for any given aspect of the performance. It is often difficult to distinguish between the contributions of the playwright, the actors and the director. The usual convention is that a director is ultimately responsible for everything the audience sees and hears.
- Whether you are criticising or praising a performance, you must have evidence to support your argument.
- Read a range of reviews to see how other reviewers write. Read local newspaper reviews as well as reviews in the mainstream media; there are also professional reviewers working independently online.

Close analysis of a play script

This section shows you how to write a close analysis of a passage from a play, relating features of the passage to an interpretation of the text.

There are two main aspects to close analysis, both equally important:

- **close *reading*** – focusing on the passage in order to gain a more complex and in-depth understanding of the play
- ***writing* a close analysis** – writing about the passage in detail. This is the best way to provide supporting evidence for an interpretation of the play's wider meaning.

Essential elements of close analysis

There are three main areas to focus on when preparing to write a close analysis of a passage from a play. These are:

- language used by the characters
- significance of the passage
- connections between features of the play, including performance aspects indicated in the stage directions.

In addition, you must ensure that your writing follows the **conventions of analytical writing**. That is, it:

- refers closely to the text throughout, including brief quotations integrated into your writing
- explains the meaning and significance of textual evidence
- uses a serious, formal tone.

Macbeth and the three witches in a 2013 Shakespeare's Globe production of *Macbeth*.

See the table on pages 116–19 for a detailed explanation of these elements in relation to a sample passage from *Macbeth*.

How to read a play closely

The following key questions will help you gather and organise information as you carefully read a passage from a play.

Identify the context of the passage

Briefly contextualise the passage.

- Does the passage contain an event or idea that is significant in the play as a whole?
- What dramatic impact is created by this passage being located at this particular point in the play?
- How does the passage reveal some of the wider concerns of the play?

Look closely at the characterisation

Consider the presentation of characters in the passage.

- What is revealed about them through their dialogue, their actions or the stage directions?
- What do characters' silences, gestures and facial expressions reveal?
- What is revealed about relationships between characters by the way they talk to one another?

Consider the importance of the setting

Think about the specific setting of the passage (e.g. a room in someone's house), as well as the wider setting (e.g. a town or a rural estate).

- How does the setting contribute to your understanding of the passage?
- Is the setting linked closely to particular characters?
- Do any props have particular importance to characters or to the ideas explored in the passage?

Look at special language features

Comment on language used by the characters, including:

- the way in which they speak, e.g. formally or informally, with a wide, expressive vocabulary or with a limited range of words; and the tone of their language
- the use of irony (verbal, dramatic)
- the use of sensory imagery (things that are seen, heard, felt, smelled or tasted by characters).

See Chapter 4, pages 65–6 and this chapter, pages 102–3 for discussions of these different types of irony.

Sample passage from *Macbeth*

The following play excerpt is from Act 5 Scene 5 of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (first performed in 1606). In this scene, Macbeth's castle is besieged by English forces as well as Scottish forces loyal to the sons of the murdered King Duncan. Read it carefully then see the elements identified for close analysis in the table that follows.

[MACBETH, SEYTON and Soldiers enter, with drum and colours]

MACBETH Hang out our banners on the outward walls;
The cry is still, 'They come.' Our castle's strength
Will laugh a siege to scorn; here let them lie
Till famine and the ague eat them up:
Were they not forced with those that should be ours,
We might have met them dareful, beard to beard,
And beat them backward home.

[A cry of women is heard offstage]

What is that noise?

SEYTON It is the cry of women, my good lord. *[SEYTON exits]*

MACBETH I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been, my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't; I have supped full with horrors:
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.

[SEYTON re-enters]

Wherefore was that cry?

SEYTON The Queen, my lord, is dead.

MACBETH She should have died hereafter:
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

[A MESSENGER enters]

Thou com'st to use thy tongue; thy story quickly.

MESSENGER Gracious my lord,
I should report that which I say I saw,
But know not how to do it.

MACBETH Well, say, sir.

MESSENGER As I did stand my watch upon the hill,
I looked toward Birnam, and anon, methought,
The wood began to move.

MACBETH *[Striking the MESSENGER]* Liar and slave!

MESSENGER Let me endure your wrath, if't be not so:
Within this three mile may you see it coming;
I say, a moving grove.

MACBETH If thou speak'st false,
Upon the next tree shalt thou hang alive,
Till famine cling thee; if thy speech be sooth,
I care not if thou dost for me as much.
I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth: 'Fear not, till Birnam Wood
Do come to Dunsinane'; and now a wood
Comes toward Dunsinane. Arm, arm, and out!
If this which he avouches does appear,
There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.
I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish th' estate o'the world were now undone.
Ring the alarum bell! Blow, wind! Come, wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back.

[All exit]

Essential elements from the passage

The table below sets out the aspects of a play that require detailed attention in order to write a thorough and perceptive close analysis.

- The first column, headed **Identify important elements**, sets out what to look for in each of the four main areas: language; significance of the passage; connections between features of the text; and conventions for writing a close analysis.
- The second column, headed **Explain the effects of elements**, gives examples of the important elements and explains some of their effects, drawing on the passage from *Macbeth*.

Use this table to prepare your own close analysis by completing the two columns for a passage you are studying. The questions and points for language, significance of the passage and connections between features of the text can be used for analysing a passage from any play.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
Language	• Note any word choices that strike you as unusual.	• In the phrase 'forgot the **taste** of fears', the word 'taste' creates an effective image: fear does not literally have a taste, but the word reflects the physical response that fear can produce. Macbeth has become so accustomed to fear that he barely feels it. • The phrase '**equivocation** of the fiend' conveys Macbeth's realisation that he has been misled by the witches. The word 'equivocate' is previously used in a humorous sense by the Porter (in Act 2 Scene 3); it now takes on tragic overtones.
	• Look for the connotations of words. • How do these connotations affect our view of characters, settings and events?	• What words suggest can be as important as their literal meanings. • The words 'horrors', 'direness' and 'slaughterous' show Macbeth's awareness of his fall from grace.
	• What is the significance of recurring images? • Are they symbols (images that stand for larger entities)?	• Recurring **images of clothes** suggest the play's interest in outward appearances, and the degree to which these reflect or conceal a person's real desires or intentions. • When Macbeth says 'we'll die with harness on our back' he reveals his acceptance of his fate. • These images link with the theme of equivocation (see above) or verbal deception.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
	• What kind of tone does the playwright use for the characters' speeches?	• Macbeth's tone shifts from defiant to reflective ('I have almost forgot …'), sorrowful ('She should have died hereafter'), angry ('Liar and slave!') and back to defiant ('Blow, wind! Come, wrack!'). • In this way, Shakespeare shows a character grappling with a growing awareness that his fate is not so much predestined as determined by his own actions.
Significance of key passages	• What is the context of the passage? • Look for beginnings, turning points, crisis points, resolutions. • Relate the context of the passage to characterisation, narrative development, central ideas and concerns.	• **Beginnings** establish characters, settings, ideas. • **Turning points** can reveal changed attitudes or circumstances. • **Crisis points** often take the form of an unexpected challenge that causes changes in attitudes, circumstances, expectations. • In this scene Macbeth is confronted with his wife's death and a realisation that he has been deceived by the witches. Rather than give up hope and surrender, Macbeth arrives at a moment of profound understanding – *anagnorisis* in Aristotle's terms (see page 88) – and rises to meet the challenge. • **Resolutions** can contain solutions to a problem, reinforcing values and revealing 'true' character.
	• Look for important insights into characters' motivations, values, goals. • Soliloquies and asides provide critical insights into character.	• A **conversation between two characters** who trust each other can reveal their real hopes and feelings; alternatively, if they lack trust, the conversation can reveal frustrations and underlying tensions. (The meeting between Malcolm and Macduff in Act 4 Scene 3 shows both of these situations.) • Macbeth's **soliloquy** ('Tomorrow, and tomorrow …') conveys feelings of despair about his own life and also about the human condition – a philosophical reflection Macbeth has seemed incapable of in earlier scenes.
	• Look for typical aspects of the playwright's style, such as a rich use of imagery; dialogue that conveys social and historical context; stage directions that inform acting style; props and sets with symbolic meanings.	• There is much use of **blank verse**, with occasional variations (such as the short line 'Signifying nothing') to add emphasis to a point or create a dramatic pause. • Shakespeare uses **metaphors** ('Out, out, brief candle!') and other imagery to show the wide range of Macbeth's thoughts and emotions, and to broaden the scope of ideas from the characters' experiences to wider human concerns.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
Connections between features of a text	• Explain links between the *way* the text is written and *what* is being said.	• **Repetition** of 'tomorrow' in the soliloquy reflects Macbeth's sense that life is no more than a pointless repetition of day after day. • **Short, sharp commands** at the end of the scene show Macbeth's new-found energy and decisiveness: 'Arm, arm, and out!', 'Ring the alarum bell!'
	• How does structure affect the reader's experience?	• The **order of events in the plot** might not be chronological; this can produce suspense, interest, surprise etc. • In *Macbeth* the narrative structure is chronological but the witches' prophecies foreshadow events (link to plot) and introduce the question of fate versus free will (link to themes/ideas).
	• How is characterisation related to the views and values being presented and explored in the text?	• **Whether characters are 'punished' or 'rewarded'** reflects the text's position on the views and values associated with these characters, or on the society depicted. • Macbeth's despair results from his treachery and ruthlessness: he has corrupted all the values of his society, causing himself and those around him to suffer.
	• How does imagery convey central preoccupations and ideas?	• The **images of life** as a 'brief candle', a 'walking shadow' and a 'poor player' convey the idea of life's brevity and lack of meaning. Significantly, this is not the view of life presented by the play as a whole, but a tyrant's view of life when he has stripped it of value.
	• How do the characters' actions, facial expressions and tones of voice as indicated in the stage directions influence the reader's response to the dialogue?	• There are few stage directions in Shakespeare, leaving much to be realised in performance. • The stage direction '*Striking the MESSENGER*' is significant as the audience has not previously seen Macbeth being physically aggressive. (His most violent acts are reported or implied.) • The fact that Lady Macbeth's death occurs offstage is also significant as it emphasises her decline and shows how distant husband and wife have become (in contrast to their closeness earlier in the play).
	• How does the passage create a mood or feeling?	• The mood might be reflective, sad, tense, exuberant, playful, fearful etc. • **Adjectives and adverbs** help to establish tone. For example, 'dismal', 'petty' and 'dusty' convey Macbeth's mood of bleak despair.

Conventions for writing a close analysis	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
	• Don't describe; analyse!	• **A sentence that is too descriptive** is: 'Macbeth learns that his wife has died and then describes his feelings of sorrow and loss in a soliloquy.' • **A more analytical sentence** is: 'Macbeth's soliloquy expresses the sorrow he feels on his wife's death and the loss of meaning and purpose in life.'
	• Use evidence from the text to support your statements.	• **Make detailed, specific references to the text; avoid general, sweeping statements** such as '*Macbeth* shows that a tyrannical dictator is never deserving of sympathy or compassion.'
	• Always explain the significance (and, if necessary, the meaning) of the quotes you use.	• **Avoid long quotes** and quotes that occupy an entire sentence, e.g. 'Macbeth is so accustomed to violence that he no longer feels afraid or alarmed by danger. "I have supped full with horrors: / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me."' • Instead, write: 'Macbeth has become so accustomed to "slaughterous thoughts" and "horrors" that they no longer shock or alarm him.'
	• Use a serious and formal tone – avoid being too conversational or chatty.	• **Use a wide vocabulary** so that your word choices are as precise as possible. • **Don't use expressions such as** 'in my opinion' and 'it is my belief that'.

How to write a close analysis: a three-step process

Follow this three-step process for developing a close analysis of a passage. The extract from *Macbeth* on pages 114–15 is used for illustrative purposes.

1. **Read the passage carefully and make annotations** identifying features of the text such as language use, characterisation, staging (including character movements, props and sets) and imagery; link these to key ideas in the text.
2. **Order your annotations** so there is a logical sequence of ideas in your close analysis – move from specific features of the text to its broader ideas, views and values.
3. **Write the analysis**.

Step 1: Read closely and make annotations

Use the table on pages 116–19 as a model for making notes on the key elements and their effects.

Another very useful technique is to annotate the passage itself, writing brief notes on the elements and techniques used by the playwright. Remember to think about how the scene would be performed on a stage. You can then expand on these notes in your close analysis.

Use a highlighter or coloured pen to mark up the passage, selecting different colours for different features of the writing:

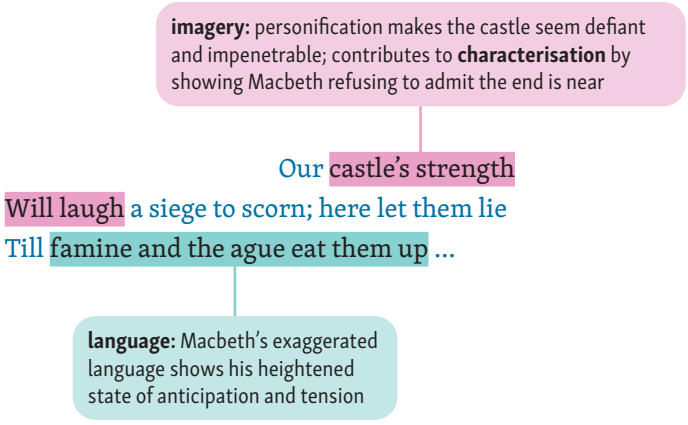
- characterisation
- staging
- aspects of language (e.g. tone, style, unusual word choices)
- key images.

Here are four quotations from the *Macbeth* passage on pages 114–15, using the following code:

- characterisation
- staging
- language use
- images.

In the annotations, an arrow → shows how you can move from an element of the passage to a key idea that the playwright is exploring – a very important part of your analysis.

Quotation 1



Quotation 2

staging: the stage direction shows Macbeth's disbelief and fear, expressed physically as well as verbally

[Striking the MESSENGER] Liar and slave!

characterisation: Macbeth accuses the messenger of being mistaken – showing his refusal to face reality and his tendency to project his own failings onto others

Quotation 3

imagery: the extended metaphor for life conveys Macbeth's despair → **idea** of nihilism: that life lacks meaning or purpose

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more ...

characterisation: Macbeth's growing self-awareness shown as this description applies especially to his own life

Quotation 4

language: short, commanding sentences convey Macbeth's new-found sense of purpose – in contrast to the pessimism of the soliloquy a few lines earlier → **idea** that our actions can give meaning and significance to life

Ring the alarum bell! Blow, wind! Come, wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back.

imagery: 'harness' continues a series of clothing images throughout the play; here Macbeth wears armour, the clothing he wore at the play's beginning

Step 2: Order the annotations

Once you have annotated the passage, look for ways to organise and order your observations and comments. Aim to link specific features to the text's broader concerns – the values and viewpoints it presents and examines. The table below shows three examples of this.

Ways to order comments	Example using the passage
start with **language use** ⇓ show how language is the key to understanding characters and ideas ⇓ views and values	The adjectives 'dismal', 'petty', 'dusty' create a mood of despair and hopelessness. ⇓ Macbeth's character develops through his growing awareness of how dire his situation is; introduces the idea of nihilism. ⇓ A pessimistic view (through Macbeth's eyes) of life as lacking meaning or purpose; this implies that ultimately those who don't value the lives of others will not find value in their own lives.
start with a central **image** ⇓ show how the image encapsulates one or more ideas ⇓ ideas explored through characters, situations ⇓ views and values	'Out, out, brief candle!' suggests Macbeth is reflecting on the end of life (represented by a candle flame). ⇓ The play uses a series of images of light (associated with truth, goodness and life) and dark (falseness, evil and death). ⇓ Macbeth aligns himself with 'darkness' (from 'Stars, hide your fires' in Act 1 Scene 4); Lady Macbeth summons 'thick night' (Act 1 Scene 5) but in Act 5 Scene 1 constantly carries a candle. ⇓ Life is valuable but precarious: like a candle flame, it must be nurtured and protected.
start with a **character** ⇓ show how the passage places that character in a context ⇓ ideas are introduced and developed ⇓ views and values	Macbeth has become king by murdering Duncan and ordering the death of anyone perceived to be a threat to his power. ⇓ The Scottish lords and English forces advance on Macbeth's castle; he is outnumbered and isolated. ⇓ Almost defeated, Macbeth questions the meaning and purpose of life, but then rouses to take on his enemies in battle. ⇓ Is fate predestined or do we make our own fates? Macbeth believes he cannot escape his own fate, but the play can also be read as suggesting his fate is entirely of his own making.

Step 3: Write the analysis

This sample close analysis follows the third of the approaches in the table on the previous page. It begins with a discussion of Macbeth's character as it is revealed in the passage, then considers his context at this point in the play, and then discusses how the passage explores ideas and viewpoints.

Facing imminent defeat by the English forces and rebel Scottish lords, Macbeth experiences the full range of emotions while preparing his castle's defences. He has a few loyal soldiers, but, as Seyton's brief communications suggest, they offer little more than token support. Only the 'castle's strength' offers any real protection, a slim hope of survival that Macbeth inflates into a fantastical image of a prolonged siege in which his enemies die painfully from famine and the plague – a sign of Macbeth's desperation and increasingly tenuous grasp on reality. Macbeth's initial bluster quickly gives way to reflection and then, following the news of his wife's death, despair, showing an emotional depth not evident since the earliest scene of the play. At the news that Birnam Wood appears to be moving towards the castle, a fulfilment of the witches' prophecy, he shows anger, disbelief, doubt and then renewed purpose and determination. In this single short scene, we see the broad range of Macbeth's thoughts and feelings, his capacity for poetic introspection, and his keen desire for action and achievement, making his destructive reign appear all the more tragic.

Introduction focuses on the central character, outlining his situation in this scene.

Moves on to Macbeth's moods and responses, building a view of his character.

The dire situation in which Macbeth finds himself leads him to broaden his reflections from his personal circumstances to the wider human condition. Macbeth's final soliloquy reflects the depth of his isolation and introspection: the former heroic soldier now has few allies, no companionship and little to live for. It is a profoundly pessimistic view, expressing not only Macbeth's feelings of loss but also his sense of being hemmed in by fate, powerless to alter his destiny. He compares life to 'a walking shadow, a poor player', an image that suggests a lack of purpose and agency, a human subject that can only act in the world, not on it. A shadow is a projection or copy of a person, able to move only where and when that person moves; a player or actor can

A closer look at the main speech in the scene; considers how this speech reflects Macbeth's context and contributes to **characterisation**.

Carefully discusses Macbeth's **language** and **imagery** and unpacks the associated ideas. Brief quotations are incorporated seamlessly into the discussion.

only say what a playwright has written in a script. Relatedly, Macbeth conveys a strong sense of his own mortality, prompted by the death of Lady Macbeth: life, rather than stretching out before them, full of promise and potential, now appears fleeting, a mere 'hour upon the stage', as precarious as the flame of a 'brief candle'. However distorted his view of life may be by his own bleak situation, Macbeth now achieves a heightened awareness of his insignificant place in the wider universe – at precisely the moment when his life is about to end.

Discusses a central **idea** which is implicit in the passage and explored by the play as a whole.

The importance that Macbeth places on the concept of fate is further highlighted when the messenger describes the movement of Birnam Wood towards Dunsinane Castle. Macbeth instantly recalls the witches' prophecy: 'Fear not, till Birnam Wood / Do come to Dunsinane'. To this point, all the witches' prophecies have come true, and Macbeth has acted on the basis that they have infallible foreknowledge of human affairs. Now, however, he realises that he might have completely misinterpreted their speeches; that they have misled him through 'equivocation' and told 'lies like truth'. Macbeth's shock and incredulity are conveyed partly through the force with which he accuses the messenger of lying, and partly through the stage direction 'Striking the messenger' – an action which is all the more significant for the audience as Macbeth is not previously shown being physically aggressive. The irony, of course, is that neither the messenger nor the witches have lied, but that Macbeth himself has been the greatest equivocator, pretending to be honourable but, in reality, being treacherous. If Macbeth does not fully appreciate this irony, he at least sees that equivocation is at the heart of what has caused an entire nation to fall into a state of terror and chaos, and that there is now no escape – no 'flying hence nor tarrying here' – from a fate that is as clear to him as it is unavoidable.

Explains the importance of an element of **staging**.

Indeed, throughout the play Macbeth imagines that he is doing little more than playing out a destiny which is already, in some sense, 'written'; that what will happen will happen, regardless of the choices he makes or actions he performs. One way of seeing Macbeth's position at the end of the play is as a victim of fate or, at the very least, as a pawn in a cruel game being

Develops the discussion of fate and considers two ways of reading or interpreting the play's viewpoint on this concept.

played by the witches. If this were so, then we might well agree with Macbeth that his life has been without meaning or significance, as its key details have been determined in advance by a force outside his control or even influence. But we can also see Macbeth as trapped in a web of his own making, at the centre of forces that he himself has set in motion. Lady Macbeth commits suicide, unable to live with the memories of what they have done; he has become so familiar with 'slaughterous thoughts' that he is incapable of natural human feeling; the forces of England as well as Scotland have risen up against his tyrannical rule. If Macbeth sees life as futile and meaningless, then he, and no-one else, has made it so.

Uses textual evidence to support the assertion that Macbeth, rather than fate, is responsible.

Moreover, the play as a whole does not present a view of life as 'signifying nothing'. As characters such as Macduff and Ross understand, human actions and choices do give life meaning and purpose. At the play's end, Macbeth, too, seems to realise this. Finally certain of his fate, he nevertheless actively resists it, challenging the forces of nature as well as his enemies to take him on: 'Blow, wind! Come, wrack! / At least we'll die with harness on our back.' Once again, Macbeth is the valiant soldier, taking on overwhelming odds and banishing equivocation to the past. His actions as a dictator have stripped life of its value, of its sources of solace and meaning, for all of Scotland; but in confronting death with courage, Macbeth finds a way to make the 'sound and fury' signify a human capacity to act with integrity, conviction and purpose.

Compares Macbeth to other characters to consider the view of fate and human agency presented by the whole play – not just the selected passage.

Incorporates a quotation to make a more positive point about Macbeth's attitude towards fate.

Concludes the essay by using material from the end of the selected passage and drawing together the points made throughout the discussion.

Checklist for close analysis of a play

A close analysis of a passage from a play should include the following elements.

- ☑ Detailed references to the play.
- ☑ A discussion of the play that shows an understanding of performance aspects.
- ☑ Some short quotations from the passage, integrated smoothly into your sentences.
- ☑ Discussion of how the playwright uses the language of the characters' dialogue to develop the characters and present ideas.
- ☑ References to stage directions (if present) that show how they shape the audience's understanding of characters and ideas.
- ☑ Analytical comments about the ideas and values being explored.
- ☑ A well-ordered and logically developed argument about and interpretation of the play.
- ☑ Varied sentence structures and lengths, and a sophisticated vocabulary used precisely and expressively.

Joseph Millson as Macbeth in a 2013 Shakespeare's Globe production.

CHAPTER 6

POETRY

Poetry is the most stylised and abstract of literary forms. Although narratives, characters and settings can be found in poems, they are not essential; in many poems, time and place are not strongly defined. Characters are fully developed only in epic poetry.

Instead of creating detailed depictions of characters, plot and setting, many poets seek to convey a mood or image to the reader (or listener) in a powerful and memorable way. Poetry condenses meaning into the most compact, rich and suggestive form possible. Indeed, the focus of poetry is on language: on its many complexities and nuances, its sounds as well as its sense, and the patterns words can form on the printed page along with their patterns of meaning.

Because of the condensed and often abstract quality of poetry, the meaning of many poems is not immediately apparent, and the skills of interpreting and analysing poetry take time to develop.

Features and conventions of poetry

There are many technical features that poets deploy to construct meaning and to generate effects. It is important to know how to identify these technical features – which are discussed throughout this chapter – but simply identifying or describing them is not sufficient. You must go further and explain how these features are relevant to the poem as a whole. Always link observations of rhythm and rhyme, and patterns of imagery and language, to the meaning of the poetry.

The following points summarise the main features and conventions of poetry.

- Line lengths are determined by the poet, not by the width of the page.
- Lines are grouped together to form stanzas, the lengths of which are also determined by the poet (although some poetic forms have stanzas of fixed lengths).
- The sounds of the words are important, and contribute to the overall meaning of the poem.
- The narrator of a poem is known as the speaker or persona, and should not automatically be identified as the poet.
- Rhythm and rhyme are key tools of the poet, and there is a specialised vocabulary for describing their conventional patterns.
- Images, including similes, metaphors and symbols, contribute to the wider meaning of the poem by:
  - drawing connections between seemingly dissimilar objects or concepts
  - leading the reader's thoughts from the particular to the abstract
  - placing the specific details of the poem within a larger context – perhaps that of a nation, or of human history and experience, or of literature and art.

These features and conventions are discussed in more detail on the following pages, with numerous examples. Where a poem is discussed in some detail, the year of first publication is given; the text of most poems cited or reproduced in full is drawn from the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (5th edition).

Line length

Because the line length is determined by the poet, the way in which a line ends is always significant. Prior to the 20th century, most poets used verse forms with regular line lengths. Irregular line lengths became much more prevalent in the 20th century, as poets experimented with, and broke down, traditional forms in order to express new circumstances and attitudes.

Regular line lengths

- Regular line lengths result from a fixed number of syllables per line; the number of stressed syllables is usually consistent, too.
- Lines of equal lengths generate a sense of order, regularity, predictability and coherence.

Irregular line lengths

- Irregular line lengths result from the number of syllables in each line varying according to the poet's creative choices.
- When line lengths vary, the poet has much greater freedom in deciding how to end each line.

How to indicate line breaks in a quotation

When integrating poetry quotations within a sentence, indicate a line break with a forward slash, also known as a solidus. You can have a space either side of the solidus, or no space. In this book we use the former convention.

For example, consider these lines from **John Donne**'s 'The Sun Rising' (1633):

> Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
> In that the world's contracted thus.
> Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
> To warm the world, that's done in warming us.

You could discuss Donne's use of direct address as follows:

> The speaker of 'The Sun Rising' addresses the sun as if it is a contracted labourer, whose 'duties be / To warm the world' and whose job, the speaker humorously suggests, is completed simply by warming the speaker and his lover.

Punctuation and capitals should be retained from the original.

Stanzas

A **stanza** is a group of lines that share an idea or a set of images; stanzas are separated by a space. Stanzas in poetry are equivalent to paragraphs in prose.

In most traditional poetic forms, each stanza has the same number of lines: the number of lines determines how the stanza is named. The most common stanza lengths are:

- couplet – a two-line stanza
- tercet – a three-line stanza
- quatrain – a four-line stanza.

It is unusual for a poem to consist entirely of couplets, but rhyming couplets can be joined together to form longer stanzas. Similarly, tercets can be joined to form a six-line stanza (a sestet); quatrains can be joined to form an eight-line stanza (an octave) and so on.

Rhyme

Rhyme is produced when the last syllables of two words have matching sounds. Lines are said to rhyme when matching syllables occur at the ends of the lines.

- Rhyme was an important aid to memory when poetry was primarily an oral (rather than a written) tradition.
- Rhyme serves to group lines together, generating cohesion and structure.
- Rhyming lines are usually successive or separated by one or two other lines.

Notating rhyme schemes

Patterns of rhyme are conventionally notated by using lower-case letters. The first line is *a* and subsequent lines use successive letters of the alphabet. (These lower-case letters are sometimes italicised, as they are here, but not always.)

Where a rhyme occurs at the end of a line, the appropriate letter is repeated. Thus:

- A rhyming couplet is indicated by *aa*:

> In the room the women come and go — ***a***
> Talking of Michelangelo. — ***a***
>
> (from TS Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock')

- A quatrain in which the second and fourth lines rhyme but the first and third lines do not is described as *abcb*:

> Break, break, break, — ***a***
> On thy cold gray stones, O Sea! — ***b***
> And I would that my tongue could utter — ***c***
> The thoughts that arise in me. — ***b***
>
> (from Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Break, Break, Break')

- The rhyme scheme of a limerick is *aabba*:

> There was an old man with a beard, — ***a***
> Who said, 'It is just as I feared! –, — ***a***
> Two Owls and a Hen, — ***b***
> Four Larks and a Wren, — ***b***
> Have all built their nests in my beard!' — ***a***
>
> (Edward Lear)

John Donne's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' (1633; see pages 164–5 for the complete poem) consists of quatrains with an *abab* rhyme scheme. The use of two rhymes in each stanza means that the poem's form mimics its content: the difference in sounds between the first and second lines mirrors the duality of the speaker and his lover, while the rhymes give each stanza a strong sense of unity – which the speaker asserts is also an attribute of his relationship.

William Blake's 'The Tyger' (1794) also uses quatrains with two rhymes, though in this case the rhyming couplets – an *aabb* rhyme scheme – produce a very different effect. The use of two rhyming couplets in each stanza reinforces the strong regular rhythm: together, the rhythm and rhyme give the poem a chant-like quality. The speaker seems both awed and appalled by the image of the Tyger, asking a series of unanswerable questions before concluding with a final quatrain that is almost identical to the first, reinforcing the speaker's astonishment.

The Tyger

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

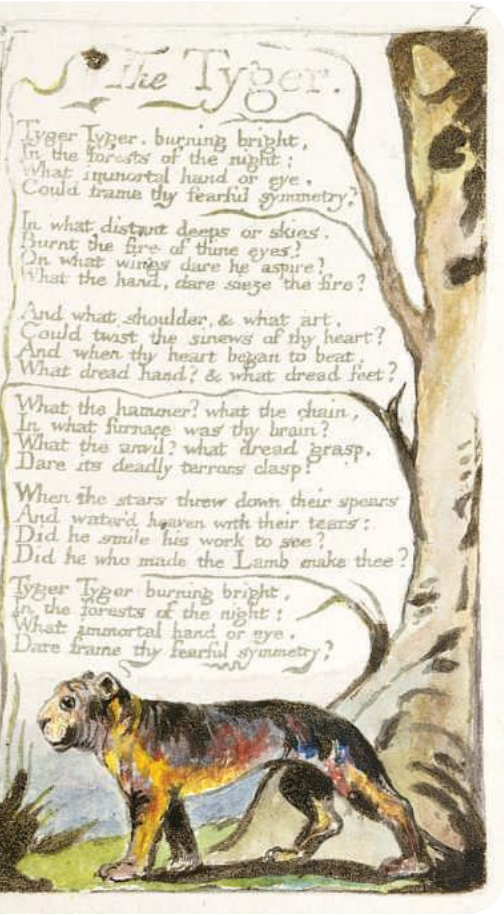
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?



'The Tyger' in *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, illustrated and printed by Blake in 1794.

Half rhyme and internal rhyme

Two more subtle uses of rhyme are:

- internal rhyme – when the rhyme takes place within a line rather than at line ends
- half rhyme – when the sounds are similar but not exactly matched (also known as off-rhyme or slant rhyme).

WH Auden's 'Lullaby' ('Lay your sleeping head, my love', 1940) uses half rhymes to create a sequence of gently echoing sounds. Half rhymes occur in the sixth and last lines in three of the four ten-line stanzas: *ephemeral/beautiful*; *sympathy/ecstasy*; *enough/love*. The second word in each case produces a soft echo of the first, appropriate to the tender tone of the poem. A full or perfect rhyme occurs in the third stanza: *cost/lost*, generating a more emphatic tone where the poem's intensity reaches a brief climax.

The use of half rhyme generates a much more disturbing effect in **Wilfred Owen**'s 'Strange Meeting' (1920). Owen matches the consonant sounds but changes the vowel sounds:

> It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
> Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
>
> Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned ...

The second line in each pair has a lower or flatter pitch, creating a series of falling sounds that reflect the speaker's sense of despair and failure.

British solders in a front-line trench during World War I. Wilfred Owen was one of a number of acclaimed British poets who served during the war, and whose realistic depictions of trench warfare contrasted with the public's patriotic support for the war.

Assonance and alliteration

Assonance and alliteration are repeated sounds that can occur anywhere within a line of a poem. To be most effective, assonance and alliteration should occur in words very close together – usually successive, or separated by only one word.

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds – this can produce a soothing effect if the vowel sounds are long.

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds – this can produce an edgy, brittle effect with consonants like 't' and 'p'.

The example opposite refers to Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break' (1842), reproduced here in full.

Break, break, break,
    On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
    The thoughts that arise in me.

O well for the fisherman's boy,
    That he shouts with his sister at play!
O well for the sailor lad,
    That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on
    To their haven under the hill:
But O for the touch of a vanished hand,
    And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break,
    At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
    Will never come back to me.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson uses alliteration and assonance in 'Break, Break, Break' to enhance the impact and emotional intensity of this short poem. Alliteration is used in several places: apart from the opening line (and title), the repeated 't' in 'tongue' and 'utter', 'b' in 'boat' and 'bay', and 'd' in 'day' and 'dead' contribute to a harsh, bitter tone. The use of assonance creates an echo effect, sometimes within a line, as with 'tongue' and 'utter', and sometimes across lines, as with the 'a' sound of 'break' echoed in 'gray' (first stanza) and 'haven' (third stanza).

The repetition of words and sounds in this poem reinforces what the speaker sees as the remorseless quality of nature in the face of his own loss and despair. Human affairs may be happy – as for the fisherman's boy or the sailor lad – or sad, but the forces of nature are harsh and relentless, and the speaker despairs at the pain of loss in an unfeeling universe.

Repetition of sounds produces a far more elegiac feeling in another Tennyson poem, 'The Splendor Falls' (1850). Here, Tennyson repeats softer consonant sounds 'l' (in 'long light') and 'f' (in 'horns of Elfland faintly blowing'), as well as the 'o' vowel sound (in 'echoes roll from soul to soul'). The poem's pattern of sounds creates a gentle, lyrical effect, though the sense of loss is just as profound as in 'Break, break, break'.

Like Tennyson, **Elizabeth Bishop** uses alliteration and assonance extensively in her poetry, which has an extremely musical quality. In 'At the Fishhouses' (1947), the speaker describes singing to a seal: 'I used to sing him Baptist hymns'. The repetition of 'i' sounds (in 'sing', 'him' and 'hymns') gives the line a chant-like quality, as if merely to say the line is to begin the act of singing.

Bishop also uses alliteration in this poem when she seeks a more fragile quality. The speaker contemplates dipping a hand into the icy water: 'If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter'. The repeated 't' sounds give the line a harshness that mimics the nature of the sensory experience being described.

This is softened in the following lines, in which the water is compared to knowledge and repeated 'f' and 'o' sounds – 'forever, flowing', 'flowing, and flown' – generate a more peaceful and sonorous tone for the poem's conclusion.

Rhythm

Rhythm is an extremely important feature of poetry. The detailed attention poets give to rhythmic patterns means poetry has a very close relationship to music. This is particularly evident when poetry is read aloud, as it is usually intended to be.

- The rhythm of a poem is produced by its pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example, in the line 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall', the syllables 'Hump', 'Dump', 'sat' and 'wall' are stressed or accentuated; they receive more emphasis than the other syllables, which are unstressed.
- A regular rhythm generates a sense of forward movement in the poem; it also creates a pleasing, reassuring quality, since the beat or pulse of the poem falls in a regular, predictable place.
- An irregular rhythm produces an uneven, jerky feel, perhaps to convey a sense of unease, or to evoke the rhythms of ordinary speech.

Regular rhythmic patterns

Metre is a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. Because of this regular pattern, each line can be seen as comprising a number of rhythmic units, each of which consists of (usually) two or three syllables. Each unit is known as a **foot**.

Metrical feet are named according to the number and order of stressed and unstressed syllables. The most common of these are defined in the table below.

How the metre is described	Name of the basic unit (the 'foot')	Definition	Example
iambic	iamb (pronounced 'i-am')	an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable	con**tent** (as in: 'I am feeling content with life')
trochaic	trochee (pronounced 'trokay')	a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable	**con**tent (as in: 'the content of this book includes poetry analysis')
anapaestic or anapestic	anapaest or anapest	two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable	Tennes**see**; with a **leap** | and a **bound**
dactylic	dactyl	a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables	**Ad**elaide, **Jo**sephine

The metre is named according to the *kind* of feet that each line comprises (using terms in the left-hand column of the table on the previous page), and the *number* of feet in each line. The number is indicated by a Greek prefix (e.g. 'di-', 'tri-') in front of the word 'meter'.

Name of metre	Example of the metre	Example of poetry in this metre
dimeter two feet per line	iambic dimeter (four syllables per line, unstressed syllable followed by stressed)	This like a dream Keeps other time (WH Auden, 'This Lunar Beauty')
trimeter three feet per line	iambic trimeter (six syllables per line, unstressed followed by stressed)	The Heart asks Pleasure – first – And then – excuse from Pain – (Emily Dickinson, 'The Heart asks Pleasure – first')
tetrameter four feet per line	trochaic tetrameter (eight syllables per line, stressed followed by unstressed)	Lay your sleeping head, my love, Human on my faithless arm (WH Auden, 'Lullaby')
	anapaestic tetrameter (twelve syllables per line, two unstressed followed by one stressed)	For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed; And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill, And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still! (Lord Byron, 'The Destruction of Sennacherib')
pentameter five feet per line	iambic pentameter (ten syllables per line, unstressed followed by stressed)	I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* No. 43)

Note the following guidelines.

- Iambic pentameter is the most widely used of all metres.
- It is rare to have more than five feet per line.
- **Catalectic lines** have an incomplete foot (i.e. a missing syllable), usually at the start or end of the line. Auden's 'Lullaby' is, strictly speaking, in catalectic trochaic tetrameter.
- To accommodate the rhythmic pattern, vowels sometimes need to be pronounced where they would normally be silent. The **grave accent** (e.g. è) is used to indicate this, as in this line of iambic pentameter: 'Oh, no! it is an ever-fixèd mark' (from Shakespeare's Sonnet 116).

See page 143 for the use of iambic pentameter in blank verse.

Variation of the rhythmic pattern

Poets can vary the rhythmic scheme of a poem to draw attention to particular words and phrases, or to achieve an effect in sound or rhythm that mirrors or emphasises the meaning of the words.

When analysing poetry, it is often more useful (and more interesting) to comment on where the rhyme scheme is varied than simply to identify the main pattern.

Thomas Wyatt uses iambic pentameter in 'They Flee from Me' (early 16th century) to generate pace and urgency, qualities that are established from the first line: 'They flee from me, that sometime did me seek'.

In the final stanza, though, Wyatt interrupts a pleasurable reminiscence with a line that lacks the final, stressed syllable: 'It was no dream, I lay broad waking'.

The attenuated (or catalectic) line conveys the speaker's realisation that such times are over, which is reinforced by the phrase in the following line: 'But all is turned'.

They Flee from Me

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle tame and meek
That now are wild and do not remember
That sometime they put themselves in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune, it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once in special
In thin array after a pleasant guise
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small;
Therewithal sweetly did me kiss,
And softly said *Dear heart, how like you this?*

It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
But all is turned thorough my gentleness
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;
And I have leave to go of her goodness
And she also to use newfangleness.
But since that I so kindly am served,
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

William Blake uses iambic tetrameter in 'London' (1794) to establish a regular rhythm and pulse, supporting the idea of the speaker walking through the city: 'I wander thro' each charter'd street'.

In some places, Blake varies the rhythm by starting a line with a stressed rather than an unstressed syllable. The first word in these lines receives an unexpected emphasis, as in 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe', or 'Blasts the new-born Infants tear'. Indeed, each line in the third stanza begins with a stressed syllable, as the speaker expresses horror at widespread oppression and unhappiness.

London

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning church appals;
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

Gustave Doré's wood engraving 'Over London by Rail' from *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872).

Twentieth-century poets continued to use conventional metrical patterns but with much more freedom. **Robert Lowell**'s 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' (1946) is written predominantly in iambic pentameter, but with many variations that create a sense of a world in disarray. The first occurs in the second line:

> A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,—
> The sea was still breaking violently and night
> Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet ...

The sequence of two stressed syllables – 'still' and 'break' – and then three unstressed syllables before 'night' disrupt the flow of iambs established in the first line.

This mimics the rough, broken surface of the water and creates a sense of uncertainty about how the poem will proceed, both at the level of form and at the level of content.

Caesura

A caesura (pronounced suh-*zhooh*-ruh) is a pause or break in a line of poetry. It is often indicated by a comma, although it can also result from the natural rhythm of the words.

A caesura can signal a hesitation or brief rest, perhaps reflecting the meaning of the phrase, or simply regulating the pace and flow of the poem.

The 17th-century metaphysical poet **Andrew Marvell** uses caesura in the early part of 'To His Coy Mistress' (1681) to convey a feeling of being at leisure, of having an infinite amount of time in which to act:

> We would sit down, and think which way
> To walk, and pass our long love's day.
> Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
> Shouldst rubies find; I by the Tide
> Of Humber would complain ...

The commas and colon within lines help to slow the pace of the verse, supporting the idea of the speaker and his lady friend quietly contemplating life's amusements. The speaker is, of course, exaggerating the situation, for both comic and persuasive effect: his real intention is to convey a sense of how finite and limited time is for mortal beings.

The speaker's true purpose becomes clear in the second stanza:

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.

Suddenly, the tone becomes more serious and urgent, the pace increases and the use of caesura becomes more infrequent.

John Donne's use of caesura in 'The Flea' (1633) heightens the overblown style to comic effect:

> Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
> Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
> Wherein could this flea guilty be,
> Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
> Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
> Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;
> 'Tis true, then learn how false, fears be;
> Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
> Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

The frequent commas create short, sharp phrases, emphasising the exaggerated nature of the speaker's questions and appeals – as if they are part of a genuinely passionate outburst, rather than a witty, mock-indignant plea.

A use of caesura that creates a more serious effect occurs in **Sylvia Plath**'s 'Nick and the Candlestick' (1965). Here, caesura helps to capture the speaker's halting movements in the dark as she checks on her young son. The first line contains two full stops, helping to establish the uncertain mood and a hesitant rhythm:

> I am a miner. The light burns blue.

After this the poem flows more smoothly, but regular commas and other punctuation marks interrupt the rhythm, as in:

> And the fish, the fish –
> Christ! They are panes of ice ...

The frequent hesitations suggest the speaker's bewildered state of mind as she grapples with the reality of her situation: partly confronting ('The pain / You wake to is not yours'), partly miraculous ('You are the baby in the barn').

Enjambment

Enjambment is the running on of lines. This disrupts the conventional expectation of a pause at the end of each line, and breaks down a too-rigid adherence to a strict poetic form.

The example on the previous page from Donne's 'The Flea' deploys enjambment, as well as caesura. In the 20th century, poets used enjambment extensively, sometimes running the last line of one stanza onto the first line of the next stanza. This was part of an ongoing exploration and subversion of traditional boundaries and divisions in poetic form.

Philip Larkin uses enjambment in 'The Whitsun Weddings' (1964) to convey the speaker's sense of movement on a train journey:

> We ran
> Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
> Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence
> The river's level drifting breath began,
> Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

The running on of lines enacts the movement of the train as it 'crosses' streets and suburban blocks; it also generates a sense of forward movement – an overflowing of conventional boundaries and limits.

Peter Porter's use of enjambment in 'Scrawled on Auden's Napkin' (2001) helps to create a relaxed tone and a conversational style: the poem has an improvised feel, as if the poet is literally 'scrawling' ideas on a napkin. The thoughts seem to tumble over one another:

> Mankind is always hungry, so eat up
> Your dish of Paschal meat, pillage the fridge
> For sausages left overnight, sink doubt
> In one of Chester's 'savoury messes' –
> We eat our way to Paradise, if that's
> What an afterlife of unreformed desire
> Is called.

Note that this apparent randomness conceals a regular metrical pattern – the poem is (fairly consistently) in iambic pentameter. In this blending of a modern style with a traditional form, Porter pays homage to Auden, who was a master of reworking older poetic forms. Porter's musings on connections between food and the sacred are delivered in a laconic, deadpan way that is also highly reminiscent of Auden.

Major forms of poetry

There are a number of ways of defining the form of a poem, including:

- a fixed pattern of rhyme, rhythm and number of lines (e.g. a sonnet has fourteen lines and a rhyme scheme)
- the nature of the content and mood (e.g. ode, elegy)
- the way in which a story is told (e.g. dramatic monologue, epic).

Note that blank verse and free verse, two important types of verse, can be used in various forms of poetry.

Blank verse

Blank verse is poetry written in unrhymed (hence 'blank') iambic pentameter.

- Most Shakespearean drama is written in blank verse.
- The rhythm of blank verse is very close to that of normal speech in English.

The Romantic poets often used blank verse. The following example is the beginning of **William Wordsworth**'s 'Tintern Abbey' (1798):

> Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
> Of five long winters! and again I hear
> These waters, rolling from the mountain-springs
> With a soft inland murmur. Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs ...

The (mostly) regular pattern of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables creates a consistent rhythm. This helps generate a suitable mood for this meditative reflection on the nature of memory.

Note, however, the emphatic tone generated by the unexpected stress on 'long' in the second line, emphasising the difficulty of enduring the winters as compared to the summers.

William Turner's 1794 watercolour painting of Tintern Abbey.

Free verse

Free verse is poetry with no regular line length, rhyme or rhythm.

Free verse became widely used in the 20th century when poets experimented with form by breaking down traditional structures. There were strong precedents for the use of free verse in the work of 19th-century poets, such as that of the American poet Walt Whitman.

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) uses free verse to express feelings of liberation and personal freedom; it also conveys a sense of self that is simultaneously ordinary and ecstatic:

> I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
>
> I loafe and invite my soul,
> I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

Whitman rejected the conventional forms widely used at the time (such as the sonnet and blank verse), and sought a poetic idiom that would convey a uniquely American voice. He also opened up poetry to the expression of thoughts and feelings that would normally only be hinted at, such as sexual desires and experiences:

> I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
> How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
> And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
> And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

Although Whitman's language is relatively formal, his use of free verse enables the patterns of ordinary speech to become key elements of poetry. For this reason alone *Leaves of Grass* had a large influence on the development of poetry in the 20th century, especially in the United States.

If Whitman's poetry is positive, sensual, personal and patriotic, the work of **TS Eliot** around fifty years later – also using free verse as the standard poetic form – embodies very different, if not entirely opposing, qualities. Eliot rejected traditional forms and regular patterns of rhyme and rhythm as he depicted the alienating and dehumanising qualities of modern life.

A famous example of Eliot's use of free verse occurs at the opening of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915):

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table ...

The regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in the first line is immediately disrupted by the longer second line, in which stressed syllables are separated by two or three unstressed syllables (mimicking the meaning of the phrase 'spread out').

The strong sense of purpose established by the first line is thus immediately negated not only by the images of inertness and diffuseness, but also by the irregular rhythms and line lengths of the stanza.

Note that writing in free verse does not mean that rhyme is never used, but that it is used irregularly, and with a particular purpose rather than as an automatic consequence of the form. (See the first two lines of 'Prufrock' above, one of several instances of rhyme in this poem.)

Free verse can mean much more than the use of irregular line lengths; it allows the poet to experiment with every aspect of language, including:

- the placement of words on the page
- the unconventional use of punctuation marks – for example, omitting punctuation entirely.

The poet who is best known for the unconventional use of punctuation is **EE Cummings**. Writing in the first half of the 20th century, Cummings also experimented with conventions for capitalisation, word spacing and spelling (collectively these elements of written English are known as orthography), and with syntax and grammar.

For example, in 'somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond' (1931), commas and semicolons are not followed by the usual space, and the first-person pronoun 'I' is in lower case throughout. The last stanza concludes with a complete sentence that has neither an initial capital letter nor a final full stop:

> (i do not know what it is about you that closes
> and opens;only something in me understands
> the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
> nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands

The unconventional punctuation and spacing can have various effects in Cummings' poetry: the most obvious effect is to make the familiar look unfamiliar, encouraging the reader to see or feel from a fresh perspective. It can also create a humorous or whimsical tone, and a more intimate voice than a formal, 'correct' style of writing generally allows.

Heroic couplets

Heroic couplets are rhyming couplets in lines of ten syllables (usually iambic pentameter).

- Heroic couplets have been used for long poems such as narrative poems and epics (see below).
- The form was widely used in the 16th and 17th centuries, but is most closely associated with the poets John Dryden (late 1600s) and Alexander Pope (early 1700s).

Alexander Pope used heroic couplets extensively, in both serious and comic poems. In *The Rape of the Lock* (1717) the use of heroic couplets contributes to the mock-heroic effect:

> Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel
> A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?
> Oh, say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
> Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?
> In tasks so bold can little men engage,
> And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?

In an epic, heroic couplets help to create a serious, elevated tone, appropriate to weighty subject matter. Here, though, Pope's use of inflated language ('assault', 'mighty') and the contrast of the poem's form and style with its actual subject matter – the 'theft' of a lock of hair from a young woman – create a comic rather than a serious tone.

Ballad

A **ballad** tells a story, often with a strong dramatic element and drawing on the local folk culture. It is usually written in short stanzas.

Some famous ballads in the literary tradition are *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Lucy Gray' (1800) by William Wordsworth and 'Maude Clare' (1859) by Christina Rossetti.

Lyric

The **lyric** is the most common poetic form. It was originally accompanied by music, and the term retains this meaning (as in 'song lyric'). A lyric poem:

- is relatively short
- is in the voice of a single 'character', known as the speaker
- uses a personal tone that conveys the speaker's private thoughts and feelings to the reader/listener
- often focuses on a moment, mood or image.

There are many forms or structures in which a lyric can be written: a series of quatrains is the most common. In Renaissance Italy and Elizabethan England the sonnet became the dominant form of the lyric, which usually focused on the subject of romantic love (see below). Lyrics can also be religious or mystical in nature.

Sonnet

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line poem usually written in iambic pentameter in one of a few established rhyme schemes.

Sonnets are conventionally about love, but can be religious – John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are famous examples of the latter (see page 149). They can also be about more everyday experiences.

Although seemingly quite strict, the sonnet form has proved to be flexible enough to allow for considerable variation and experiment. The main sonnet forms are defined in the table on the next page.

Type of sonnet	Rhyme scheme	Structure
Petrarchan named after the Renaissance Italian poet Petrarch	*abbaabba cdecde* or *abbaabba cdcdcd*	• The first eight lines are the octave; the last six lines are the sestet. • The octave develops the main idea or problem; the sestet provides a response or resolution.
Shakespearean (sometimes known as 'English') Shakespeare used this form throughout his cycle of 154 sonnets	*abab cdcd efef gg*	• The three quatrains develop different aspects of the main idea. • The final rhyming couplet resolves the argument.
Spenserian named after the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser	*abab bcbc cdcd ee*	• The three linked quatrains develop the main idea. • The final rhyming couplet generates a sense of closure and resolution.

Although **William Shakespeare** is very consistent in his use of the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg* throughout his 154 sonnets (1609), there are some exceptions. One of these is Sonnet 126, the last of the group of sonnets addressed to a young man. Not only is the rhyme scheme different (rhyming couplets are used throughout) but the final two lines are missing:

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy pow'r
Dost hold Time's fickle glass his fickle hour,
Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'st
Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow'st.
If nature, sovereign mistress over wrack,
As thou goest onwards still will pluck thee back,
She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill
May time disgrace, and wretched minute kill.
Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure;
She may detain, but not still keep her treasure.
Her audit, though delayed, answered must be,
And her quietus is to render thee.

The effect of this structure is to give the poem a slightly abrupt feel, consistent with the poet's warning about time. The first eight lines (the octave) express admiration for the young man's apparent control over Time's passing, with his youthful beauty being preserved by Nature. The final four lines, though, suggest that he cannot remain Nature's darling forever, and eventually she (Nature) will have to release him. This quatrain, two lines shorter than the usual sestet, thus delivers a blunt, emphatic message about the inevitability of physical decline and Time's ultimate mastery over our lives.

John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (published posthumously in 1633) use several rhyme schemes that are closer to the Petrarchan form (octave + sestet) but retain the final rhyming couplet of the English forms. The final couplet generates a strong ending – an affirmation of religious faith and devotion. For example, the rhyme scheme of 'Death, be not proud' is *abba abba cddcee*, with the concluding couplet affirming the speaker's belief in life after death:

> Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
> Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
> For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
> Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
> From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
> Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
> And soonest our best men with thee do go,
> Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
> Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
> And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
> And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well
> And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
> One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
> And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

In the 19th century, poems such as John Keats' 'Bright Star' and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) – including the famous 'How Do I Love Thee?' (Sonnet 43) – continue the tradition of sonnets as love poems.

Twentieth-century poets use the sonnet form much more flexibly, employing a wide range of language styles and moods. One acclaimed set of 20th-century sonnets is *The Sonnets* (1964) by American poet **Ted Berrigan**. Alice Notley – also a highly regarded poet, and Berrigan's second wife – notes in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Sonnets* that Berrigan used a variety of compositional techniques in order to

> break the ages-old logic of the sonnet and sonnetlike poems and to make a new statement about reality: the outcome or gist of something is in its midst not just at its end.

Here is Sonnet 17:

for Carol Clifford

Each tree stands alone in stillness
After many years still nothing
The wind's wish is the tree's demand
The tree stands still
The wind walks up and down
Scanning the long selves of the shore
Her aimlessness is the pulse of the tree
It beats in tiny blots
Its patternless pattern of excitement
Letters birds beggars books
There is no such thing as a breakdown
The tree the ground the wind these are
Dear, be the tree your sleep awaits
Sensual, solid, still, swaying alone in the wind

The traditional patterns of rhyme and rhythm are no longer used, although the short lines 'The tree stands still' and 'It beats in tiny blots' create a loose four-line pattern, as in the Shakespearean model. The first four lines focus on the stillness of the tree; the second four on the motion of the wind. The final six lines – the sestet – resolve the tension or difference between tree and wind, suggesting that 'there is no such thing as a breakdown': in other words, the separate elements must be seen as belonging to a unified whole. In typical postmodern fashion, Berrigan includes a line ('Dear, be the tree your sleep awaits') from another 20th-century American work, John Ashbery's 'Sonnet', reinforcing the rich tradition of sonnet writing and reinvention.

Ode

The **ode** is another type of lyric poem, often written in the form of an address. It has a ceremonial, stately quality and a complex stanza form.

There are two main kinds of odes: those for a public occasion, and those intended for private reflection.

John Keats' odes, including 'To Autumn' and 'Ode to a Nightingale', are some of the most famous ever written. His 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820) was written for private reflection, and has five ten-line stanzas that follow the rhyme scheme *abab cdedce* (or with a variation of this rhyme sequence in the sestet).

The speaker admires the urn's beauty, which transcends the passage of time. The two lovers depicted on its surface 'cannot fade', yet the 'Bold Lover' will never succeed in kissing his beloved. Thus, the poem is a tribute to the beauty and permanence of art, while also acknowledging what art fails to capture – the vitality and sensuousness of life itself.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

1

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearièd,
Forever piping songs forever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
Forever panting, and forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets forevermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

5

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Keats' drawing of the Sosibios Vase, dated around 50 BC.

Elegy

An **elegy** is a poem that laments the death of a person, or a tragic event.

A feeling of sadness and loss pervades an elegy, but the ending can express hope and a sense of renewal. An important subgenre is the pastoral elegy, which has a rural setting and features shepherds and mythological references.

WH Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1940) is a famous elegy from the 20th century, while John Milton's 'Lycidas' (1637) is an important early pastoral elegy in English poetry. Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) is a well-known elegy in the pastoral tradition, though it takes the form of a general meditation on death rather than a lament for a particular individual.

Haiku

Haiku is a Japanese form of poetry with three lines and a fixed number of syllables in each line: five syllables in the first line, seven in the second line and five in the third line.

A haiku captures a single image or feeling in a very distilled form, usually including a reference to a season or to nature more broadly. English translations of Japanese haiku do not always adhere to the syllable scheme; nor do many haiku written in English.

Three Japanese masters of haiku in the 17th and 18th centuries were Matsuo Bashō, Naitō Jōsō and Yosa Buson. This example by **Jōsō** retains the conventional syllable scheme in the English translation:

> Both plains and mountains
> Have been captured by the snow
> There is nothing left

In early 20th-century English poetry, a number of writers in the imagist movement, such as Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, drew on the haiku form in writing short, concentrated poems. These poets were reacting against the longer and more discursive poems of the Victorian period, and sought to create clear, focused images free from sentimentality.

Dramatic monologue

A **dramatic monologue** contrasts with a lyric: it is a longer poem in which the speaker is more strongly characterised and developed. There is more of a storytelling aspect to a dramatic monologue than there is in a lyric. The dramatic quality of the poem comes from a situation described by the speaker.

The Victorian poets Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning wrote several dramatic monologues: 'Ulysses' (Tennyson) and 'My Last Duchess' (Browning) are two of the most famous examples.

In **Tennyson**'s 'Ulysses' (1842) the speaker is the disenchanted hero of Homer's *Odyssey* (Ulysses is another name for Odysseus), who expresses regret at the end of his adventures and the approach of old age:

> It little profits that an idle king,
> By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
> Matched with an agèd wife, I mete and dole
> Unequal laws unto a savage race,
> That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
> I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
> Life to the lees ...

Ulysses' restless character and pensive mood are quickly established; his audience is unspecified, so it is as if the reader is eavesdropping on his private thoughts.

Browning creates a more explicitly dramatic situation in 'My Last Duchess' (1842). The speaker is identified by the subtitle 'Ferrara' – Alphonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara (born in 1533), whose first wife (his 'last duchess') died, in suspicious circumstances, at the age of sixteen. Ferrara, who is seeking to marry again, is showing a portrait of his late wife to an emissary from the family of his prospective bride. The monologue evokes the drama of the encounter between the two men, as well as capturing the Duke's assured but threatening character – particularly in the lines 'I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together'. Underneath the Duke's courteous demeanour lies, it seems, a jealous and ruthless personality, just as underneath the veneer of polite society lies a culture in which powerful men treat women as possessions.

My Last Duchess

Ferrara

That's my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Epic

The **epic** is the longest and most narrative-driven form of poetry. Its subject is usually on a grand scale, encompassing events of a momentous nature and/or occurring over a number of years, such as a war or a dangerous quest.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is the most famous epic poem written in English. It describes the original sin of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the garden of Eden; each of its twelve 'books' is several hundred lines in length.

A much older epic poem is *Beowulf*, written between the 8th and 11th centuries in Old English, an early form of the English language. It has been translated into modern English a number of times: a relatively recent well-regarded translation is by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (published in 1999).

Poetic diction, persona and voice

Poetic diction is the vocabulary used in a poem, including similes and metaphors.

The **speaker** or **persona** is the individual who seems to be addressing the reader or listener; the **voice** of a poem is the 'sound' and tone with which that person seems to be speaking.

- The speaker might be created as a character, or remain undefined; they should not automatically be identified as the poet. Some poems have multiple speakers, presenting contrasting perspectives.
- **Tone** refers to the emotion conveyed by the speaker: happy, sad, angry, reflective, mocking, passionate and so on. The tone can shift dramatically over the course of a poem, showing fluctuating emotions, different perspectives or simply an evolving point of view.
- **Style** is the way in which words are used and combined. A poet could have an ornate style, rich in adjectives, adverbs, similes and metaphors; or a minimalist, pared-back style. **Register**, or the level of language, is an important aspect of style: it can be formal, informal or colloquial.

Poetic diction is largely what distinguishes the language of poetry from the language of prose, and also from the language of everyday speech. Poetic language is denser and more figurative – that is, richer in metaphors, similes and symbols. Of course, these distinctions are not universal: some prose is very poetic, and some poetry is extremely prose-like, especially when poets seek to emulate the rhythms and sounds of ordinary, everyday speech.

Traditionally, poetic diction was elevated and stylised, but from the end of the 18th century there was a movement to include more 'ordinary' language in poetry. In his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) Wordsworth asserted that his poetry contained:

> little of what is usually called poetic diction; I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it; this I have done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men.

Nevertheless, the poetry of Wordsworth and his contemporaries, as the examples in this chapter show, tends to be more elevated in style than the everyday 'language of men'.

The shift to incorporate more everyday language – the vernacular – into the language of poetry did not happen quickly, and it was not until the 20th century that poets regularly began to include colloquial or slang words.

A formal style and traditional poetic diction is used by **Thomas Gray** in his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), using iambic pentameter and an *abab* rhyme scheme:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
    The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
    And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
    And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
    And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds ...

The regular patterns of rhyme and rhythm give the poem a steady predictability – an essentially reassuring quality, despite the sombre tone and serious subject matter.

One hundred years later, Walt Whitman introduced a more informal style and rhythms closer to those of prose in *Leaves of Grass* (see page 144). Later poets in the United States continued to develop a distinctively American style. **William Carlos Williams** rejected traditional metres and diction, drawing on the rhythms and sounds of ordinary American speech, and focusing on everyday experiences rather than conventional, elevated subjects of poetry. In 'Portrait of a Lady' (1920) he delivered a whimsical response to earlier serious works with the same title by Henry James (a novel), Ezra Pound and TS Eliot (poems):

    Your knees
are a southern breeze—or
a gust of snow. Agh! what
sort of man was Fragonard?
—as if that answered
anything.

The frequent use of enjambment, dashes, rhetorical questions and an informal register give the poem a lighthearted tone; the speaker's view of art (Fragonard was an 18th-century French painter) is casual, even irreverent, rather than serious and authoritative.

English poets of the early 20th century also incorporated informal styles into their poetry, although the work of modernists such as Pound and Eliot could be extremely dense and sophisticated, sometimes including quotations from earlier poets in Greek, Latin and French.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is perhaps the most famous example of this approach to poetic diction. Here are the last few lines:

> Shall I at least set my lands in order?
> London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
> *Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*
> *Quando fiam ceu chelidon*—O swallow swallow
> *Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*
> These fragments I have shored against my ruins
> Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
> Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
> Shantih shantih shantih

Eliot incorporates, and juxtaposes, quotations from Dante (in Italian), a nursery rhyme, the Elizabethan playwright Thomas Kyd and terms from the Hindu Upanishads (religious texts). The effect is dazzling and provocative, but sometimes bewildering and cryptic. In stitching together texts from disparate historical and cultural contexts, Eliot anticipated postmodern styles of writing.

In the United States, poetry was no less sophisticated or experimental, but poets tended not to adopt the richly allusive, overtly learned style of the English modernists. Rather, they remained closer to ordinary life and language, and incorporated colloquial expressions, references to popular culture and everyday experiences as readily as they used formal or 'high art' allusions.

Imagery

Because of poetry's close focus on language, the multiple meanings and suggestions of words are more fundamental to the overall sense of a poem than they are in any other literary form. It is important to:

- consider carefully the connotations of words alongside their literal meanings
- analyse the significance and impact of images as closely as you would study the narrative or plot of a novel.

Knowing how to identify these images is a key skill of the literary critic; however, explaining the *effect* of such an image on the reader, and how it contributes to the poem's meaning, is even more crucial.

Simile

A **simile** compares two different things using 'like' or 'as'.

- The comparison draws the reader's attention to a particular quality of the first term.
- It connects the first term with other terms that have similar images associated with them.

Robert Frost uses a simile in 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep' (1936) to create an image of a seagull standing on a beach:

> The wetter ground like glass
> Reflects a standing gull.

This simile compares the smooth, flat sand near the water's edge to a sheet of glass; the sand is subject to the movements of the waves, but the comparison with glass gives the sand a solid, changeless quality. It also invokes the idea of a mirror, reinforced by the second line, which indicates that the gull's reflection can be seen in the wet sand. The image creates a sense of stillness, of quiet reflection: it is this calm state of being, Frost suggests, that is more valuable than anything people might observe when they 'look at the sea'.

Metaphor

A **metaphor** describes one thing as if it is another.

- Metaphors are extremely effective in making us look at the world of familiar objects and experiences in unexpected, revealing and refreshing ways.
- Another way of thinking about a metaphor is as a statement of equivalence between two different things, e.g. 'the camel **is** the ship of the desert'.

The metaphor can state this equivalence explicitly, using a form of the verb 'to be' (e.g. 'is', 'are').

In 'Insomniac' (written around 1960), **Sylvia Plath** uses an unusual metaphor to describe the overstimulated mind of a sleepless man: 'His head is a little interior of grey mirrors'. In this image, thoughts pass through the mind as if endlessly reflected from mirror to mirror, unable to be stilled.

Alternatively, a metaphor can be expressed using an adjective or a verb to establish an equivalence between two unlike objects or concepts.

In 'South of My Days' (1946, reproduced below), Australian poet **Judith Wright** tells the story of an early-20th-century drover who moved cattle between Queensland and New South Wales. As the speaker shelters in an old cottage, she feels close to all the others who, over time, have also found refuge there, including Dan the drover. Wright uses a rich network of images – both similes and metaphors – to convey the close relationship between the drover, the cottage and the landscape. For example, a metaphor compares the old man's store of memories and experiences to the contents of a beehive: 'Seventy summers are hived in him like old honey'. The verb 'hived' creates the metaphor, which is reinforced by the simile comparing time to 'old honey'. The image portrays the man's lifetime of experiences as rich and sustaining, and as intimately connected with the natural world.

Moreover, the country is represented not as a passive background to human existence, but as active, dynamic. The adjectives (underlined) in the phrase 'clean, lean, hungry country' create a metaphor in which the land is likened to a wild animal, a creature that is not easily dominated or possessed by humans.

The metaphorical intermingling of animate and inanimate, human and non-human, is crucial to the poem's overall sense that in this landscape, people and place are not separate, but fundamentally interconnected.

South of My Days

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter;
low trees blue-leaved and olive; outcropping granite—
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek's leaf-silenced,
willow-choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crab-apple,
branching over and under, blotched with a green lichen;
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter.

O cold the black-frost night. The walls draw in to the warmth
and the old roof cracks its joints; the slung kettle
hisses a leak on the fire. Hardly to be believed that summer
will turn up again some day in a wave of rambler roses,

thrust its hot face in here to tell another yarn—
a story old Dan can spin into a blanket against the winter.
Seventy years of stories he clutches round his bones.
Seventy summers are hived in him like old honey.

Droving that year, Charleville to the Hunter,
nineteen-one it was, and the drought beginning;
sixty head left at the McIntyre, the mud round them
hardened like iron; and the yellow boy died
in the sulky ahead with the gear, but the horse went on,
stopped at the Sandy Camp and waited in the evening.
It was the flies we seen first, swarming like bees.
Came to the Hunter, three hundred head of a thousand—
cruel to keep them alive—and the river was dust.

Or mustering up in the Bogongs in the autumn
when the blizzards came early. Brought them down; we brought them
down, what aren't there yet. Or driving for Cobb's on the run
up from Tamworth—Thunderbolt at the top of Hungry Hill,
and I give him a wink. I wouldn't wait long, Fred,
not if I was you; the troopers are just behind,
coming for that job at the Hillgrove. He went like a luny,
him on his big black horse.

Oh, they slide and they vanish
as he shuffles the years like a pack of conjuror's cards.
True or not, it's all the same; and the frost on the roof
cracks like a whip, and the back-log break into ash.
Wake, old man. This is winter, and the yarns are over.
No one is listening.
South of my days' circle
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country
full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.

Personification

Personification occurs when a metaphor attributes human qualities to non-human objects or creatures. In this way, the poet breaks down familiar categories and definitions, suggesting surprising connections between objects, places and people.

American poet **Emily Dickinson** personifies death in 'Because I could not stop for death' (1890) to convey a calm acceptance of mortality. The poem uses an extended metaphor, in which death is represented as a charming gentleman who takes the speaker for a carriage ride to her grave.

The speaker looks back on the three phases of life: childhood, represented by 'the School, where Children strove'; maturity, represented by 'the Fields of Gazing Grain'; and old age, represented by 'the Setting Sun'. She experiences death not as a cruel force that will take her suddenly from those she loves, but as a companion whose presence is inevitable, even reassuring.

This acceptance of death is reinforced, and to some extent explained, by the speaker's confidence in her own immortality, which has also accompanied her in the carriage. The personification of death thus allows Dickinson to portray the transition from life to death as seamless and natural, and the world of the afterlife as merely a part of the temporal world we live in.

Conceit

A **conceit** is a metaphor that relates very different types of things in a way that is unexpected and witty.

A **metaphysical conceit** typically combines an image from the cosmic or spiritual realm with an everyday object or concept. It is usually associated with the metaphysical poets of the early 1600s, of whom John Donne is the most celebrated and best known.

In **John Donne**'s 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' (1633, reproduced on the next two pages), the relationship between two lovers is compared to a compass. These two entities (a human relationship and an inanimate compass) are utterly dissimilar, yet the conceit invests the intangible bond between people with the characteristics of a mundane physical object.

Donne develops an elaborate scheme by which the two compass points signify the lovers, with the woman at the (still) centre and the man at the (mobile) circumference. The lovers are united – even while they are separated – by the bond between them, which is represented by the joined arms of the instrument.

A Valediction Forbidding Mourning

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, no;

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears;
Men reckon what it did and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
The thing which elemented it.

But we by'a love so much refined
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assurèd of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th' other foot, obliquely run.
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

Symbol

A **symbol** is an object that stands for another, larger thing; the symbolic object is part of or associated with the larger entity, but also represents it.

Common examples of symbols include:

- the cross as a symbol for the Christian church
- the throne and crown as symbols for the monarchy
- a dove as a symbol for peace
- the colour white as a symbol for purity
- a red rose as a symbol for love.

An object may have more than one symbolic meaning. For example, a cross might symbolise death rather than the Christian faith, especially if accompanied by a wreath of flowers. A red rose might signify passion or lust rather than a more romantic conception of love. The context in which the symbol appears is crucial in clarifying meaning.

In 'The Sick Rose' (1794), **William Blake** uses a traditional symbol – the rose, as a symbol of love – and gives it an unfamiliar twist. On a literal level, the poem describes a rose being attacked by a worm: read in this way, the poem has only a superficial meaning and little or no poetic significance. It *must* be read on a metaphorical and symbolic level for its real meaning (or meanings) to be understood.

The symbolic meaning of the worm is ambiguous – its precise meaning depends on how the poem as a whole is interpreted. The worm might be seen in a fairly abstract way, as signifying corruption or deceit; in this case, the 'bed / Of crimson joy' can be read as referring to a sexual relationship that transgresses social or moral conventions, and therefore corrupts the purity of love. The worm might also be seen as a version of the biblical serpent, an incarnation of evil that corrupts the good in humanity. A more sexually charged reading would be to regard the worm as a phallic symbol.

If the poem is interpreted in a moralistic way, the worm might be seen as signifying a threatening sexual desire that is 'dark' and 'secret', destroying the beauty of love as expressed, say, within the context of a marriage. Alternatively, the worm might be read in a more positive way, as symbolic of a natural force or energy that society's idealisation of love (symbolised by the rose) foolishly seeks to deny.

The Sick Rose

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

Blake's illustration for 'The Sick Rose' in *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, published in 1794.

Poets can invest certain images with symbolic meaning by giving them particular associations and using them in specific contexts. Such images or objects only have that symbolic meaning within a single literary work or a group of closely related texts, as shown in the following examples.

In 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (1939), **WH Auden** invests figures in Pieter Bruegel's painting of Icarus falling into the ocean (*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, c.1555) with symbolic meaning. The ploughman who 'may / Have heard the splash' and the passing ship symbolise humanity's indifference to human suffering:

> the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
> Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Images of ships and ploughmen do not ordinarily have such resonant, abstract meanings, but the first half of the poem is an extended reflection on suffering and its 'human position'. In this way, Auden makes it clear that these figures are in fact symbols for a seemingly universal aspect of the human condition.

In the poetry of **WB Yeats**, the tower is a recurring image with multiple meanings. On a literal level it refers to the 11th-century Norman tower owned by Yeats; on a symbolic level, the tower represents Ireland – an ancient country haunted by its violent history.

The sequence of poems 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (1923) enacts a journey from the base to the top of this tower. This movement symbolises the poet's personal quest and also Ireland's troubled history, from the colonial English estates of 'Ancestral Houses' and the 'acre of stony ground' at the tower's base to the vision of an uncertain Irish future from 'the tower-top'.

The Irish tower known as Thoor Ballylee, once owned by Yeats, takes on a symbolic meaning in his poems.

Close analysis of a poem

This section shows you how to write a close analysis of a poem, relating poetic features to an interpretation of the poem.

There are two main aspects to close analysis, both equally important:

- **close *reading*** – focusing on the text in order to gain a more complex and in-depth understanding of its meanings
- ***writing* a close analysis** – writing about the text in detail. This is the best way to provide supporting evidence for an interpretation of a poem's wider meaning.

Essential elements of close analysis

There are three main areas to focus on when preparing to write a close analysis of a poem. These are:

- language and imagery
- form and structure
- connections between the features of a poem.

In addition, you must ensure that your writing follows the **conventions of analytical writing**. That is, it:

- refers closely to the text throughout, including brief quotations integrated into your writing
- explains the meaning and significance of textual evidence
- uses a serious, formal tone.

How to read a poem closely

The following key questions will help you to gather and organise information as you read a poem carefully.

How has the poet used form and structure?

Consider the arrangement of words within lines, and of lines within stanzas.

- Is the poem in a standard form (e.g. sonnet, ode)? Does it follow the conventions of that form or does it depart from them?
- Are the lines of equal length? Are they grouped into stanzas of equal length?

- Are there regular patterns of rhythm and/or rhyme? What are the effects of these?
- How do elements of form and structure influence the reader's response and the poem's meaning?

What are the special features of language use?

Comment on aspects of the poem's language, including:

- style and diction (e.g. formal or informal language)
- alliteration and assonance
- irony (verbal, dramatic)
- allusions (e.g. classical, biblical, historical, literary)
- caesura and/or enjambment, and any unusual punctuation
- words or phrases from languages other than English.

How is imagery used?

Consider the type and effects of images, including:

- similes, metaphors, personification, conceits
- symbols and their meanings
- sensory imagery (things that are seen, heard, felt, smelled or tasted).

What sort of persona is created by the poet?

Think about how the poem's speaker influences your response to the poem.

- Has the poet constructed a strong sense of a character? What are the main qualities of this character? What emotions do they convey?
- Does the speaker express a viewpoint on the poem's subject?
- Does the poem encourage you to agree or disagree with the speaker's viewpoint?

What is the poem's context?

If you are studying a number of works by a poet, think about how the poem you are analysing fits into the poet's work more broadly. If you are analysing an excerpt from a long narrative poem, consider the significance of the excerpt within the whole poem.

- Is the poem typical of the poet's main concerns and usual style?
- Does the poem reflect the concerns of its historical period or style (e.g. Romanticism, modernism)?
- In what ways is the poem significant or of particular interest?

Sample poem for close analysis

Carefully read Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1807; also known as 'Daffodils'), then read the elements identified for close analysis in the table that follows.

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company;
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Daffodils in the Lake District, England, where Wordsworth lived for most of his life.

Essential elements from the poem

The table below sets out the aspects of a poem that require detailed attention in order to write a thorough and perceptive close analysis.

- The first column, headed **Identify important elements**, sets out what to look for in each of the four main areas: form and structure; language and imagery; connections between features of the text; and conventions for writing a close analysis.
- The second column, headed **Explain the effects of elements**, gives examples of the important elements and explains some of their effects, drawing on 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'.

Use this table to prepare your own close analysis by completing the two columns for a poem you are studying. The questions and points for form and structure, language and imagery, and connections between features of the text, can be used for any poem.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
Form and structure	• What is the poem's form? • Does the poet use the form in a conventional way, or do they place pressure on its conventions?	• 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' is a **lyric** with four six-line stanzas. • Each **stanza** ends with a rhyming couplet added onto the common *abab* pattern of lyric poems. This gives an emphatic note to the ends of stanzas, making them self-contained. • The lyric is typically used to express a strong feeling or experience, which is also Wordsworth's purpose here.
	• Are the lines and stanzas regular or irregular in length?	• Lines and stanzas are **regular in length**, giving the poem a reassuring, measured quality that is consistent with the solace the poet draws from the scene.
	• Is there a regular pattern of rhythm and/or rhyme? How does this contribute to the poem's impact? • Look for variations from the main pattern, as these will always be significant.	• The metre is **iambic tetrameter**, used consistently. • An exception is '**Toss**-ing their **heads** in **state**-ly **dance**', which begins with a trochee (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable; stressed syllables are shown in bold) – generating a dance-like rhythm that reflects the speaker's perception of the daffodils' motion.
	• Are there any examples of caesura or enjambment?	• **Caesura** is used, e.g. the dashes in 'I gazed—and gazed—but little thought', which convey the idea that the speaker is so enthralled by the scene that he pauses to take it in.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
Language and imagery	• Look for the connotations of words – these can be as important as their literal meanings.	• The adjective '**golden**' (line 4) describes a colour, but also suggests gold, the precious metal – reinforcing 'wealth' in line 18.
	• Is alliteration or assonance used? What is the effect?	• In 'twinkle on the milky way', **alliteration** (from repeated 'l' and 'k') and **assonance** (from repeated 'i') mimics the idea of twinkling starlight.
	• Are similes or metaphors used? • What images are created in this way and how are they significant? • Can any images be read as symbolic?	• The **simile** 'I wandered lonely **as** a cloud' suggests the speaker feels part of the natural world, and gives the state of being 'lonely' a positive dimension. • The **metaphor** of dancing personifies the daffodils and waves, suggesting they are active, conscious beings with emotions.
	• What is the significance of recurring words or images?	• **Repetition of 'gazed'** conveys the speaker's feeling of being entranced, immersed in the experience of watching. It also reinforces that the speaker is still, whereas the natural world around him is full of movement.
	• What kind of tone does the speaker use? • Does the tone change within the poem? • Tone conveys the speaker's attitude towards what they are describing.	• The tone is happy, exultant in the first three stanzas, conveying the speaker's feelings upon seeing the field of daffodils. • The tone then **shifts to become more reflective** in the final stanza as the speaker contemplates the lasting impact of the vision of daffodils.
	• Explain the links between the *way* the text is written and *what* is being said.	• The poem's **strong sense of order and unity** reflects these qualities in the natural world.
	• How is the speaker's voice related to the views and values being presented and explored in the poem?	• The speaker celebrates the uplifting beauty of nature through a **positive tone and mood**.
	• How does imagery convey central preoccupations and ideas?	• Elements of nature are connected through the **imagery of dancing**, and the simile 'continuous as the stars' conveys a sense of cosmic unity.

	Identify important elements	Explain the effects of elements
Connections between features of a text	• How does structure affect the reader's experience?	• The **final stanza shifts into the present tense** to show the lasting impact of the scene of daffodils. In this way, Wordsworth makes the reader aware of the power of the 'inner' vision as well as the outward one. • The semicolon at the end of the third stanza signals that the final stanza will reflect on the meaning and significance of the poem's subject matter – resolving or completing the poem in some way.
	• How does the speaker create the mood or feeling of the poem?	• **Adjectives** such as 'sprightly', 'sparkling' and 'jocund' generate a happy, celebratory tone, contrasting with 'vacant' and 'pensive' in the final stanza (a link to structure). • The speaker conveys the sense of being present in the scene, **using 'I' in several places** to create the feeling that he is relating a personal, deeply felt experience to the reader.
Conventions for writing a close analysis	• Don't describe; analyse!	• **A sentence that is too descriptive** is: 'The poem describes the poet's happiness on seeing a field of daffodils beside a lake on a sunny day.' • **A more analytical sentence** is: 'The poem uses images of dancing and stars to suggest that a field of daffodils embodies a joyful universe of interconnected elements.'
	• Use evidence from the text to support your statements.	• **Make detailed, specific references to the text; avoid general, sweeping statements** such as 'Wordsworth's poem captures the inspirational qualities of nature.'
	• Always explain the significance (and, if necessary, the meaning) of the quotes you use.	• **Avoid long quotes** that occupy an entire sentence, e.g. 'Wordsworth personifies the daffodils by describing them as dancing. "Ten thousand saw I at a glance, / Tossing their heads in sprightly dance."' • Instead, write: 'Wordsworth personifies the daffodils by comparing their movement in the breeze to a "sprightly dance".'
	• Use a serious and formal tone – avoid being too conversational or chatty.	• **Use a wide vocabulary** so that your word choices are as precise as possible. • **Don't use expressions such as** 'in my opinion' and 'it is my belief that'.

How to write a close analysis: a three-step process

Follow this three-step process for developing a close analysis of a poem or an excerpt from a poem. 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (reproduced on page 170) is used for illustrative purposes.

1. **Read the poem carefully and make annotations** identifying features of the text such as language use, imagery, persona, rhyme and rhythm; link these to key ideas.
2. **Order your annotations** so there is a logical sequence of ideas in your close analysis – move from specific features of the poem to its broader ideas, views and values.
3. **Write the analysis**.

Step 1: Read closely and make annotations

Use the table on pages 171–3 as a model for making notes on the key elements and their effects.

Another very useful technique is to annotate the poem, writing brief notes on the poetic elements and techniques. You can then expand on these notes in your close analysis.

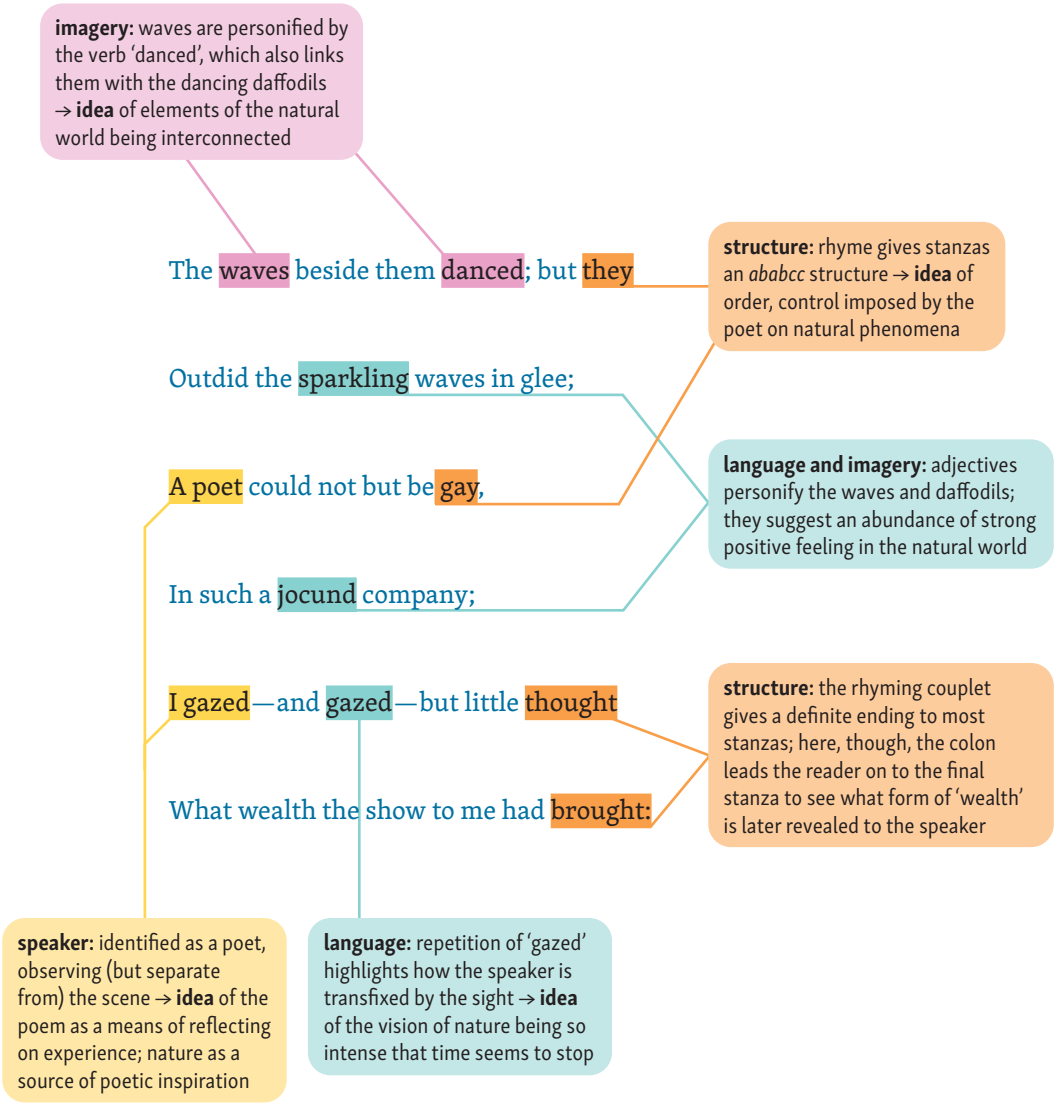
Use a highlighter or coloured pen to mark up the poem, selecting different colours for different features of the writing:

- aspects of language (e.g. tone, style, word choices, alliteration, assonance)
- imagery (e.g. similes, metaphors, symbols)
- form and structure (e.g. the poetic form being used, line and stanza lengths, rhyme, rhythm, caesura, enjambment)
- the speaker or persona.

On the next page is the third stanza from 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', annotated using the following code:

- language
- imagery
- form and structure
- speaker/persona.

In the annotations, an arrow → shows how you can move from an element of the poem to a key idea that the poet is exploring – a very important part of your analysis.



Step 2: Order the annotations

Once you have annotated the poem, look for ways to organise and order your observations and comments. Aim to link specific features to the poem's broader concerns – the values and viewpoints it presents and examines. The table below gives three examples of this.

Ways to order comments	Example using the passage
start with **language use** ⇓ show how language is the key to understanding images and ideas ⇓ views and values	Adjectives 'sparkling', 'sprightly', 'gay' contrast with 'vacant', 'pensive'. ⇓ Language conveys the idea that nature is capable of feeling and expressing joy, and that a poet can perceive this joy and be uplifted by it. ⇓ The value of capturing in poetic form the insights provided by experience of the natural world.
start with a central **image** ⇓ show how the image encapsulates one or more ideas ⇓ ideas explored through form, structure, language and speaker's viewpoint ⇓ views and values	The image of dancing daffodils. ⇓ The idea of nature as animated, active, joyous. ⇓ Daffodils are linked to stars (stanza 2) and waves (stanza 3), suggesting nature's unity and interconnectedness; focus shifts to poet/speaker in stanza 3 to explore human dimensions. ⇓ A poet's imagination is capable of perceiving and capturing the beauty of nature.
start with the **speaker** ⇓ show how the speaker establishes a viewpoint and the poem's tone and style ⇓ ideas introduced and developed ⇓ views and values	The speaker describes both the outward experience of walking in a field and the inward experience of remembering. ⇓ The frequent use of the first-person 'I' draws attention to the speaker's state of wonder and happiness on seeing the daffodils. ⇓ The speaker's solitude is crucial to his awareness of nature as animated and joyful, and to his later reflections on the scene; develops idea of the poet as private, sensitive, reflective. ⇓ The private state of reflection heightens both perception of the natural world and the experience of the 'inward eye'.

Each of these starting points could also be developed differently by:

- focusing on other aspects of language, imagery and the speaker's viewpoint
- making alternative connections between language, imagery, structure, the speaker's viewpoint and the ideas, views and values explored
- interpreting these features and expressing the ideas in different ways.

Aim to express *your* interpretation by making logical connections between features of the poem and clearly basing each of your points on textual evidence.

Stage 3: Write the analysis

The sample close analysis below follows the second of the three approaches outlined on the previous page: beginning with a central image, moving on to a key idea, then discussing how that idea is explored through form, structure, language use and the speaker's viewpoint.

In William Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', the central image of 'A host, of golden daffodils ... Fluttering and dancing in the breeze' is so striking and memorable that it provides the poem with its popular alternative title, 'Daffodils'. These flowers are not simply alive, but almost human as they '[toss] their heads in sprightly dance'. They are glorious in themselves; but they also embody the overflowing exuberance of the entire natural world, from the 'sparkling waves' to the stars that 'twinkle on the milky way'. Within this joyful cosmos is the speaker, who experiences the feelings of joy he attributes to the natural world, and yet also stands apart from it, looking on with a sense of wonder.

The idea most obviously conveyed by Wordsworth's daffodils is that the natural world is abundant, harmonious and full of joyous feeling. The metaphor of the dance personifies and links the daffodils and the waves; the daffodils are linked with the stars through the simile 'continuous as the stars that shine', while the stars in turn are linked with the waves through the image of flickering light: the stars 'twinkle' and

Introduction states the importance of the **image** of daffodils. Brief quotations are incorporated to support the discussion.

Connects daffodils to other **imagery** in the poem and considers their wider significance.

Introduces the speaker as an important element, signalling that the speaker's role will be considered in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Moves on to a key **idea** and explains how **imagery** works to convey this idea.

Discussion of **metaphor** and **simile** explains how the poet uses these techniques and offers examples.

Considers how the poem's **structure** creates a cumulative effect.

the waves are 'sparkling'. Each stanza adds another element to the accumulation of natural imagery – stars in the second stanza, waves in the third – and builds the sense of exuberance and celebration. The image is made even more vivid through the sense of shared emotion; not only are the daffodils vast in number, but they behave identically, in harmony with one another and with the 'waves beside them'. In the poet's view, elements of the natural world are interrelated parts of a unified whole: joyful, spontaneous and unanimous.

Introduces another key **idea** – harmony and shared feeling in nature.

Moves from the central **imagery** to the **speaker's viewpoint**.

This central image is counterbalanced by the speaker's own presence in the scene; it is through the speaker's response that the implications of nature for human thought and feeling are explored. The poem's opening image establishes the speaker's sense of separation and distance: 'lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills'. Although loneliness usually has negative connotations, here it is compared to a floating cloud, which has associations of peacefulness and contentment, suggesting that the speaker is most at ease during solitary encounters with the natural world. Yet the idea of being 'on high' signals that the speaker is simultaneously both within the landscape and detached from it, a tension that continues to underpin the speaker's account. He 'gazed—and gazed', implying a stillness that contrasts starkly with the incessant motion of the daffodils and waves. He, too, feels the joy which he reads into the landscape, but he expresses this in a way that suggests that, as a poet, his natural sentiments are rather different: 'A poet could not but be gay'. In other words, without the vision of the daffodils he would not be joyful but in some darker emotional state. Although the poet/speaker gains pleasure from being in the natural landscape, he is not an organic part of it, and his sense of difference and separation are, paradoxically, inseparable from his joy.

Considers how **imagery** constructs viewpoint and mood for the **speaker** – similar to creating a character in fiction.

Develops the **idea** of difference and separation between the speaker and the natural world through a close focus on **language** and **imagery**.

Finally, the speaker indicates that what is most valuable about the field of daffodils is not actually being there to see them, but being able to see them with his 'inward eye' when he is at home. In the third and fourth stanzas, the poem's focus shifts from outwards to inwards, from the wonders of the natural

Links structure to the poem's exploration of how the **poet/speaker** is affected by his experience.

world to the poet's capacity to experience wonder. The daffodils' physical 'dance' is transformed with time into an inner 'dance' of the poet's heart which is prompted not by a walk by the lake, but a quiet reverie on the couch. At the end of the poem, as at the beginning, the speaker is alone again, experiencing the 'bliss of solitude'. Whereas the daffodils, waves and stars lack individuality, the speaker is so individual – even unique – that he is utterly alone, content to walk, gaze, reflect and, by implication, write poetry, without interacting with another human being. The true 'wealth' of his experience is only apparent to him in moments of reflection, when the weight of his 'pensive mood' can be lifted by his mental image of the daffodils; his dance 'with the daffodils' is not a physical one in an open field under the sun, shared with multitudinous others, but an imaginative one while lying on a couch, entirely alone.

Draws together **images** analysed earlier to give the discussion coherence.

Links **imagery** and **structure**; explains the significance of the imagery in the final stanza, contrasting it with the natural imagery of the first three stanzas.

What is, on a first reading, a poem about the glories of nature and nature's capacity to uplift the spirits of an onlooker can also be read as a meditation on the poetic sensibility. The natural world is full of wonders, but humanity is not part of it, and the poet is solitary, able to gaze on nature and then give it meaning through reflection and recollection. The image of the daffodils is striking and memorable, but the figure of the speaker, who transforms fleeting experience into poetic permanency, is equally significant. What remains enigmatic is what is missing from the poem: human society, and the question of how human beings should interact. Should we be like the daffodils and the waves, in constant harmony and seeking only to outdo one another with our glee? Or should we be more like the poet, drifting like a cloud above worldly cares, seeking only joyful scenes to be recalled in quiet solitude? On this question, Wordsworth remains silent, leaving each reader to find their own meaning both in the beauty of nature, and in the solitude of their private thoughts and memories.

Conclusion sums up the discussion and considers the broader view being presented and explored by the poet.

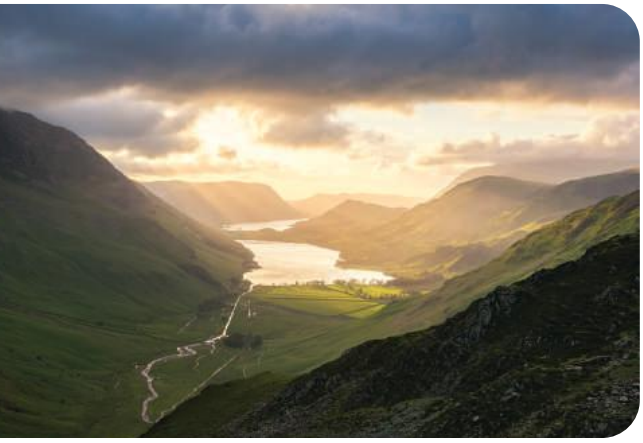
Restates the importance of the central **image**, but asserts that the figure of the **speaker** is of equal importance – a logical conclusion of the discussion.

Ends by considering what is omitted from the poem – this can be a useful strategy in discussing the broader ideas and views of a text, and the overall meaning that a reader might draw from it.

Checklist for close analysis of poetry

A close analysis of a poem, or of an excerpt from a longer poem, should include the following elements.

- ☑ Detailed references to the poem.
- ☑ Some short direct quotations, integrated smoothly into your sentences.
- ☑ Discussion of how the poet uses language and features such as rhythm, rhyme, structure, persona and imagery, to convey meaning and emotion.
- ☑ Discussion of how the poet uses a particular poetic form, and how they adhere to, or subvert, the conventions of that form.
- ☑ Analytical comments about the ideas, views and values being explored in the poem.
- ☑ Some references to the poet's wider body of work and the significance of this poem within the poet's oeuvre.
- ☑ A well-ordered and logically developed argument about and interpretation of the poem.
- ☑ Fluent and precise expression, including effective use of the terminology (metalanguage) for describing poetic features and conventions, and a sophisticated vocabulary.



The dramatic landscapes of the Lake District provided inspiration for Wordsworth and several other Romantic poets.

CHAPTER 7

NONFICTION

There are many kinds of nonfiction; in this chapter the focus is on nonfiction texts that fall, at least to some extent, within the literary tradition. Nonfiction narratives are linked by the convention that they tell a story or stories about real people and actual events. However, in literary nonfiction the nature of truth often comes under scrutiny, and the writer's attempted objectivity will always include a subjective element. In nonfiction narratives, as in other narrative genres, the writer determines what to include, the order in which to relate events and the ways in which individuals, beliefs and events will be portrayed through particular word choices and imagery. Even biographies, which often aim to be detached and objective, are written from a certain perspective, which is evident in the choice of information included or, just as significantly, omitted. The more creative forms of nonfiction can draw on elements of fiction, such as characterisation and narrative structure, to fashion a compelling narrative in which there is a significant element of subjectivity and even invention.

This chapter looks at several nonfiction genres that share much with imaginative forms of literature: the portrayal of complex, engaging individuals; incidents and circumstances that are unusual and intriguing; and language that is multilayered, nuanced and evocative.

Memoir and autobiography

Autobiography is the story of the author's own life. It is usually very subjective and presents the writer's views and opinions on a range of issues, in addition to factual material.

Memoir is an account of part of the writer's life, often foregrounding the social and cultural contexts of that period.

In autobiographies and memoirs – that is, firsthand or 'eyewitness' accounts – the author's recounting of the facts is influenced by their particular point of view, as well as by the fallibility of memory. The author's purpose in writing about their life might be to give testimony, find answers, share a traumatic experience or reveal a hidden story, and this purpose can also affect how they recall or shape the account.

As the author is telling their own story, they have a great deal of creative control over the way in which it is told. They might, conventionally, begin with the earliest event and work their way through chronologically to the most recent; or they could use flashbacks and flashforwards to shift between present and past, describing events 'out of order'. They might use a plain style and a contemplative tone, or more figurative, poetic language; they could choose to use humour, irony and a more colloquial style to entertain as well as inform their readers.

One of the best-known memoirs in Australian literature is **Clive James' *Unreliable Memoirs*** (1980), which gives an account of James' childhood in Sydney from his birth in 1939 until his departure for England at the end of 1961. James was a teenager during the 1950s, a period of growing self-confidence for the Australian nation, and his memoir captures the society and culture of a time and place, as well as his growth to early adulthood, in a way that is realistic, humorous and poignant.

> Other children, most of them admittedly older than I, but some of them infuriatingly not, constructed billycarts of advanced design, with skeletal hard-wood frames and steel-jacketed ball-race wheels that screamed on the concrete footpaths like a diving Stuka [a German plane used in WWII]. The best I could manage was a sawn-off fruit box mounted on a fence-paling spine frame, with drearily silent rubber wheels taken off an old pram.

Towards the end, though, James becomes increasingly nostalgic as he reflects on the impossibility of capturing past experience as well as the material and cultural reality of an earlier time:

> The longer I have stayed in England, the more numerous and powerful my memories of Sydney have grown. There is nothing like staying away for bringing it with you. I have done my best to tell the truth about what it was like, yet I am well aware that in the matter of my own feelings I have not come near meeting my aim ... Nothing I have said is factual except the bits that sound like fiction.

On the surface, **Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*** (2005) could hardly be more different. US writer Didion describes the course of a single year, 2004, following the death of her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, on 30 December 2003. At that time their daughter Quintana was in intensive care, and she remained seriously ill for several weeks; in March 2004 she suffered a brain injury that required surgery and extensive rehabilitation. Yet despite the traumatic nature of the book's content – and Didion makes clear the extent of her loss and grief – her memoir is engaging, thought-provoking, life-affirming and often witty. She reflects on the years of her marriage and her close working relationship with Dunne, as well as the challenging year following his death, moving easily between present and past, humour and melancholy.

> When I was clearing out a file drawer recently I came across a thick file labeled 'Planning.' The very fact that we made files labeled 'Planning' suggests how little of it we did. We also had 'planning meetings,' which consisted of sitting down with legal pads, stating the day's problem out loud, and then, with no further attempt to solve it, going out to lunch. Such lunches were festive, as if to celebrate a job well done.

Didion combines specific details of John's death and Quintana's illness with reflection and introspection, fusing the personal and the philosophical.

In Australian literature, an important form of autobiography has been Indigenous life writing. With official versions of history so often marginalising the experiences of Indigenous people, the publication of memoirs such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) and Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) brought Aboriginal experiences to a mainstream non-Indigenous audience, raising awareness and contributing to a wider recognition of Indigenous rights.

Diaries and journals

Many people keep diaries and journals, though seldom with the intention to publish them. Nevertheless, when the writer or their experiences (or both) are of broader public interest, a diary can provide valuable insights into its writer's life and times, as well as having literary value. Samuel Pepys' *Diary* begins on 1 January 1660, and much of its interest lies in its account of the Great Plague of London (1665–66) and the Great Fire of London (September 1666). Pepys' lively descriptions also provide a firsthand account of London's social life at this time. Likewise, English playwright and novelist Frances 'Fanny' Burney's journals and letters, written between 1768 and her death in 1840 but not published until the late 1800s, show her flair for observation and description while conveying details of the household and society in which she lived.

When the historical and cultural context in which a diary is written is of special interest, the intensely personal, often confessional mode of a diary becomes even more affecting. The diary of Anne Frank, a Dutch Jewish girl whose family went into hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in the 1940s, was only published after World War II ended, when Anne's father, Otto, was the family's sole surviving member. Published in English in 1952 as *The Diary of a Young Girl*, the diary's personal and intimate style conveys the author's growing maturity and insight as well as the tragedy of her circumstances. Translated into more than seventy languages, the diary has reached a massive global readership and become one of the most moving testimonies of the war.

The diaries and journals of respected authors can offer insight into the creative process, as well as having value as literature in their own right. Virginia Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* (1953) comprises extracts from her journals that focus on her novel-writing: in his review for the *New Yorker* magazine, poet WH Auden declared he had 'never read any book that conveyed more truthfully what a writer's life is like, what are its worries, its rewards, its day-by-day routine'.

War memoirs

An important subgenre of memoir comprises recollections of wartime experiences. Many writers have enlisted as soldiers and felt that giving an account of their experiences was an important form of testimony, particularly when official accounts of conflict tended to be more celebratory or to glorify

war. The horrific circumstances of trench warfare in World War I (1914–18) were not widely known by the public at that time, and in the years following the war a number of now-acclaimed memoirs were published. There were also novels based strongly on their authors' wartime experiences, such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and, from the German perspective, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, both published in 1929.

Robert Graves joined the British army at the start of World War I and was seriously wounded in 1916 in the Battle of the Somme. His memoir ***Goodbye to All That*** (1929) includes an unflinching account of trench warfare and its huge cost to human life:

> We had no blankets, greatcoats, or waterproof sheets, nor any time or material to build new shelters. The rain poured down. Every night we went out to fetch in the dead of the other battalions. The Germans continued indulgent and we had few casualties. After the first day or two the corpses swelled and stank. I vomited more than once while superintending the carrying.

The war had initially seemed largely unthreatening – 'over by Christmas at the outside' – but even after it became bogged down in trench warfare, and thousands of lives could be lost in a single day of fighting, Graves notes the public's ignorance and continued patriotic enthusiasm:

> England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere, looking for a pseudo-military outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language.

Graves, like his fellow soldiers Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, wrote war poetry that confronted readers of the time with the horrors of the war, but the physical details and matter-of-fact style of this memoir make it an essential account of the soldiers' experiences, stripped of ideology and glamour.

Similarly, after World War II the realities of the Holocaust become known to the wider world through memoirs such as *If This Is a Man* (published in Italian in 1947) by Italian Jewish writer and chemist Primo Levi, and *Night* (published in French in 1955) by Romanian writer Elie Wiesel, who was deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp with his family when he was fifteen.

Biography

A **biography** is the story of a person's life, usually from childhood until at least middle age, written by the **biographer**.

Most biographies are written in a formal style and with a high degree of objectivity and balance. In order to present a fair and accurate portrayal of the subject, a biographer will carry out a great deal of research, reading published documents and personal correspondence as well as conducting interviews. The biographer's sources are important, and a comprehensive biography will include details of where specific information was found.

A biography will describe the subject's date and place of birth, family background, early life, education, professional life, personal relationships, major achievements and contributions to society. It will include important social and historical events and give a sense of the subject's place in history or in a particular field. Although in telling the story of its subject's life a biography usually moves chronologically, from birth until late adulthood, it can also have nonlinear elements. A biographer might, for instance, move forwards in time to explain how a childhood event had an effect later in life. They might choose to begin the narrative with an incident in the subject's adult life, before moving back to their birth or their parents' meeting.

Patrick White: A Life, David Marr's 1991 biography of Australian novelist and playwright Patrick White, begins conventionally, with the marriage of White's parents, and ends with White's death. Yet Marr often moves forwards and backwards in time, sometimes giving historical context and sometimes showing the impact of an event or decision on White's later life.

> In London it was [White's mother] Ruth who chose the curious name Patrick for their son … in Australia at this time Patricks were Irish servants, Labor politicians and Catholic priests … It was bound to cause some confusion and in later years White was sometimes put with Yeats, Shaw and O'Neill on the list of Irish writers who had won the Nobel Prize, but this Patrick had not a drop of Irish blood.

At many points, Marr notes where a person or incident from White's life was used, perhaps decades later, in one of White's works; quotes from the novels are incorporated within the life story. In this way, Marr connects the life and the work, showing how White drew on and reworked his life experiences to create his novels and plays.

Essays

An **essay** is a work of prose that presents a point of view on a particular topic. It can vary in length from a few hundred words to several thousand.

Although the academic essay is generally regarded as a dry, impersonal, formal and often formulaic piece of writing, the essay form is much more flexible and versatile than this. The term 'essay' was first used to describe this type of writing by Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), a French nobleman who retired at the age of thirty-seven to devote himself to reading, reflection and writing. The French word *essai* means an attempt or a trial, and Montaigne's essays exemplify a spirit of inquiry – self-inquiry, as well as reflections on wider questions of ethics and the human condition.

In a note 'To the Reader' prefacing the *Essays* (first published in French in 1580), Montaigne declares that 'I myself am the subject of my book', but in fact his subjects range widely and he draws on a variety of sources. He frequently quotes from classical Roman poets such as Ovid, Petrarch, Virgil and Cicero, refers to ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, and relates anecdotes from his own and others' experiences.

In **'On the Cannibals'**, Montaigne reflects on notions of what is considered savage or barbaric, suggesting that such judgements often simply reflect a person's sense of what is familiar and 'normal', rather than anything inherently 'bad' or 'wrong' about the people or cultures being labelled in this way. He begins by referring to an account of (Greek) King Pyrrhus encountering the Roman army and declaring, 'I do not know what kind of Barbarians these are' – the Romans were not generally considered 'barbarians', so the term is immediately thrown into question. Montaigne next describes one of his employees ('a simple, rough fellow ... a good witness') who 'stayed some ten or twelve years' in Brazil and observed the culture of the indigenous people who, at times, ate the flesh of their war victims. This introduces the essay's main subject – the cannibals of the title – but Montaigne then digresses to reflect on other, seemingly unrelated questions. Montaigne's musings are often presented as random chains of thought, but they always have a point and a place within an unfolding argument. In other words, he might say the equivalent of 'but I digress ...', but this is simply a signal to the reader that they should see the various parts of his argument as contributing to the whole.

> Now to get back to the subject, I find (from what has been told to me) that there is nothing savage or barbarous about those peoples, but that every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to; it is indeed the case that we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of the opinions and customs of our own country.

Although the culture of the indigenous Brazilian people is at the heart of the essay, Montaigne also considers such varied topics as the extent of unknown lands yet to be discovered by Europeans, and the nature of true bravery and victory in battle. Yet all these discussions work together to suggest that our knowledge is never as certain as it may seem; there is always a contrasting perspective, another way to consider things. Above all, Montaigne condemns hypocrisy – the failure to apply the same standards of judgement to ourselves as we apply to others:

> It does not sadden me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs: what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrong-doings we should be so blind to our own.

This blend of the personal and the analytical, the anecdotal and the scholarly, the whimsical and the serious, is typical of Montaigne's approach to the essay.

Since Montaigne, there have been many renowned essayists, and they have deployed structure, style and tone in various ways to achieve their purpose. More recently, published collections of essays for the general reader often have a strong first-person voice; and, when essays investigate a topical issue, they can overlap or merge with journalism.

American writer **Joan Didion** began her career when she won an essay-writing competition run by *Vogue* magazine, and her first nonfiction book, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), was a collection of essays that had been published in magazines such as *Vogue* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Didion is often associated with the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s (see page 190), and her work fuses literary techniques with reportage and investigation. While in some essays the subject is largely Didion herself, in others she takes the role of a reporter who observes and records, while also making her own status as an interested observer part of the story. In 'California Dreaming' (included in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*) she writes about the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, a Californian think tank:

> I have long been interested in the Center's rhetoric, which has about it the kind of ectoplasmic generality that always makes me sense I am on the track of the real soufflé, the genuine American *kitsch*, and not so long ago I arranged to attend a few sessions in Santa Barbara. It was in no sense time wasted.

As this quotation shows, Didion's style features long, complex sentences (balanced judiciously by short ones for added impact); metaphorical language; and a certain ironic, sometimes sceptical, tone. It is sincere, yet with a playful, amused note under the surface that keeps the reader engaged and entertained at the same time as they are being enticed into forming a more thoughtful view of the world.

Extended essays

Many writers have used the general approach of an essay but extended it into a book-length piece of writing. This can be effective when the writer seeks to develop a complex argument about a major social or ideological concern.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is an extended essay developed from lectures she gave at the women's colleges of Newnham and Girton at the University of Cambridge in 1928. Woolf argues that the literary tradition has been dominated by men for hundreds of years due to the oppression of women within patriarchal societies, a situation that can only be redressed if women are able to have more time and space in which to write. She also surveys the work of female writers, such as Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot (the pen name of Mary Ann Evans), creating the sense that there is a strong female tradition of writing already in existence.

Although *A Room of One's Own* presents an argument and is essentially factual, Woolf incorporates fictional elements and literary qualities. She invents an 'extraordinarily gifted sister' for William Shakespeare and uses a style rich with imagery and complex sentences, even when describing a simple scene of 'sitting on the banks of a river':

> To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with the heat, of fire. On the further bank the willows wept in perpetual lamentation, their hair about their shoulders. The river reflected whatever it chose of sky and bridge and burning tree ...

A Room of One's Own thus takes its place within the literary tradition – exploratory and inventive in its language as well as its ideas.

Creative nonfiction

Creative nonfiction is a broad category of texts that describe real people, events and experiences, but use literary devices such as figurative language, detailed description, techniques of characterisation, a strong narrative voice that is integral to the story, and a narrative structure that creates a reading experience similar to that of reading a novel.

In fact, all the nonfiction genres discussed in this chapter can be considered types of creative nonfiction, depending on the writer's approach and use of language. However, some book-length nonfiction genres don't quite match the usual conventions for autobiography, memoir and biography, and can be very creative in their use of narrative voice and structure.

Travel writing, for example, is a form of memoir in which the focus is as much on the places being lived in and/or travelled through as on the writer's personal experiences. *In Patagonia* (1977), by English novelist and journalist Bruce Chatwin, and *Tracks* (1980), by Australian writer Robyn Davidson, are two examples of travel writing that include historical background, cultural context and detailed descriptions of landscapes in addition to the author's experiences.

Journalistic nonfiction (or literary journalism) draws on journalistic techniques including conducting interviews, carrying out archival research, attending events such as criminal trials and visiting key locations. While the accurate reporting of facts is essential, the genre also allows for an element of subjectivity through the writer placing themselves in the story and expressing their own responses and opinions. Other elements characteristic of literary fiction that can be incorporated in literary journalism are dialogue (much of which might, necessarily, be invented), detailed and evocative descriptions, narrative tension, symbolism and irony. The writer might also, perhaps for legal reasons, disguise the identity of some individuals by altering names, combining a few individuals who play minor roles in the story into one character or even basing several characters on one individual.

An important movement that shaped and developed this genre was **New Journalism**, which emerged in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s: writers such as Truman Capote, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe published both fiction and nonfiction, and in various ways blurred the distinctions between the two.

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), an account of the 1959 murders in Holcomb, Kansas, of four members of the Clutter family and the two men who committed them, is an early and defining text in the New Journalism movement. Capote spent many hours researching the story, interviewing residents, investigators and the two murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. Unlike many works in this genre, Capote's 'nonfiction novel' (a term he used for it) avoids using the first person and presents information in a seemingly objective manner through a third-person narrative voice. Yet Capote shapes and manipulates the reader's reactions in numerous ways. He interweaves the stories of the victims and investigators with those of Smith and Hickock, moving between different times and locations to build tension even when the eventual outcome – the arrest, trial and execution of the murderers – is known. And there are many subjective elements, including Capote's representation of the thoughts and feelings of individuals at times when he had no access to them, and the depiction of individuals in ways that subtly invite, or discourage, the reader's sympathy.

This is particularly true of Capote's portrayal of Smith and Hickock. Conversations, thoughts and feelings are related with a degree of detail that owes as much to the novelist's imagination as to the interviews Capote conducted. Here, he relates an exchange between Smith and Hickock, on the run and anxious about their identities being discovered.

> Perry had gone too far. He went further: 'Floyd – is that the name?' A bit below the belt, but then Dick deserved it, his confidence was like a kite that needed reeling in. Nevertheless, Perry observed with some misgiving the symptoms of fury rearranging Dick's expression: jaw, lips, the whole face slackened; saliva bubbles appeared at the corners of his mouth. Well, if it came to a fight, Perry could defend himself.

Indeed, there have been accusations that Capote invented scenes, distorting reality in order to achieve effects more like those of fiction: suspense, pity, empathy, anticipation, denouement and resolution.

In Cold Blood also belongs to the **true crime** genre. Capote's interest in gaining a psychological understanding of criminals, victims and investigators, and his detailed, evocative descriptions of times and places, are common to many subsequent texts in this genre, including Australian authors Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man* (2008) and Helen Garner's *This House of Grief* (2014), both of which present unflinching accounts of horrific crimes in complex, nuanced ways.

Unlike Capote, though, both Hooper and Garner place themselves in the narrative, making their own observations and responses part of the wider story. In this way, the inevitable subjective elements of such a narrative, and the impossibility of capturing every detail or showing every perspective, become integral to the text, rather than being glossed over or hidden. As Garner reflects in her essay 'The Fate of *The First Stone*', there will always be gaps in a writer's attempt to tell a true story, but these are not, by themselves, reasons for rejecting the story.

> These are the stories that need to be *told*, not swept away like so much debris, or hidden from sight. My attempt to understand this story was frustrated. My version of it is full of holes. But I hope that these holes might, after all, have a use; that through them might pass air and light ...

Helen Garner is one of Australia's most acclaimed writers. Her nonfiction collection *Everywhere I Look* was published in 2016.

CHAPTER 8

FILM

A film tells a story through moving images on a screen accompanied by a soundtrack. Like other forms of narrative, films use plots, settings and characters, as well as images and symbols that give their stories wider relevance and significance. It is not surprising, then, that many novels, short stories and plays have been adapted to film.

However, the differences between film and traditionally print-based forms of literature are in many ways more important than their similarities. Literature depends on language, above all, to construct and convey meaning; film relies on the moving image.

This chapter provides an overview of film language and techniques. For detailed and fully illustrated explanations of how to analyse film, see Insight's *Film Analysis Handbook* (2nd edn, 2017) by Thomas Caldwell.

Mise en scène

Mise en scène is a French term meaning 'putting on stage'; it refers to all the visual elements within the frame. The four elements of mise en scène are **setting**, **lighting**, **costumes** and **acting style**.

These elements are present within the frame of the film. If they work together effectively we usually do not notice individual elements, but filmmakers choose them carefully and specifically to enhance the meaning of the film.

Setting

The setting is the physical location of a scene, and most feature films have a number of settings.

The setting can establish the country or region where the action takes place, and put characters into a national context. It might be depicted in an extremely realistic way, giving the audience the sense of 'being there'. In fantasy and science-fiction genres, the setting might be partly created by computer-generated imagery (CGI) in order to represent imaginary worlds, machines and creatures.

Settings often provide information about the characters' cultural context and economic circumstances. For instance, a large, luxuriously furnished house indicates affluence and success, although whether this success is achieved through legitimate or illegitimate means can only be revealed by the plot. Outdoor settings show physical environments, which can influence the course of the characters' lives. Natural environments might, for instance, be harsh and forbidding, or lush and inviting. Built environments, such as towns and cities, also help to convey the cultural context.

Settings are crucial to genre, helping (along with the other elements of mise en scène) to establish whether the film is, for instance, historical drama, science fiction, film noir or romantic comedy. They are also, in conjunction with elements such as lighting and sound, used to create the mood of a film.

Changes of setting are always significant: they can signal upheavals, new beginnings and stages on a journey or quest.

Lighting

Lighting is a complex element that can be manipulated to create a mood and draw attention to specific elements within each scene. It can vary in colour, intensity, texture, source and direction.

A shot could be evenly lit, or have some areas that are lit and others in shadow. Lighting can be used to frame certain characters and objects, drawing the audience's attention to things that are well lit. Shadows can suggest a lurking threat, or enable a character to remain unnoticed.

The degree of clarity of the light helps to create a mood: hazy or murky light might be used to suggest mystery or danger (often in combination with the soundtrack), while bright, clear light could help to convey the characters' feelings of happiness and hope.

Costumes

Costumes include the clothes worn by the characters, as well as make-up, hairstyles and personal props such as jewellery. They are essential elements of characterisation and provide information about social, cultural and historical contexts.

The colour of a character's clothes can have cultural or symbolic meaning – black can signify mourning, for example, or a villain. A protagonist's clothes might contrast with those of other characters, helping them to stand out in a crowd scene, or reflecting their status as outsiders. Personal props can work on a symbolic and thematic level, too: the ring in the *Lord of the Rings* films represents great destructive power, for instance.

A shift in a character's outlook and circumstances will often be reflected in a costume change, including a new hairstyle and make-up.

Acting style

Acting style includes facial expressions, body language, movements, posture and voice. The director guides the actors in their performance to help define each personality and to tell the story, while the actors bring their own interpretation to the characters they play.

The acting style also conveys information about relationships: the ways in which the characters look at each other, their body language and their closeness to or distance from one another all reflect the nature of their relationships, and feelings such as love or anger.

Anna Paquin and Holly Hunter in *The Piano* (1993), written and directed by Jane Campion.

In the early shots of *The Piano* (see above) the **mise en scène** establishes a number of tensions and contrasts that run through the film. In this scene, Ada (Holly Hunter) and her daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), have been left on a New Zealand beach, where they wait to be collected by Ada's new husband, Alisdair (Sam Neill). The mise en scène captures the abrupt transition that has just occurred in Ada's life, from a settled existence in Scotland to the New Zealand frontier, and evokes feelings that are both tender and defiant.

The remote natural **setting** contrasts with the furniture typical of a 19th-century middle-class house; the **light** and space of the beach and sky contrast with the dark tones and shadows of the furniture and trunks. The **costumes** merge with the packing cases, showing these characters' strong connection with the place they have come from, and suggesting their lives have been spent largely inside, rather than outdoors.

The physical closeness between Ada and Flora indicates the closeness of their relationship, yet their **acting style** reveals a difference between them. Flora sleeps contentedly, while Ada, holding tightly onto her umbrella, looks sideways with an expression of discontent, as if unwilling to accept the reality of where she has landed.

Cinematography

Cinematography involves all aspects of the use of the camera to film the action. The **cinematographer** is the person who, under instruction from the director, sets up all the shots in the film, using various camera distances, angles and movements to tell the story.

The following are the main elements of cinematography.

Focus

When a visual element is in focus it appears clear, with well-defined edges. In an image with **shallow focus**, only the objects a certain distance from the camera are in focus. In contrast, in an image with **deep focus** all or most elements are in focus, regardless of how near to or far from the camera they are.

The eye is drawn towards what is in focus, so the use of shallow focus draws the audience's attention to particular elements, such as a character or an object. A shot with deep focus places more importance on the setting. In the still below from *Charlie's Country*, the use of deep focus ensures the bush around Charlie is in focus, emphasising the connection between him and the natural environment.

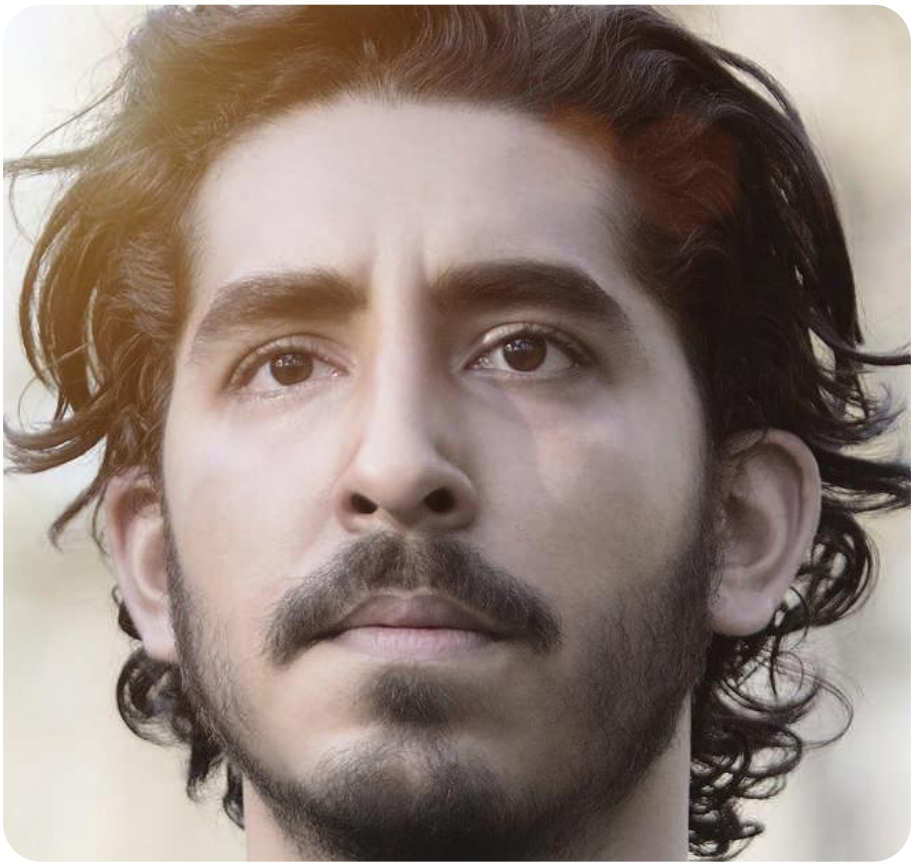
David Gulpilil in *Charlie's Country* (2013), directed and co-written by Rolf de Heer.

Camera distance

The camera distance is the apparent distance between the camera and the subject. By using different camera distances, filmmakers can represent both the smallest details of the characters' expressions and interactions (close-up shots), and their wider settings and contexts (medium shots and long shots).

Close-up

A close-up shot shows the subject matter – a face or an important object – in detail. There will be very little or no background detail in this shot: the subject fills nearly all of the frame. The shot draws viewers in, leading them to pay close attention to the subject. An actor's facial expression is of critical importance in a close-up, conveying feelings and attitudes even when these are not communicated by words.



Dev Patel as Saroo in *Lion* (2016), directed by Garth Davis.

Medium close-up

Medium close-ups are more commonly used than close-ups. In a medium close-up there is a comfortable distance between the camera and the subject, and while the subject dominates the frame, more background detail is visible than in a close-up. In addition to showing an actor's face, a medium close-up can include their shoulders and some elements of the setting. This can provide more context for the subject, especially if an actor's facial expression conveys a strong emotion or attitude.

In the close-up shot, below, from *Birdman*, actor Emma Stone's face conveys uncertainty and concern, but also a degree of calmness; she looks away from the glare of the stage lights in the background, suggesting a distance between her character and the world of the theatre.

Emma Stone as Sam in *Birdman* (2014), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

Medium shot

A medium shot (also known as a mid shot) shows a person from the waist up, with some of the background visible. It gives some information about the setting, but the focus is clearly on the subject, especially if only the subject appears in focus.

A medium shot can also show two people close together and convey some details of the relationship between them. This is called a two shot. The following medium shot from *The Hours* shows Virginia and Leonard Woolf sitting on a train platform, slightly apart yet looking directly at each other, suggesting a turning point in their relationship.

Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf and Stephen Dillane as Leonard Woolf in *The Hours* (2002), directed by Stephen Daldry and based on Michael Cunningham's 1998 novel.

Medium long shot

A medium long shot has a balance between the subject or subjects and the background or setting. It can show more of the characters' contexts and the nature of the interactions between them than close-ups and medium shots.

The medium long shot (opposite, top) from *The Hours* captures a moment in the life of a conventional family in 1950s America. The distance of the subjects from the camera allows for elements of the setting to be shown, as well as contrasts between areas that are well lit and areas in shadow. The gap between husband and wife hints at the separation to come, despite the appearance of contentment and happiness.

John C Reilly, Julianne Moore and Jack Rovello in *The Hours*.

Long shot

A long shot shows much of the setting, with the main focus of the shot at a distance from the camera. It establishes a connection between the characters and the setting, and can suggest the way in which the setting shapes or perhaps limits the characters' lives. It can also create an impression of isolation or vulnerability.

This long shot, below, from *Lion* shows Saroo as a boy, alone in a featureless landscape. The train tracks extend into the distance, reflecting Saroo's remoteness from his home and family.

Sunny Pawar as Young Saroo in *Lion* (2016), directed by Garth Davis.

Camera angle

The camera can point up, down or straight on at the subject of the image, creating a range of effects.

In a **high angle shot**, the camera is placed above an object and tilted down. This can suggest that the individual in the frame is vulnerable, and that a character who is looking down at the subject is in a position of strength.

In the high angle shot from *Blade Runner* below, Rick Deckard (played by Harrison Ford) is hanging on by his fingertips in his climactic fight scene with the replicant Roy Batty. Deckard's vulnerability and mortality are shown by his fragile grip, and the building's height and sheer vertical surfaces are also emphasised by the angle of the shot.

Harrison Ford as Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott.

In a **low angle shot**, the camera is placed below an object and tilted up. This puts the audience in the position of looking up at characters and objects, which can appear powerful or threatening. However, in the shot from *Birdman*, opposite, the troubled protagonist, Riggan Thomson, is having a fantasy about flying through the streets of Manhattan – so the shot contributes to a surrealist, even uplifting, moment in this black comedy.

Michael Keaton as Riggan Thomson in a low-angle shot from *Birdman* (2014), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

Camera movement

There are three main kinds of camera movement. They can be used to generate a sense of movement and drama, as well as to show more of the setting as the characters move through it.

- **Panning** involves rotating the camera from side to side, as if it were following the ball in a tennis match.
- **Tilting** involves rotating the camera up and down, similar to a nodding action.
- **Tracking** involves moving the entire camera horizontally although, depending on the mechanism for supporting the camera, there can also be some vertical movement. Smooth tracking can be achieved using a dolly (a moving platform), while a handheld camera creates a much jerkier movement.

Director Paul Greengrass often uses handheld cameras, as in the films he has directed in the *Bourne* series. This technique helps to capture the characters' quick movements and sudden changes of direction in chase sequences, heightening the tension and the audience's sense of involvement as Jason flees from his attackers.

Matt Damon as Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), directed by Paul Greengrass.

Cinematography can create a wide range of effects, and convey detailed information about settings, characters and themes. The opening scene of *Blade Runner* crosscuts between **extreme long shots** and an **extreme close-up** to introduce the film's setting and genre, establish its tone and suggest its central ideas and concerns. After the opening credits and introductory text, the screen fades into an extreme long shot of a futuristic cityscape, complete with flying vehicles and giant smokestacks blasting fireballs into the atmosphere. Like many extreme long shots in cinema, its primary function is to act as an establishing shot, showing the audience where the film is set. However, the large distance between the camera and the city means that the audience cannot see any of the city's inhabitants, creating the impression that the industrialisation of this city has overwhelmed humanity – a key theme in the film. Yet, as the camera tracks over the buildings, cutting to shots that become closer and closer to the pyramid-like Tyrell Corporation building, the images also help to create a sense of awe and wonder.

These extreme long shots are intercut with an extreme close-up of a single eye in which the hellish metropolis is reflected. The question of who the eye belongs to is left unanswered, so the image of the eye functions symbolically to suggest key themes such as the nature of perception, memory and identity.

Editing

Editing is the process of determining the length and sequence of shots in a film. It also involves deciding which shots will be included and which will be excluded from the finished film.

Editing has a strong influence on the style and 'feel' of a film. The most common edit is a **cut**: one shot ends and the next shot begins immediately, often with the sound continuing without a break. Tension and excitement can be generated by brief shots and frequent cuts. A more reflective and slower-paced film would use longer shots. In a **crosscut**, a shot in one setting is followed by a shot in a different setting, showing action that is occurring at the same time. Alternatively, crosscutting can be used to move between events happening at different times.

Flashbacks and **flashforwards** are created by editing, to show events happening earlier or later than the narrative present. The film cuts to the earlier or future time then, after the sequence is shown, the film cuts back to the present. Editing choices such as this are integral to the narrative structure of a film, as they control the order in which events and information are communicated to the audience.

The **director's cut** is a version of the film that differs from the one initially commercially released. It is the result of a different set of editing decisions, which can subtly alter the meaning and impact of the film.

Arguably the most famous example of a film being **re-released to better reflect its director's original artistic intentions** is *Blade Runner*, which had a cinema release in 1982, was re-released by director Ridley Scott in 1992 as the *Director's Cut* and was then re-released again by Scott in 2007 as *The Final Cut*.

Major changes made in the 1992 *Director's Cut* included the removal of the narrative voice-over and, more significantly, two major edits – a dream sequence was placed back into the film, and the original hopeful ending was removed, resulting in a much more sombre and ambiguous conclusion.

These edits, especially the sequence in which Deckard dreams about a unicorn, significantly change the meaning of the film. Including this dream sequence means that the later scene in which Gaff leaves Deckard an origami unicorn now implies that Gaff knows about the images in Deckard's dream, and therefore that Deckard himself might be a replicant.

Sound

A film's soundtrack includes the characters' dialogue, the sound effects and the music. It combines with the visual elements to tell the story, evoke a mood and create a credible, believable world.

The absence of sound can also be a powerful element of a soundtrack, and moments of silence are always significant. For example, silence in a jungle or on a battlefield signals impending danger, while shadows moving in silence can create an eerie sense of foreboding.

Sound effects

Sound effects are all the sounds heard by the audience apart from dialogue and music. They include sounds made by the characters and typical noises of their environment, such as footsteps, traffic, machinery, other people who form part of a crowd or workplace scene, electronic media, birds and animals.

Some sound effects cannot be heard by the characters – for example, the sound of a cash register when a character thinks about money. These are less common and tend to have a humorous effect.

None of these sounds are present in a print text, and few are present in a performance of a play. The combination of realistic settings and sound effects enables filmmakers to create a more fully realised world than is possible in other forms of literary texts.

Music soundtrack

The music soundtrack is one of the most powerful elements in any film. Music contributes significantly to:

- the film's mood and atmosphere, by conveying feelings such as sadness, fear, triumph or joy
- the cultural, social and historical context depicted by the film
- the film's appeal to its target audience.

Music can also contribute to the film's narrative by building suspense or relieving tension. It can accompany a character in a way that suggests the character's role in the narrative: perhaps positive and uplifting, or negative and destructive. Gheorghe Zamfir's pan flute music for *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) is integral to the film's atmosphere of other-worldly mystery, perfectly complementing the impressionistic, dreamy look created by cinematographer Russell Boyd and director Peter Weir.

A scene from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), directed by Peter Weir and based on Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel.

Diegetic and non-diegetic sound

Diegetic sounds belong to the world of the film and include the dialogue, sounds produced by the characters and background noise belonging to their environment. **Non-diegetic sounds** are outside the world of the film; they cannot be heard by the characters.

The music soundtrack is usually non-diegetic: it is heard by the audience but not by the characters. However, the music in a film can be diegetic when the source of the music belongs to the characters' world.

> The opening titles of the 1997 science-fiction film *Gattaca*, directed by Andrew Niccol, begin against a blue background with strange objects falling to the floor – large white crescents, long black ropes and snow-like flakes. The sound of their impact on the floor is amplified so they make a **thunderous crashing noise**. As the titles progress it is revealed that what is being depicted is a man rigorously grooming himself, and the objects shown in extreme close-up are his fingernails, hair, skin flakes and facial hair from shaving. The amplified sound draws attention to the high importance of all bodily tissue in this world, where identity and the value of human life are strongly tied to, and defined by, an individual's DNA. The **low bass notes in the music score** contribute to a sense of menace, while the mournful theme played by the strings suggests the life of sorrow that the film's protagonist has been living.

Narrative structure

The narrative structure of a film can be analysed in a similar way to that of a novel or play. However, there is a dominant structure adopted by many Hollywood films, including films from the past as well as contemporary releases.

Classical Hollywood narrative structure

The **classical Hollywood narrative structure** includes a number of elements.

- The main character is known as the **protagonist**; their actions drive the narrative forwards.
- The protagonist is motivated by the desire to achieve a **goal**.
- One or more **obstacles** stand in the way of the protagonist achieving their goal; these obstacles create **conflict**.
- The protagonist must **change** in order to overcome the obstacles.
- In the film's **resolution**, the protagonist either achieves their goal or fails to achieve it – in either case, the questions and tensions generated by the conflict are answered and resolved.

Many novels and plays could also be analysed in terms of the classical Hollywood narrative structure: they, too, feature protagonists, conflicts and resolutions. However, literary fiction is generally much less narrative-driven than Hollywood cinema. The smooth plot development from conflict to change to resolution will rarely be as evident in a novel by, for instance, Jane Austen or F Scott Fitzgerald as it is in a Steven Spielberg blockbuster.

Resisting the conventions of Hollywood cinema

The classical Hollywood narrative structure does not apply to every film – many films manipulate or subvert the conventions of the classical Hollywood narrative. The following are some of the many ways in which this can occur.

- There might not be an obvious central character – the film could explore several interlinking relationships rather than one or two main figures.
- The protagonist might not have a clear goal, and they might not change significantly throughout the narrative.
- The film's ending might be open-ended or ambiguous rather than generating a strong sense of closure and finality.

Narrative viewpoint

Just as narrative fiction has conventions and techniques for representing different points of view – such as first-person and third-person narrative perspectives – so too does film.

In an **objective point of view**, the audience observes the characters and their world from an external perspective, but does not share a particular character's experiences and feelings. Like an author using an omniscient narrator in a novel, a film can use an objective point of view to transport the audience to various locations and show various perspectives on the unfolding action.

In contrast, a **subjective point of view** enables the audience to experience an event from the perspective of a particular character. The audience sees and hears what that character would at that moment; the perspectives of other characters are less apparent. Three techniques that can be used to create a subjective point of view in a film are discussed below.

Voice-over

A narrative voice-over tells the audience directly about events being depicted in the film. It is similar to the narrative voice in fiction, although in a film we are usually able to observe the action from a more detached, external perspective than the narrative perspective in a novel or short story allows. That is, if the narrator is a character in the film, we are able to see that character, as well as the other characters, independently of what the narrator tells us. Even if the narrator is outside the world of the film (non-diegetic), rather like an omniscient narrator who sometimes uses the first-person voice, the audience can still form an independent view of characters and events from the visual and aural information conveyed by the film. In a novel, though, the written narrative is the *only* source of information.

A voice-over provides information that is not necessarily known by the other characters; this heightens our awareness of what is at stake and draws us into the world of the film. Dramatic irony can also be created in this way. The narrator is usually the protagonist, and the voice-over encourages the audience to see events and situations from that character's perspective – and to recognise both the strengths and weaknesses of that character.

Close-ups

How close or distant the camera is from a character influences whether the audience sees and hears the events of the film from their point of view, or from a more external perspective. A close-up shot shows a character's face in fine detail, leading the audience to focus closely on aspects of the character's facial expression (especially their eyes and mouth), and giving the audience more insight into their private thoughts and feelings than the other characters have. The audience is encouraged to share the feelings and viewpoint of this character, especially if there are many such close-ups of one character and few or none of the other characters.

Medium shots and long shots show the broader context inhabited by the characters; these are more likely to be used to create an objective point of view.

Point-of-view shots

In a point-of-view (POV) shot, the audience see and hears exactly what a character sees and hears. Taken to its extreme, this technique gives us the impression we are looking through a character's eyes – as if we are inside that character's head.

> One of cinema's classic point-of-view shots occurs during the opening scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), where police detective John 'Scottie' Ferguson spirals into obsession over a mysterious woman. His descent into near-madness is symbolised by his paralysing fear of heights, which is established during an opening chase sequence in which he pursues a criminal across the rooftops. Scottie stumbles after a jump, slides down a roof and clutches the gutter to stop himself from falling. The film cuts to a close-up on his face as he hangs from the gutter and glances down, and then cuts to a point-of-view shot of the ground appearing to stretch away from him even further. The effect was achieved through the use of a dolly zoom: the camera was physically moved in one direction while zooming in the other direction, to create a distorted and disorientating effect, conveying to the audience Scottie's subjective perspective as he has an attack of vertigo.

James Stewart as Scottie in Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film *Vertigo*.

Film adaptations

Many films adapt existing material from another medium: novels, short stories, plays, comics and so on. There have been numerous film and television adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and Jane Austen's novels, while the film versions of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* (first in 1920, and most famously in 1931 with Boris Karloff as the monster) and of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* (including *Nosferatu* in 1922) were some of the earliest successful feature films. Classic Hollywood films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Rear Window* (1954), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *Blade Runner* (1982) are all adaptations of novels or short stories.

When material from a print medium is adapted for the screen, the director, screenwriter and producers may make changes for a range of reasons. For example, they might enhance romantic elements in the belief that this will make the film more popular and therefore more successful, or they might make casting decisions that alter the age or race of a character for thematic or ideological reasons. Director Andrea Arnold chose to use black actors for the young and adult Heathcliff in her 2011 film version of Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*. In the novel, Heathcliff is described as a 'dark-skinned

gypsy', but his dark skin and implied racial and ethnic differences from the other characters are easily overlooked when reading. In a film, though, using actors who are dark-skinned positions an audience to view Heathcliff's outsider status in a different way.

Perhaps the biggest constraint in adapting a novel to film is time: the average feature film runs for ninety to 120 minutes, which is not long enough to include all the plot detail of a 300-page novel, let alone much longer ones. For example, there are many film versions of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which is more than 800 pages long.

However, films can present information visually and aurally in a condensed manner that is not possible in writing. Elements of the setting as well as the actors' clothes, physical appearances, body language and facial expressions can be conveyed with a level of detail and immediacy that could never be captured by the written word.

Solomon Glave as Young Heathcliff and Shannon Beer as Young Catherine in the 2011 film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, directed by Andrea Arnold.

CHAPTER 9

INTERPRETATION AND LITERARY THEORY

Texts can be interpreted in many different ways, and people have argued over the meaning and significance of works of literature since the earliest texts were performed and published.

One reason readers find different meanings in a literary text is because their backgrounds, contexts and experiences vary. These factors influence the ways in which readers respond to characters and situations, and even the emotional associations they attach to particular words and images. Compounding these variations is the inherent ambiguity of literary texts – their layers of implied meanings in addition to the explicit 'surface' meanings, and the use of figurative language in which metaphorical and symbolic meanings are at least as important as the literal meanings of words.

Contrasting interpretations can also be developed through reading a text from different theoretical perspectives or positions. Literary theories offer a range of 'lenses', or frameworks, for reading and interpretation. Some theories provide a focus and a set of assumptions that enable a reader to critique the representation of certain social groups, such as women, working-class people, members of minority groups or indigenous peoples. Other theories suggest ways to interrogate language more closely, revealing unexpected meanings or perhaps drawing attention to textual gaps and silences.

Every new interpretation of a text takes its place within a rich web of dialogue about the meaning and significance of literature.

What is an interpretation?

To **interpret** a text is to offer an explanation of what it means.
An interpretation:

- draws together the different elements of a text to give a sense of the work as a whole
- is supported by close reference to, and analysis of, the text itself
- is coherent – it is relevant to every part of the text without inconsistency or contradiction.

An interpretation presents an informed explanation of one, or some, of the underlying concerns and unifying patterns of a text. It may focus on a number of important elements, such as characters and narrative structure. It may pay close attention to the text's relationship to the context in which it was produced; it could suggest that, for a contemporary reader, the key issue in the text is not the one that has received the most attention in the past.

An interpretation of a text seeks to answer questions such as the following.

- What are the text's underlying values?
- What does it imply about the kinds of behaviour that are acceptable and unacceptable?
- How do its patterns of imagery, metaphors and symbols relate to the characters, the plot and the society being depicted?

An interpretation of the poetry of John Donne (1572–1631) could see it as a paradoxical celebration of human progress and reason on the one hand, and of the ineffable mystery of life on the other.

Another interpretation of Donne's poetry could determine that it explores the capacity of language, particularly metaphorical language, to link the physical world with the world of feeling and faith.

Donne's poetry could also be interpreted as (and critiqued for) presenting and reinforcing a patriarchal view of society, in which women are objects of male power and lack their own voice and agency.

As these examples show, an interpretation offers a 'big picture' view of a text that is underpinned by, and built from, the 'small picture' detail found by close analysis.

Elements of an interpretation

There are several important elements of any interpretation. These elements help define the form or genre of literary criticism, which combines aspects of a purely personal response to a text with characteristics of an objective analysis.

Respond to the text's viewpoints

A text will present a particular viewpoint on the people and societies it represents. However, this viewpoint will be presented implicitly, through the unfolding of the plot, the choices made by characters and the consequences that flow from these, and the associations and resonances of words and images. Of course, in nonfiction there is more scope for the writer to directly state their point of view, but even here readers can come to their own conclusions about what the writer's wider messages and underlying values might be.

An interpretation, then, presents an opinion on what a text's viewpoints are, and an explanation of how these viewpoints are conveyed by the text.

Recognise that different interpretations are possible

Writers of literary criticism generally consider the novelist, poet or playwright to be interested in exploring the complexities of human experience rather than making black-and-white statements about truth or morality. They acknowledge that, while the text might raise questions, it will not necessarily answer them. Therefore, an interpretation of a text will identify and explicitly describe themes and messages that the text only suggests or implies.

For all these reasons, there is no single, definitively 'correct' reading of a text. Any reader skilled in literary analysis will be able to create two different interpretations of a text, both of which could be equally valid – yet could also, in their turn, be criticised by other readers for their oversights and biases.

Justify your interpretation

Although it is possible to interpret a text in different ways, not *every* interpretation is equally valid. It *is* possible to misread a text and come to an incorrect view of what it is about.

An interpretation needs to be supported by a variety of evidence drawn from the text, and justified through logical, reasoned argument. The earlier sample analyses of a passage from a novel (pages 79–81), a passage from a play (pages 123–5) and a poem (pages 177–9) demonstrate ways of incorporating evidence and of extrapolating from this evidence to a view of the text's wider concerns.

Developing an original interpretation

Many of the texts studied at school and university have been analysed and discussed for many years – in some cases, for hundreds of years. This means there are many interpretations already in print or online, so attempting to find something original to say about these texts might seem like an impossible task. What can you do?

- **Draw on your own responses to the text.** These will reflect your unique combination of life experiences, cultural and social context, past reading experiences and the kinds of knowledge you bring to bear on the text.
- **Use the strategies and techniques of close analysis.** These will bring you to a distinctive reading of a text. Focus on the words, phrases, images and scenes that strike you as most interesting or surprising, that draw you into a character's emotional world or link different parts of the text. (See Chapters 4 to 6 for more on writing a close analysis of a passage or poem.)
- **Read the text several times.** When re-reading, you will notice many things that initially escaped your attention. An interpretation can draw into the foreground the less-obvious features of the text – a minor character, a simple prop, an unusual image – enhancing the originality of your writing.
- **Read other opinions on a text.** This will give you a sense of the main issues people have talked about and their attitudes towards the text. Do you agree with what has been said? Can you think of other points to make?
- **Talk to others who have read the text.** Class discussions, in particular, can be extremely useful in clarifying your ideas; they allow for a dynamic exchange of views and can highlight the differences between your and others' responses to the text. Always think about what evidence there is in the text that could support or contradict each viewpoint.

Although the study of literature is extremely analytical, it is also very creative. An interpretation is grounded in a text, but it is also an original and subjective piece of work. The text you are studying is known – but at the same time it is complex, richly suggestive, often enigmatic and ambiguous. Your interpretation is, in the end, an expression of your independence as a reader, a writer and a human being.

Literary criticism: historical background

Literary criticism has a very long history. Aristotle's *Poetics*, which discusses tragic drama and epic poetry, dates from the 4th century BC. Aristotle describes tragedy as:

> a representation of an action that is worth serious attention ... in language enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to the several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation [or catharsis] of such emotions.

Even more than 2000 years ago, Aristotle identified the worthiness of a text, and an analysis of how a text uses language in particular, 'enriched' ways, as central concerns of literary criticism.

In classical Rome, too, writers not only produced literature but commented on it. *On the Sublime* – written in Greek by an unknown author conventionally referred to as Longinus, in about the 1st century AD – identifies the qualities of superior writing, pointing to its emotional impact, just as Aristotle does:

> the true sublime uplifts our souls; we are filled with a proud exaltation and a sense of vaulting joy ...

Interestingly, *On the Sublime* also identifies a text's capacity to stand the test of time as a sign of its quality:

> For a piece is truly great only if it can stand up to repeated examination ... sublimity in all its truth and beauty exists in such works as please all men at all times.

The idea that a 'truly great' literary work has a transcendent and universal quality became a central tenet of literary criticism, particularly of the humanist tradition. It also became one of the most contested aspects of literary criticism in the 20th century.

Romanticism and Matthew Arnold

Romantic poets in the early 19th century were prolific writers of criticism as well as poetry. In particular, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote extensively on literature as well as on broader cultural and philosophical issues. As in their poetry, their essays stressed the importance of imagination, beauty and feeling, qualities that could be brought together by the artist, and especially by a poet. Shelley's long essay 'A Defence of Poetry', written in 1821 but not published until 1840, argues for the special place of poetry in literature:

> A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth ... poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

In fact, Shelley placed poetry and poets at the forefront of human thought and creativity:

> Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all ...

and finally:

> Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Implicit in these quotes are Romantic ideals that have remained part of popular conceptions of what literature is and does. These include the idea that literature can 'capture' experience, and the idea that what is contained in a work of real literary value is true for all people in all places and at all times – the concept of universality.

Later in the 19th century, during the Victorian period, the poet and critic Matthew Arnold continued in the Romantic tradition of seeing the author as a gifted individual whose work of art captures something essential and true about all human experience. However, Arnold added a moral aspect to the literary tradition, arguing that the act of reading and appreciating great literature improves both the individual and the wider society. In his essay 'The Study of Poetry' (1880) he asserts that:

> More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.

Arnold is also a significant figure in the development of the idea of a literary 'canon': a body of literature regarded not just as superior, but as having lasting value and relevance. Part of the critic's work, according to Arnold, is to identify those superior works and to justify their place in the canon. For example, Arnold praises the work of the 14th-century author Geoffrey Chaucer:

> [Chaucer's] superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry ... he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view.

As with the earlier Romantic writers, Arnold believed in the existence of a 'truly human' perspective that would be relevant to everyone. As more recent critics have noted, a 'truly human' perspective at this time actually referred mainly to the perspective of middle-class white men. Nevertheless, the focus on moral values, and on the life-enhancing qualities of the 'best' literature, remained important elements of literary criticism into the 20th century.

The Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. Matthew Arnold was appointed Professor of Poetry at this university in 1857 and 1862; the position was held by men for over 300 years until Alice Oswald's appointment in 2019.

Leavis and the moral tradition

Frank Raymond (FR) Leavis taught English literature at the University of Cambridge from 1927 to 1964 and was probably the most influential literary critic of the 20th century. Along with his wife, Queenie Dorothy (QD) Leavis, with whom he often worked, Leavis was critical of popular culture and the increasing prevalence of technology in society. Like Arnold before him, he advocated the reading of great literature as a form of self-improvement. In this, he consolidated the 'moral tradition' in English literary criticism.

Another central aspect of Leavis' project as a critic shows Arnold's influence: the evaluation of English literature, sorting texts into a hierarchy of a few great, and a larger number of good, but lesser, works. Although this continued an approach to literary criticism begun in the 19th century, Leavis' work had two important and lasting effects.

Firstly, Leavis reshaped ideas of the English literary canon by placing greater emphasis on the novel, and by recognising the work of modernist writers such as DH Lawrence and TS Eliot, as well as earlier poets such as John Donne. For Leavis, the four greatest English-language novelists were Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad.

Secondly, Leavis advocated a close, detailed study of a literary text that drew strong connections to its author and its social and historical contexts. In discussing the novels of Henry James in *The Great Tradition* (1948), for instance, he states the importance of considering James' 'interests' as reflecting 'the elements of his situation':

> He was born a New Yorker at a time when New York society preserved a mature and refined European tradition ... Then there was the early experience of Europe and the final settling in England.

Thus, although Leavis' focus as a critic was on the work itself, he also saw the work and its author as deeply connected to the broader society. In this, Leavis prepared the ground, at least in part, for later critical movements that saw texts as products of wider social and cultural forces.

Practical criticism and New Criticism

Practical criticism was developed by Cambridge academic IA Richards in the 1920s, when English literature was establishing itself as an important university discipline. The focus of practical criticism was a close and sensitive reading of the text; in fact, Richards gave his students texts – often poetry – for analysis without telling them anything about the identity of the author or about the time and place in which the texts were written.

This approach to analysing literary texts was also taken up by a group of American academics during the 1920s to 1940s. The New Critics took an almost scientific approach to the study of literature; their focus was on the text itself and its use of literary devices such as metaphor and symbol. This process of 'close reading' of particular words and passages, and the required knowledge of a range of literary devices and techniques, has been extremely influential in the study of literature in schools and universities. In some ways, it underpins the approach taken in the preceding chapters of this book.

New Criticism makes the following main assumptions.

- The text is a complex, independent entity, which can be studied in isolation from its author and the context in which it was produced.
- The text is a coherent, organic whole, whose form and content are harmoniously integrated.
- Analysis requires close attention to textual detail, especially in relation to the use of language.

For the New Critics, poetry was the literary form par excellence. A **New Critical reading** of William Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' would **emphasise its unity of form and content**: the structure of the poem – regular five-line stanzas rhyming *ababcc* in iambic tetrameter – reflects the cosmic order depicted. Such a reading might also point out how the **image of the dance underpins and unifies the poetic vision** of a cosmos in which the 'sprightly dance' of the daffodils, the 'sparkling waves' and 'stars that shine / And twinkle' are harmoniously and joyfully bound together.

Although their approach was scientific, what the New Critics sought in literature – and, above all, in poetry – was not the rational but the sensual. The New Critics valued wholeness and organic unity, seeking qualities in literature that they, like Leavis, perceived to be vanishing from society.

Unlike Leavis, though, the New Critics had little interest in an author's social or historical context. They moved away from the Romantic idea of the author as the ultimate source of meaning or as the provider of unique insights into human experience. This is most clearly stated in a famous article by two New Critics, WK Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, titled 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946). Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that the author's intention is irrelevant to the reader's understanding of the text's meaning:

> 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 ...

Despite this seemingly objective approach, and a more explicit set of underlying assumptions, New Criticism was still underpinned by assumptions about universality. It regarded the meaning of a text not as open to interpretation or changing with time, but as fixed and permanent, accessible to anyone with the proper tools of literary analysis.

The shift towards theory

In the second half of the 20th century, there was a strong movement away from regarding a text as a static object with a fixed meaning, to seeing the text as more fluid, with meanings that shift over time and vary according to the reader's perspective. Critics questioned, and often rejected, some of the underlying asumptions of Leavis and the New Critics.

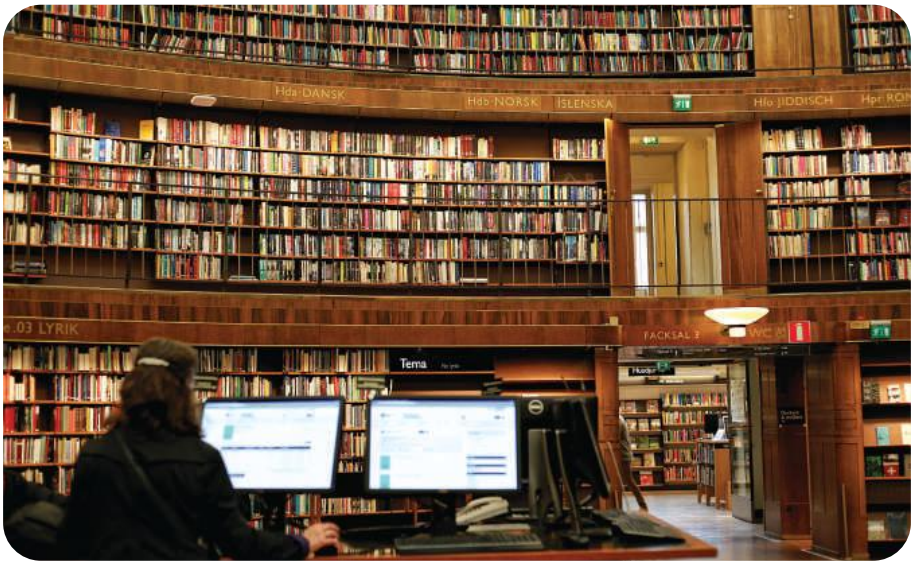
- Literary critics now saw a text not as a unified, organic whole, but as fragmented and inconsistent.
- They placed greater emphasis on the ways in which the context of a text's production and reception, and of the reader's context, contribute to the text's meaning and value.
- They looked critically at the kinds of people represented in literary texts, and – perhaps even more crucially – at the kinds of people who are marginalised or omitted.
- They acknowledged that a text can mean different things to different readers, especially readers from varied historical, social and cultural contexts.

One important thread that connects more recent approaches to literary criticism is that they avoid or resist the most obvious reading the text elicits. The traditional method of close reading tends to go along with the text, explaining what it appears to be trying to say and the way in which it conveys this. But it does not try to contest that meaning or question the ways in which a text makes its meaning seem true or compelling. In this form of close reading, the critic aligns her- or himself with the **implied reader** of the text.

More recent reading practices place pressure on texts; they resist the position of the implied reader and read *against the grain* to produce **resistant readings**. They look for what a narrative leaves out as much as what it includes. They emphasise the ideological or political aspects of reading and writing about texts.

In addition, literary criticism has incorporated concepts and philosophies from other schools of thought, such as linguistics, psychoanalysis and Marxism, as well as from social movements such as feminism and environmentalism. Drawing on these schools and movements led to the creation of a number of more theoretically informed approaches, each of which comprises a strong core set of ideas and a specialised language (or discourse).

The following sections provide an overview of the most important theoretical approaches to criticism and interpretation that were developed during the 20th century and remain central to literary studies today.



Understandings of literature have changed due to new reading practices developed in the 20th century. Traditional ways of obtaining and reading books have also changed, with digital technologies now an integral part of the experience.

Structuralism and binary oppositions

Structuralism seeks to understand elements of human culture and behaviour by looking at the wider system or structure to which those elements belong. In literary criticism, a **structuralist reading** looks at how the elements of a text work together to create meaning, and how that text fits within the broader structure of a genre or of literary texts as a whole.

The introduction of 'theory' to literary criticism is often understood to have begun with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist working in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Saussure argued that language is a system of signs, with each sign made up of a signifier (the word, such as 'white'), and a signified (the concept being referred to). In Saussure's theory, language does not gain its meaning by referring to things that have an objective existence in the 'real' world, as we have no way of accessing those things other than through language. Rather, as Saussure writes in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), the meaning of each sign comes from its difference from other signs:

> in language there are only differences ... Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system ...

So, for instance, 'white' is the opposite of 'black', and we understand the meaning of each due to the difference between the two signs, not because these colours have an objective existence outside of language. The idea of language as something that can be understood and analysed as a self-contained structure, with its own internal rules and conventions, led to the development of structuralism, which was then applied to other fields of knowledge such as anthropology and sociology.

Binary oppositions

Seeing language as a network of differences is something that can readily be applied to literary texts (or any other kind of text, such as a film or a painting). Pairs of opposing terms, such as 'white' and 'black', or 'truth' and 'falsehood', are known as binary oppositions. In a literary work there might be many binary oppositions that help to organise and structure the world of the text.

Often the binary oppositions within a text align in ways that seem familiar and natural, but are really just a product of their long use in literary and mythological traditions. Consider these pairings:

We often speak, for instance, of the 'light of truth' or the 'darkness of evil'. Truth is not objectively light, and evil is not objectively dark; they are features of language that are learned, and that gain meaning from the ways in which they are used and adapted in texts.

Features of a structuralist reading

A structuralist reading looks at the internal elements of a text and how they work together. This extends well beyond structural elements such as chapters or scenes, to encompass how differences and contrasts in the language and images function to create meaning. Like New Criticism, structuralist readings tend to remove the text from its context, and from any notion of authorial intent, and look *within* the text – and to other texts – for meaning.

A **structuralist reading** of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) would note the **many references to darkness and light**, and analyse how the text aligns these with other imagery and ideas. Marlow's story begins as the sun sets over the River Thames, with the unnerving words: 'And this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth'. He relates a journey down the Congo River, from the African west coast to the interior, in search of an ivory collector named Kurtz. The journey can be seen as moving from the 'light' of Europe (civilised, knowledgeable) into the 'darkness' of Africa (primitive, unknowable), then back to Europe. However, Marlow's descriptions of London and Brussels are also characterised by darkness, suggesting the ideals of civilisation are under threat.

Marxism

Marxism is based on the political and social theories of the 19th-century German philosopher and economist Karl Marx. Marx criticised capitalism as a means of organising the human and material resources of a society, since it is based on the exploitation of the working class and the inability of working people to have control over the circumstances of their lives. **Marxist literary criticism** draws on these ideas in analysing how material conditions and class relations are represented in texts.

Marx thought that any analysis of society should focus on the working men and women who form its vast majority. Moreover, he regarded people's work, and their material and economic circumstances more generally, as central to their wellbeing. Marx was developing his ideas at a time when the industrial revolution was taking place throughout Europe, and factory work was becoming more widespread, often leading people to move from rural to urban areas. Marx saw capitalism as contributing not merely to an inequality between those who owned businesses and those who supplied the labour, but as depriving workers of meaningful and fulfilling lives.

In Marx's terms, workers were becoming *alienated* from one another and from their own humanity, performing repetitive, meaningless tasks for the benefit of others. In contrast, their employers – the bourgeoisie – were becoming increasingly wealthy and powerful. The resulting tensions between the classes would, in Marx's view, inevitably lead to conflict and, ultimately, revolution.

Features of a Marxist reading

A Marxist reading of literary texts does not necessarily look for signs of revolution, but it does examine representations of social classes and of the inequities in wealth and opportunity within modern societies.

A straightforward Marxist reading would analyse a text for signs that it is consistent with a capitalist world view – for which the text would be criticised. A text that focuses on the lives of the wealthy, without any recognition of the labour of working people that supports such lifestyles, would have its biases and blind spots clearly pointed out.

For example, Shakespearean drama focuses on the concerns of the aristocracy. The tragedies are primarily stories about kings, princes and other members of the nobility; in this genre, it is not possible for a blacksmith, say,

to be a tragic figure. So, a Marxist approach to Shakespearean tragedy might place pressure on the genre by showing how it marginalises or 'writes out' the experiences of less privileged social groups.

Alternatively, a straightforward Marxist reading would look for signs that a text recognises and condemns the exploitation of working-class people – for which the text would be viewed positively.

A more complex Marxist reading could analyse a text in terms of its commodities and exchanges. Under capitalism, objects and people are valued in terms of what they can be exchanged for, and the profit that can be gained from this exchange.

A **Marxist reading** of the work of Victorian novelists Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell would draw attention to their **representations of working-class lives** in the English society of their time.

The reading could *endorse* these writers by showing their portrayals to be sympathetic to the plight of the working class. For example, Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) exposes the poor conditions to which factory workers were subjected, conditions that could threaten their health. Bessy Higgins' wretched state makes her a figure of pity, but her explanation of the cause of her ill health – inhaling cotton dust in the mill where she worked – raises broader issues of capital and class relations:

> Some folk have a great wheel at one end o' their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry off th' dust; but that wheel costs a deal o' money – five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit; so it's but a few of th' masters as will put 'em up ...

The conflict between 'masters' (business owners) and their workers becomes a focus of the novel, and of the concerns of its protagonist, Margaret Hale. The masters – represented by John Thornton, a mill owner – resist the workers' demands for increased wages, since the mills' income is falling due to increased competition in the market; the workers – represented by Bessy's father, Nicholas – live in near-poverty and resent the wealth of the masters. Eventually a mob of striking workers breaks into the mill-yard; class conflict thus takes a violent form, as Marx expected. Even after the crowd is dispersed by police, frustrations remain on both sides.

Alternatively, a Marxist reading could *critique* the work of such writers by suggesting that their attitudes are biased and condescending, and that their real sympathies always lie with the middle class. *North and South*, for instance, acknowledges the importance of the unions through Nicholas Higgins – 'It's the only way working men can get their rights, by all working

together' – but in the novel the only improvement in the workers' lives is achieved when Thornton builds his employees a dining room. Thornton and Higgins begin to talk more often, beginning an 'intercourse which, though it might not have the effect of preventing all future clash of opinion and action ... would ... enable both master and man to look upon each other with far more charity and sympathy'. In this way, the novel subtly opposes the benefits of 'working men ... working together', and endorses individual dialogue in which, inevitably, the master holds all the power.

Of course, societies and capitalism have changed since Marx published his theories in the 19th century. Distinctions between 'workers' and 'capitalists', and definitions of social class, are much less clear-cut in the 21st century. However, Marxist criticism still considers the social and economic conditions of people's lives to be the primary determinants of their wellbeing, and the most important lens through which to view a text.

Feminism

Feminism is a broad social, cultural and political movement that advocates for the rights of women. It argues that patriarchal social structures and institutions have oppressed women, and that social, economic and legal changes are needed to redress inequality. A **feminist reading** critically examines the ways in which a text endorses, questions or is silent on the social and economic status of women in the society being depicted.

There have been feminist writers and critics for hundreds of years; two very influential works are Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). First-wave feminism, in the early 20th century, was concerned mainly with the right to vote; from the 1960s, second-wave feminism pressed for greater legal and social recognition of women's rights, including reproductive rights and the right to equal pay. *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan and *The Female Eunuch* (1970) by Germaine Greer were important feminist texts in this period. At the same time, feminist literary criticism became more influential. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) all helped to shape an approach to literary criticism that reacted against the historical oppression of women and literary representations of gender inequality.

Features of a feminist reading

Feminist literary criticism has three main broad features.

- It looks critically at writing by men and critiques stereotypical depictions of gender identities and roles. These depictions could include male characters who are dominant and active, and who are able to express themselves freely, in comparison to female characters who are submissive, passive and often silent (especially in public). A feminist reading would also examine the extent to which the text represents these sorts of identities and roles as 'natural' and legitimate.
- It looks for positive representations of women as independent, autonomous subjects who are not defined purely in terms of their relationships with men or their biological sex. The concept of *agency* is central to this approach.
- It advocates strongly for a female tradition, suggesting that women's writing has been neglected and has different qualities and aesthetics from that of male authors.

A **feminist reading** of Sylvia Plath's poetry might explore the degree to which the poems **critique the limited roles available to women in the 1950s**. In 'The Applicant' (published in the posthumous collection *Ariel* in 1965), the speaker offers the applicant a woman – a 'living doll' – who will sew, cook, 'bring teacups and roll away headaches'. Referred to only as 'it', the woman is a nameless and faceless commodity who exists solely for the benefit of a potential husband. Plath thus satirises the prevailing middle-class view of what a young woman might aspire to, revealing it as both farcical and demeaning, and critiques the objectification of women in an increasingly materialistic postwar society. The idea of a doll is taken to another extreme in 'The Munich Mannequins' (also in *Ariel*), in which the image of perpetually youthful and beautiful womanhood is embodied in the mannequins in a shop window, existing 'in their sulfur loveliness', 'Naked and bald in their furs'. Here, female physical 'perfection' (the first word of the poem) is exposed as unnatural and appalling, as it 'tamps the womb' in a rejection of fertility and results in a deathlike state, 'cold as snow breath'. Plath rejects both physical beauty and domestic proficiency as artificial, meaningless and ultimately constricting aspirations for women.

In general, a feminist reading interrogates any version of society that sees men as occupying the central, dominant roles *and* that does not suggest this situation should be changed.

Psychoanalytic criticism

Psychoanalytic readings look closely at psychological elements, such as anxiety, repression and desire. They also look for repetitions, gaps and silences, which reflect the workings of the unconscious. These elements can be evident in the behaviour of characters, or in the structure of the text as a whole.

Psychoanalysis was developed in the early 1900s by the Viennese doctor Sigmund Freud, who sought to understand and potentially cure people who were experiencing neuroses. He saw their physical symptoms as responses to psychological trauma, the memories of which they had repressed. The act of repression might have removed these memories from conscious thought, but Freud believed the result was the unconscious part of the mind exerting an unhealthy pressure on the conscious.

Although Freud's work is controversial, he developed a number of concepts that remain common in popular understandings of human psychology, and that underpin the application of psychoanalysis to literary criticism.

- The mind has a **three-part structure**. The **id** corresponds to the unconscious and to basic drives, and operates according to the pleasure principle (seeking to experience pleasure and avoid pain). The **superego** is concerned with social conventions and morality. The **ego** is the self, which must balance the conflicting demands of the id and the superego.
- **Repression** is a process involving the transfer of ideas and feelings from the conscious mind to the unconscious. They might be memories of unpleasant experiences, or they might be desires that, for social reasons, are unable to be fulfilled. Repressed feelings and thoughts can re-enter consciousness at certain times, or create effects such as hysteria.
- **Dreams** can reveal repressed thoughts and feelings by symbolically fulfilling desires. Freud sought to understand a patient's dreams in order to gain an insight into their unconscious; *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) is his most famous book.
- The **talking cure** involves patients talking to an analyst about their experiences and feelings. In this way, Freud sought to bring repressed thoughts to the surface, thus relieving the 'pressure' caused by the repression and curing the neurological symptoms it was causing.

- The **Oedipus complex** is a key part of a child's psychosexual development. It is named after the Greek mythological figure Oedipus, who unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother (famously depicted in Sophocles' play from the 5th century BC, *Oedipus Rex*). According to Freud, the child's sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex is universal, and the resolution of this through identification with the parent of the same sex is what leads to a gendered and, ultimately, adult identity.

Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist Carl Jung, an early collaborator with Freud, also developed important concepts in psychology. These include the **collective unconscious** and the **shadow** – the hidden, unknown side of the self, similar to Freud's notion of the unconscious but containing good as well as bad aspects.

Features of a psychoanalytic reading

Psychoanalytic theory goes well beyond the scope of this book; it refines Freud's ideas and combines them with complex theories of language and subjectivity, such as in the work of French theorists Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. However, in relatively simple terms, a psychoanalytic approach to literary criticism would ask questions such as the following.

- Are there *gaps, silences or omissions* in the text – things that a main character doesn't wish to talk or think about, or perhaps that the author does not want to introduce into the text?
- Are important *dreams* described? An author can use a dream sequence to hint at emotions or conflicts that are unexpressed and/or unacknowledged in a character's life.
- Is there a strong *mother–son* or *father–daughter* relationship? Is there a difficult relationship between a father and a son, whereby the son resists the father's authority and sees the father as a threat? This might give scope to think about the characters in terms of the Oedipus complex.
- Does a character have a *double life* or an *alter ego*? This could suggest repressed parts of the personality or the Jungian shadow.
- Is a character experiencing *internal conflict* that can be explained in terms of the tension between the id – governed by the pleasure principle – and the superego – governed by moral codes and social conventions, and leading to feelings of shame and guilt?

Probably the best-known **psychoanalytic reading** of a literary text is Freud's interpretation of *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud sees Hamlet's procrastination as resulting from an **Oedipal desire for his mother**; full of guilt, Hamlet is unable to kill Claudius, who has done what Hamlet (unconsciously) wishes he had done – murdered his father and slept with his mother.

If this view of Hamlet seems extreme and insufficiently supported by textual evidence, there is little doubt that Hamlet does not provide a clear, compelling reason for why he fails to respond decisively to his father's murder and his mother's incestuous remarriage. This gap or silence in the text suggests a deep internal conflict within Hamlet. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this conflict can be seen as occurring between the id and the superego. Hamlet's first reaction, after the ghost urges him to 'revenge his foul and most unnatural murder', is to 'wipe away' from his memory 'all saws [quotations] of books, all forms, all pressures past' – in other words, he will try to ignore everything he has learned, the 'pressures' of the superego, to allow his desire for revenge (the id) to be expressed in action. Yet later he admits how hard it is to discard what is ethical and logical:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought ...

According to Freud, when the ego struggles to reconcile the forces of the id, the superego and the real world, it 'breaks out in anxiety – realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the superego, and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id' (*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 1933). Hamlet's anxiety is clearly expressed in his final soliloquy:

> I do not know
> Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,
> Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
> To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me –

Only at the end, when Hamlet knows Claudius has schemed to kill him and he has been poisoned by Laertes' rapier, are his moral anxieties quelled: reality can do nothing further to harm him, and id and ego are unified in the desire to murder Claudius and avenge his father's death.

Postmodernism and poststructuralism

Postmodernism is a term that can refer to two broad concepts and bodies of work:

- the nature of Western culture since (roughly) 1950
- a set of theoretical and critical viewpoints used in analysing cultural forms (such as literary texts).

Postmodern thought is sceptical about the possibility of any universal or objective truth; it breaks down traditional hierarchies, reinvents traditional forms and promotes multiple perspectives.

Postmodernism is a broad movement that combines creative activity, philosophical thought and political activism, while poststructuralism provides its theoretical basis. Poststructuralism follows on from structuralism (see pages 224–5) in rejecting any central authority or source of meaning (such as an author), and regarding meaning as deriving from networks of signs. However, whereas structuralism sees these networks as stable, poststructuralism argues that any system of signs is inherently unreliable, subject to change and ambiguity.

An important essay that is often taken to signal the break between structuralism and poststructuralism is Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' (1967). Barthes was a French theorist and critic whose early work applied structuralist ideas and the theory of signs (semiotics) not just to literary texts but to everyday life and popular culture. In 'The Death of the Author', Barthes examines the inherent ambiguities of any written text.

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author–God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.

With this shift to a recognition of multiple meanings, and to locating meaning(s) in the act of reading rather than in the author's intention (as a Romantic reading would) or in the text itself (as a New Critical reading would), Barthes effectively moved literary criticism from structuralism to poststructuralism. As the above quotation suggests, poststructuralism also sees *intertextuality* – the use of textual elements from another text or texts –

as a feature of each and every text, not just of texts that explicitly borrow from or allude to others.

In a postmodern view, informed by poststructuralism, concepts gain their meaning not from referring to things with a 'real' existence, but from their place within language. In other words, concepts are *discursively constructed*. This might, on one level, seem straightforward: an abstract concept such as 'justice', for example, doesn't have any objective or tangible existence. On the other hand, a concept such as 'gender' might seem to have a very real, biologically based meaning. Poststructurally speaking, though, gender too is discursively constructed, and as such its meaning is not fixed, but changeable; not universally agreed on, but open to multiple understandings.

Features of a postmodern reading

Postmodern criticism looks for the following features of texts:

- ways in which a text is fragmented and episodic, rather than unified and continuous
- ways in which a text holds open the possibility of multiple meanings, even though on the surface it appears to have only a single explanation or meaning
- representations that acknowledge different perspectives, experiences and identities, particularly those that have historically been marginalised
- ways in which a text alludes (either explicitly or implicitly) to other texts – **intertextuality** – or shows awareness of its own construction as a text – a trait called **self-reflexivity**
- gaps and silences – what a text avoids saying in order to mean what it intends to mean
- ways in which the text foregrounds, or can be read as foregrounding, the fundamental role played by language in constructing identity.

Postmodern readings of Shakespeare have drawn attention to the ways in which the plays **foreground the ambiguous and playful qualities of language**. At times it can seem that the real subject of the plays is not human nature, but the simultaneous power and 'slipperiness' of language. A postmodern reading of *King Lear*, for instance, could focus on the riddles in which the Fool speaks, showing how **words can have multiple and deceptive meanings, rather than a single, fixed and unambiguous**

message. Words can be a mere 'nothing' – 'like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer', as the Fool puts it – yet they can also have the power to strip a king of all his authority. Such paradoxes (especially concerning the nature of language) lie at the centre of much postmodern criticism.

Poststructuralism and deconstruction

As the discussion of structuralism (page 224) indicates, the neat division of terms and concepts into pairs of binary opposites suggests an ordered and stable world view, with little room for ambiguity or double meanings. Goodness brings the 'light' of truth, life and civilisation; the forces of evil ('instruments of darkness', as Banquo calls the witches in *Macbeth*) bring falsehood, death and social decay. Moreover, where binary opposites are used in a text, one term in each pair is usually regarded as preferable to, or privileged over, the other. Light is privileged over darkness; truth is privileged over falsehood, and so on. This hierarchy of terms reflects, and bolsters, an established order: good defeats evil, knowledge triumphs over ignorance.

In a **deconstructive reading**, the binary oppositions and the hierarchy of terms are shown to be unstable. Such a reading might find, for example, that in some places the text values darkness over light, or that truth is aligned with darkness. It might also show that 'truth' in the text is only partial, as it relies on alternative versions of the truth being silenced or rejected.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a **deconstructive reading places pressure on the 'surface' meaning of the text** by inverting the expected hierarchy of light/darkness and truth/falsehood. Superficially, the novella seems to be rejecting darkness and its associated qualities (the primitive, the unknowable) in favour of what is known and civilised. Kurtz's final words, 'The horror! The horror!', encapsulate the civilised world's abhorrence for a society in which refinement and self-control are lacking.

However, an alternative reading sees the **darkness as an intense source of fascination** for Marlow, as in Africa he discovers Kurtz. Remote from Europe's strict social conventions, Kurtz has indulged his 'monstrous passions'; his soul 'knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear'. In contrast, the world of Europe appears repressed and lifeless, embodied in Kurtz's ghostlike beloved: 'all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk'. In this reading, truth is contained in the primitive darkness, a darkness by which Europe is simultaneously repulsed and enthralled.

The politics of postmodernism

Postmodernism is sometimes criticised for being excessively relativist – that is, for arguing that there is no absolute standard by which truth and values can be judged. This means that what counts as true and false, or right and wrong, is relative to each culture and society, and that no single version of truth or morality is any better or more valid than any other.

Although relativity is an important feature of postmodernism, it is important to recognise that postmodernist criticism is not anarchic or apolitical. Indeed, the critique of traditional power structures, accepted truths and prevailing prejudices is extremely healthy and useful in any society. In a postmodern view of power, conventional ideas about what constitutes truth often depend on the attitudes and interests of certain social groups, and work to devalue or suppress the attitudes and interests of other groups (such as the working class or immigrant communities). This doesn't mean that postmodernism abandons the idea of truth; rather, postmodernism acknowledges that different groups have different truths, and that these differences should be respected.

The Dancing House in Prague, designed by Vlado Milunić and Frank Gehry, is an example of deconstructivist architecture. This postmodern approach disrupts the conventional elements of structure to create a sense of distortion and disorder.

Postcolonialism

Colonialism refers to a nation's establishment of a colony or colonies in another country that usually has less developed technologies but abundant resources such as minerals, land and/or labour.

Postcolonialism refers to a movement in politics or culture that critiques colonialism, either in general or in relation to a specific colony.

During the period from the 1400s until the end of World War II, several western European nations – including England, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands – established colonies throughout Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific islands. Power was exerted by physical force, especially through the use of firearms, and the indigenous populations were used as a cheap labour or, in the case of many settler colonies (such as Australia), forced from their lands by a combination of violence and introduced diseases.

Not all empires were equally strong throughout this period. British colonies were established from the early 1600s in the Caribbean and then in North America; British rule in India dates from 1858. During the 19th century the British Empire grew in land and power, reaching its height in the early 20th century. Colonial encounters and endeavours are often referred to in English literature: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (first performed in 1611) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) are two well-known early examples. The end of the period of European colonialism is often taken as coinciding with the independence of India in 1947. However, many colonies experienced protracted, violent conflicts during the following decades as they sought independence, and even after gaining independence, from colonial rule.

Although the prefix 'post' is part of the term, postcolonialism does not assume that the effects of colonialism are over. Rather, it testifies to their ongoing impacts.

The Gateway of India in Mumbai, India was built between 1913 and 1924 to commemorate the visit of King George V (Emperor of India) and Queen Mary in 1911. A legacy of colonial rule, it is now a popular gathering place and tourist attraction.

Postcolonialism in literary studies

The term postcolonialism is used in literary studies in two main ways.

Postcolonial literature refers to texts produced by former colonies of European nations. These texts often question the use of power to exploit indigenous populations as sources of cheap or unpaid labour, or to obtain valuable natural resources for minimal cost. They also expose the devastating effects of colonialism on traditional societies, and assert the fundamental rights and distinctive identities and cultures of indigenous peoples.

Famous examples include the novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe; *Midnight's Children* (1981) by British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie; and *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Indian author Arundhati Roy. In Australia, poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal, novelist Mudrooroo and playwright Jack Davis were important black writers in the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

As Salman Rushdie put it in his 1982 essay 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance', postcolonial literature 'writes back' to the imperial centre, contesting accepted and official versions of history with alternative perspectives and realities.

Postcolonial criticism refers to the process of analysing texts that represent experiences of colonialism; it is often critical of texts written from the coloniser's perspective, while promoting works that present the points of view of the colonised.

Features of a postcolonial reading

Postcolonial theory focuses on the ways in which texts represent colonialism and its impacts on indigenous peoples; it examines relationships between race, power, language and identity. It critiques canonical texts that downplay the effects of colonialism and/or portray colonised peoples as less fully human than European characters. Postcolonialism often regards texts in the dominant literary tradition as complicit with colonisation, in the sense that they reinforce Western notions of superiority and downplay the violence inherent in colonial invasion and rule.

An important concept in postcolonial criticism is that of the Other, a term drawn from philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. In his highly influential text *Orientalism* (1978), Palestinian-American critic Edward Said argues that, historically, the literature of the West has portrayed the East as the Other. That is, those in the West are represented as industrious, rational and progressive, while those in the East (a broad term covering the Middle East and Asia) are depicted as lazy, irrational and uncivilised.

In a **postcolonial reading** of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the relationship and power imbalance between Prospero and Caliban can be read as emblematic of those between coloniser and colonised. Caliban had been the sole inhabitant of the island on which Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, now lives; Prospero describes Caliban as a 'freckled whelp hag-born' whom he keeps 'in service'. Caliban rejects the imposition of European rule: 'this island's mine ... Which thou takest from me'. In the end, though, Caliban's resistance is quashed, and he submits: 'I'll be wise hereafter / And seek for grace.'

As Said puts it in his 2003 essay 'Blind Imperial Arrogance':

> Every empire ... tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero attempts to teach Caliban language and 'grace', and ultimately liberates the spirit Ariel as well as himself and his daughter, Miranda, from an unjust exile. It is, then, one of the many stories that 'every empire ... tells itself and the world' to justify acts of conquest and control.

Another celebrated literary text that can appear **problematic when read from a postcolonial perspective** is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, since it reproduces colonial stereotypes of black African people as primitive, mysterious and incapable of becoming 'civilised'. In his 1977 essay 'An Image of Africa', Chinua Achebe criticises the novel as racist since its representations of black Africans deny them any humanity, and Africa is a mere backdrop for the playing out of European anxieties:

> The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art.

A counterargument – also using a postcolonial perspective – could be that Conrad's novel deploys the unreliable, narrow-minded and prejudiced viewpoint of Marlow in order to question the wisdom and judgement of those who invade and exploit the territories of others. That is, *Heart of Darkness* offers a *critique* of colonialism, although from a white rather than a black point of view.

For some national literatures, questions of colonialism are less crucial than contemporary issues of race and ethnicity. For example, the issue of how African-Americans are portrayed in American literature is related to the history of slavery, which was integral to the colonisation of North America. It differs from the usual issues addressed by postcolonialism, however, since African-Americans are not indigenous to North America, so cannot make the same claims to national independence or land rights as indigenous inhabitants. Nevertheless, questions of identity, language and power are inseparable from questions of race and the legacy of history. The concept of American literature was challenged and broadened in the 20th century by African-American writers such as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison writes:

> There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States ... The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.

Literary criticism focusing on race and ethnicity now forms part of a broader framework known as Critical Race Theory. It is informed by the histories and experiences of colonialism, and also addresses experiences of migration and diaspora (the dispersion of a racial or ethnic group across the world).

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof by US playwright Tennessee Williams (first performed in 1955) portrays a dysfunctional white family, the Pollitts, who own a cotton plantation in the American South. A **race-based reading** of the play would, as Toni Morrison suggests, move its African-American characters from the margins to the centre. These characters are rarely heard and seldom seen; they are further marginalised in the text by the term 'Negro' (in common use at the time), as in the stage direction '*a Negro voice answers*'. The Pollitts seem untroubled by the fact that their lives of comfort and privilege depend on the labour of the unpaid or poorly paid African-American plantation workers and servants. Big Daddy, the patriarch, declares that he 'went to work like a nigger in the fields' when he was ten years old. Big Daddy's life experiences are not comparable to those of his workers, but his assertion hints at a suppressed understanding that his wealth is founded on exploitation and injustice.

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism

New Historicism and **Cultural Materialism** regard texts as products of the social, cultural, historical and ideological contexts in which they were created.

Historicist readings of texts are not new, but traditional historicist views saw earlier societies as unified and homogeneous, in which the dominant values, attitudes and beliefs were held almost universally. A well-known historicist text is EMW Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942), in which literary scholar and critic Tillyard presents a version of the Elizabethan world view as a means of understanding the work of Shakespeare and Donne. In Tillyard's conception, the society of Elizabethan England was hierarchical and stable, and people had clear and fixed beliefs about the place of the world in the cosmos.

New Historicism (mainly US-based) and Cultural Materialism (mainly emerging from the UK) are two schools of literary criticism that also produce historicist readings of texts from earlier times, but *question* the following key ideas:

- the idea that every person and institution in a society shares the same views and values
- the idea that culture simply reflects a society's dominant views, and doesn't itself play any role in creating or challenging those views.

In poststructuralist fashion, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism see society and culture as fragmented and pluralistic; ideas and beliefs are not (and never were) uniform and fixed, but contested and evolving. Moreover, there is no transparent 'window' onto the past, no objective view of history; 'history', too, is a construct, a network of texts. This means that a literary text cannot be seen simply against a backdrop of 'how things were', but must be read as part of a set of cultural products from that time. New Historicists, particularly, read literary texts with and against other texts such as letters, pamphlets, reviews, author biographies, and medical, legal, religious and government documents. In this sense, it is an *interdisciplinary* approach to literary criticism.

If New Historicists and Cultural Materialists are in broad agreement about seeing texts as inextricably woven into the fabric of their societies, they differ slightly in their views of the effects texts might have. New Historicists see all texts created and circulating in a particular time as working ideologically to reinforce and legitimate the existing power relations – the status quo – in the interests of the ruling class. So, even a text that represents identities that fall outside the boundaries of what is considered 'normal', or actions that are subversive, ultimately demonstrates that those identities and actions are 'other', thus reinforcing the superiority of the established order. For instance, in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I*, Prince Hal is initially drawn to, but finally rejects, the subversive revelry of Falstaff; at the end of *Twelfth Night*, Viola reveals her male appearance to be a disguise and will take her place as the wife of Duke Orsino.

Cultural Materialists, on the other hand, give more weight to the possibility that subversive elements of a text can help to produce citizens who resist oppressive or unjust elements of their society. In this view, culture can encourage readers to question the status quo and contribute to social change.

Features of a New Historicist or Cultural Materialist reading

New Historicist and Cultural Materialist readings think about a text as a material object, with a physical and economic presence. They would consider who published and printed it, and the sorts of people who might have bought and read it, or saw it performed. A New Historicist or Cultural Materialist reading could ask questions such as the following.

- What view of the relevant culture does the text offer? How does it contribute to our understanding of the culture it depicts?
- To what extent does the text reflect or challenge the dominant values of the period in which it was written?
- What were the philosophical or political leanings of this text's author? What was their social status, and what were their concerns about the society they lived in?
- How was this text received when it was first published? Is it perceived differently now? If so, why?
- What is similar or different about the views and values presented in this text and others (both literary and non-literary) produced during the same period?

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare uses the cross-dressing Viola to create confusion and disruption in the lives of Duke Orsino and Olivia. A **New Historicist reading** would take into account the **performance practices of Elizabethan England**, which excluded women from the stage. Thus, Viola's part was performed by a boy, who played a woman who was pretending to be a man. In fact, at the time some religious groups were critical of the practice of boys playing women as they associated cross-dressing with illicit sexual activity. The play also represents Duke Orsino's desire for the androgynous yet seemingly male Cesario (Viola in male clothes with 'smooth and rubious' lips), and Antonio's love for Sebastian ('My desire, / More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth'). Homosexual acts between men were illegal and carried a possible death sentence, so although the play presents non-normative sexual attraction in a comical light, in the real world such relationships were of serious moral, legal and religious consequence.

The play thus foregrounds issues circulating in Elizabethan England and demonstrates the unruly behaviour (by the standards of the time) that might arise from nonconformist gender roles and sexual desire. The play then performs the social and ideological function of resolving these anxieties through the marriage of Olivia and Sebastian, and the promise of marriage between Viola and Orsino.

Mark Rylance as Olivia and Michael Brown as Viola in a 2002 production of *Twelfth Night* at the Shakespeare's Globe theatre.

Queer theory

Queer theory challenges conventional notions of gendered and sexual identity that have historically been taken as 'normal' and therefore 'right'. It analyses the ways in which 'normal' behaviours and identities are socially constructed and enforced, and argues that identity is both diverse and fluid.

Queer theory became an important field in the humanities in the 1990s, developing in part out of the gay rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s. It is strongly informed by poststructuralist ideas about identity, which is seen to be constructed through language and social interaction. It challenges the idea of a fixed, essential gender identity, as well as the ways in which individuals whose identity doesn't accord with ideas of what is 'normal' are regarded as 'deviant' and marginalised. Queer theorists argue that human identity is much more complex than the conventional categories of 'male' and 'female', 'straight' and 'gay' allow for. In fact, it resists any strict categories. American theorist David Halperin writes in *Saint Foucault* (1995):

> Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant ... it is an identity without an essence.

A key concept in queer studies (and in the closely related field of gender studies) is gender performativity, developed by American philosopher and theorist Judith Butler. In Butler's view, gender is not fixed or innate but produced and sustained through repeated social performances.

Features of a queer reading

A queer reading looks for signs of the ambivalence, diversity and fluidity of human identity, even in texts that, on the surface, might appear conventional. A queer reading would argue that the questioning of what is considered normal has always existed in texts, but has often been overlooked. It would ask questions such as the following.

- Do some characters refuse to fall neatly into simple male/female categories, or to conform to conventional gender roles? (This line of questioning could consider the performative aspects of gender identity, such as clothing and mannerisms – the ways in which people look and act in order to appear either male or female, or possibly to *avoid* appearing conventionally male or female.)

- Does the text challenge heteronormativity (the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm)? Is desire in the text always heterosexual? Is sexuality sometimes same-sex, or sometimes ambiguous?
- Does the text suggest that, for some, gender or sexuality might be fluid and changeable, rather than fixed?
- To what extent does the text's conclusion resolve the unsettling of conventional roles and identities?
- Are there instances in which characters are punished for their perceived 'deviant' behaviour? Alternatively, are there instances in which characters are rewarded for conforming to 'normal' gender and sexual roles?

A **queer reading** of Sylvia Plath's poetry, considered on page 229 from a feminist perspective, might read the poems slightly 'against the grain' as they do not explicitly reject heterosexual relationships. However, they do **question whether traditional gender roles can be fulfilling** and **place pressure on the notion of heterosexuality as the accepted 'norm'** (heteronormativity). In this regard, it is useful to remember David Halperin's definition: 'queer is … whatever is at odds with the normal'.

'The Munich Mannequins', for instance, which from a feminist perspective can be read as a critique of unrealistic expectations of female beauty, might from a queer perspective suggest a rejection of conventional marriage or sexual relationships. The mannequins are sterile and cold, yet they are also aloof and somewhat defiant: 'bald' and 'intolerable'. In fact, there is nothing particularly 'female' about them; their gender and sexuality are ambiguous. There is a suggestion that they might travel secretly around Europe, between Munich, Paris and Rome, unrestricted and unwatched – 'Nobody's about' – free from social expectations. The mannequins thus embody a transgressive, non-normative identity, defying easy categorisation.

These mannequins in a women's clothing store, like the mannequins in Plath's poem, could be read in different ways: are they idealised versions of female bodies, or do they resist traditional categories and expectations?

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism studies texts in terms of their representations of the environment, especially the natural environment, and of interactions between people and the environment. It is informed by concerns about the damaging impacts of human activity, and evaluates texts in terms of their response to these concerns.

Like New Historicism, ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field. It draws strongly on the science of ecology, and can examine a wide range of texts. Its origins are often taken to lie in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), in which the harmful effects of insecticides such as DDT were exposed and condemned. Carson was an American marine biologist who became a nature writer in the 1950s, and her concerns about the destruction of bird and fish life were expressed in *Silent Spring* in terms that are as much literary as scientific. Her opening conveys an idealised version of humanity and nature in harmonious co-existence:

> There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of colour that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines.

In this pastoral vision, human activity and the natural world are interconnected, full of wellbeing and beauty. The vision is broken, however, by a 'strange blight ... a grim specter [that] has crept upon us unnoticed'. Carson's poetic language, as much as her painstaking research, created an image of environmental crisis that, although it has evolved over the more than fifty years since the publication of *Silent Spring*, is increasingly prominent in our lives.

Ecocriticism looks at texts rather than at ecosystems, but the sense of crisis caused by human activity, and a desire for a more harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world, remain important elements of its approach. It is inherently political and recognises that environmental issues also impact on social and economic concerns.

Much early work done in the field of ecocriticism focused on the Romantic poets, whose representations of nature are central to their work. Consider these lines from near the beginning of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey':

> Once again I see
> These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
> Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
> Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
> Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!

Here the pastoral scene is created through a pleasant blurring of human and natural worlds; the 'hedge-rows' have 'run wild', suggesting nature resisting humanity's impact on the landscape. Even in the city, Wordsworth finds abundant beauty, with human and natural features combining seamlessly. In 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', the pastoral scene is never far away:

> This City now doth, like a garment, wear
> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
> Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
> Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
> All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

In contrast, Ted Hughes' 1963 poem 'On Westminster Bridge' provides a dark, 20th-century update to Wordsworth's picturesque vision, registering the environmental impact of human habitation much more critically:

> A shattered army, Thames' filthy tonnage, tumbrils of carrion,
> Not a beautiful spectacle
> For the drinkers of history, or for me
> Or my friends, this island's parallel issues.

Here the speaker not only observes the presence of pollution but also recognises that he exists within this 'shattered' world, not as an observer who stands apart from it. Ecocriticism can thus explore the ways in which literary representations of the environment have shifted over time, as well as the changes in writers' perceptions of humanity's culpability and moral responsibility.

GLOSSARY

allegory A story that has its real meaning in a parallel, 'implied' story; individual events and characters thus have a wider significance than their literal or 'surface' meaning.

alliteration The repetition of consonants, especially at the beginnings of words; often used in poetry, e.g. 'A slumber did my spirit seal' (Wordsworth).

allusion A reference to another literary or artistic work.

ambiguity Lack of clarity in meaning, especially between two possible meanings.

ambivalence Being 'in two minds'; a state of uncertainty about whether something is right or true.

anachronism Something out of date, belonging to an earlier time and out of place in its current context (anachronistic, *adj.*).

anagnorisis A profound moment of recognition and understanding.

anapaestic or anapestic foot In poetry, two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable.

antagonist The character who opposes the actions of the protagonist or hero.

antithesis Opposite (antithetical, *adj.*).

aside In drama, a short speech in which a character reveals their thoughts to the audience without the other characters onstage being aware they are doing so.

assonance The repetition of vowel sounds in words close together; often used in poetry, e.g. 'In the midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes' (Keats).

atmosphere A feeling or mood evoked by a text through word choice, imagery, narrative pace, setting etc.; in drama, largely generated by stage settings and lighting.

Augustan period The first half of the 18th century. Augustan literature is characterised by restraint, balance, elegance, a sense of proportion and the expression of reason and good judgement.

autobiography A book about the author's own life.

ballad A poem traditionally sung; tells a story in a direct style and in simple language.

bildungsroman A type of novel concerned with the growth and development of a young protagonist.

binary opposition Two terms opposite in meaning, each defined by not being the other, e.g. black/white, present/absent, light/dark, freedom/captivity.

biography A book about a person's life, written by another.

blank verse A form of poetry (also used in Shakespearean drama) in which lines have ten alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (i.e. iambic pentameter) and do not rhyme.

Brechtian theatre A theatrical form developed in the 1930s and 1940s by German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956); it aimed to make the audience members feel emotionally detached from the action of a play so they could better reflect on the ideas being presented.

caesura A break in a line of poetry; often indicated by a comma but can be due simply to the natural rhythm of the words.

caricature An exaggerated, usually comical portrayal of a person or character type.

catachresis The misuse of words either in error or for rhetorical effect.

catalectic lines Lines of poetry that have an incomplete foot (i.e. a missing syllable), usually at the start or end of the line.

catharsis The release of tension following the narrative crisis; crucial to the resolution of classical and Shakespearean tragedy.

cinematographer The person who, under instruction from the director, sets up the shots in a film, using camera distance, angle and movement to tell the story.

cinematography All aspects of the use of the film camera.

class A social group in which people have similar levels of wealth, education, types of jobs, cultural interests etc.

cliché An expression that is well-worn, hackneyed and overused, e.g. 'pretty as a picture', 'fresh as a daisy'.

colloquialism A word or phrase belonging to casual, everyday speech.

colonialism The occupation and control of another country in order to make use of its resources (e.g. minerals, land, labour force); widely practised by European nations from the 15th century; in some cases involving settlement (e.g. Australia).

comedy In drama, a form that takes a relatively positive view of society and human behaviour; often humorous; typically ends with a marriage; the opposite of tragedy.

conceit A metaphor in which one thing stands for another, quite different thing; unexpected and witty.

connotation A suggested or implied meaning of a word or image.

convention A 'code' shared by writer and reader (or audience), e.g. the convention in prose of using quotation marks to denote speech.

couplet Two lines of poetry that can be grouped by forming a stanza on their own or by rhyming.

Cultural Materialism An approach to literary criticism that emphasises the social, cultural and economic contexts in which literature is produced; considers literature as a material product as well as a cultural one; examines how the meaning of a text can alter as society changes.

culture Three main meanings are (1) a body of artistic works – literature, music, paintings etc. – generally agreed to be of high and lasting value; (2) all aspects of a way of life; (3) a stage of civilisation, e.g. the culture of ancient Greece.

dactylic foot In poetry, a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

deconstruction An approach to analysing or creating texts that promotes multiple meanings; subverts notions of a fixed or 'true' meaning; reveals rather than conceals the techniques of construction; often used in other creative fields, e.g. architecture, fashion, visual arts.

denotation The literal or dictionary meaning of a word.

denouement The unravelling of tension or complications immediately following the narrative climax. (French, 'unknotting'.)

dialogic Using conversation or dialogue to explore meaning; texts can be regarded as having a dialogic relationship through allusion, quotation or shared concerns.

diegetic sound Sound that belongs to the world of a film, e.g. dialogue, traffic noises, footsteps and birdsong.

discourse A form of language use that is particular to a social group, profession or body of knowledge, e.g. medical discourse; the discourse of postmodernism.

downstage In a theatre, the area of the stage closest to the audience.

dramatic monologue A poem in which the speaker directly addresses an imaginary audience.

ecocriticism An interdisciplinary approach to the criticism and evaluation of texts that considers intersections between literature (and other texts) and the natural environment, and foregrounds environmental concerns in literary works.

elegy A poem in which the speaker expresses a sense of loss; often laments the death of a person or a tragic event.

Elizabethan period The reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603); in England, a time of relative peace and of great cultural activity.

empathy A feeling of identification with another person or character; an imaginative sense of being in that person's place.

enjambment In poetry, the running-on of lines.

epic A poem that tells a story on a grand scale; usually thousands of lines in length.

epic theatre *see* Brechtian theatre.

euphemism An expression that substitutes for a more literal word or phrase to soften the impact of an event or observation, e.g. 'passed away' for 'died'.

farce An exaggerated form of comedy intended to produce laughter; often uses absurd situations and/or behaviour.

feminist criticism An approach to interpreting and evaluating texts that draws attention to the representation of gender and gender roles, especially in relation to the degree of power and independence women have in a text.

figurative language Language that uses figures of speech such as simile, metaphor and personification.

foot A rhythmic unit within a line of poetry, consisting of (usually) two or three syllables.

foreshadowing The anticipation or prediction of an event that will occur later in a narrative, e.g. through a statement or image.

free verse A form of poetry in which there is no regular pattern of rhythm, rhyme, line length or stanza length.

genre A category of texts (e.g. crime fiction, biography) sharing several conventions concerning plot, narrative, tone, style, characterisation and setting.

gothic A literary genre characterised by gloom, horror and the supernatural.

haiku A Japanese form of poetry with seventeen syllables: five in the first line, seven in the second line and five in the third line.

hamartia An error of judgement, contributing to the hero's downfall in classical tragedy.

heroic couplets Rhyming couplets in lines of ten syllables (usually iambic pentameter).

hubris Excessive pride and confidence.

hyperbole Exaggeration or overstatement, usually for comic effect.

iambic pentameter The rhythmic pattern of a line of verse comprising five sets of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (i.e. five iambic feet).

ideology A set of ideas and beliefs that underpin behaviour and attitudes; often shared by a social group or institution; often used to refer to socially dominant and/or political beliefs.

idyll A poem that describes a rural scene in a tranquil or idealised fashion.

imagery The use of language to create a mental 'picture'. Two main kinds are (1) the use of language to represent sensory experience – sight, sound, smell, taste and touch; and (2) the use of figurative language such as simile, metaphor and symbol.

imagism Early 20th-century poetic movement that aimed to produce clear images.

intertextuality References to other texts; often implicit, e.g. by an unacknowledged quotation or the use of a word or phrase strongly associated with another text (using the word 'doublethink' would be an intertextual reference to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*); can also refer to a theory of writing that sees all texts as interrelated through shared discourses and conventions.

irony The two main types are (1) verbal irony – where the literal meaning is the opposite of the real meaning; and (2) dramatic irony – where the reader/audience and perhaps one or more characters possess knowledge that the remaining characters do not have.

Jacobean period The reign of James I (1603–25; from Jacobus, Latin for James).

linear narrative Narration that proceeds in a chronological fashion, building tension and moving to a climax.

lyric A relatively short poem in the voice of a single persona (the speaker); uses a personal tone to convey the speaker's private thoughts and feelings.

malapropism A misuse of words, in which a word with a similar sound but different meaning from that intended is used, often with comic effect; e.g. in *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio mocks the Nurse by saying 'she will indite him to some supper' instead of 'she will *invite* him to some supper'.

Marxist criticism An approach to interpreting and evaluating texts that focuses on representations of class and how money, goods and labour are exchanged and valued in a text; critical of capitalism; based on the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95).

memoir A book about a period of time in the author's life.

metaphor A figure of speech that describes one thing as if it is another, e.g. 'the black cloak of night'.

metonymy A figure of speech that refers to an object in terms of a quality or attribute of the object, e.g. referring to the sea as 'the deep'; referring to the monarchy as 'the crown'.

metre In poetry, a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables with a fixed number of syllables per line.

mise en scène A French phrase meaning 'putting on stage'; refers to all the elements visible at a given point, including setting, lighting, costumes and acting style.

mock heroic The use of a heroic style to describe a relatively trivial subject for comic effect; can be used to satirise the subject and/or the heroic style.

modernism An artistic and philosophical movement in the period roughly 1900–50, characterised by disillusionment with the breakdown of traditional social forms exacerbated by two world wars; writers experimented with form and style to reflect and comment on these shifts.

motif A recurring idea or image.

myth A story involving supernatural beings or gods; often an account of an aspect of creation.

mythology A body of myths, e.g. ancient Greek mythology; Celtic mythology.

narrative The story; an account of connected events.

narrator The figure or voice that tells the story.

naturalism A literary movement focusing on the harsh realities of life; draws attention to injustice; represents characters as being shaped by their circumstances and unable to determine their destiny.

New Criticism A school of literary criticism developed in the 1920s promoting the unity and wholeness of literary texts; places the emphasis on close reading of the text rather than on its author or context.

New Historicism An approach to literature that emphasises the historical, social, cultural and ideological background of a text; often looks at literature alongside other kinds of texts produced at the same time.

New Journalism A US movement in the 1960s and 1970s that combined journalism with the creative techniques of fiction to write about real events.

non-diegetic sound Sound that does not belong to the world of a film and cannot be heard by any of the characters.

nonlinear narrative Narration in non-chronological order, e.g. beginning in the middle of the story, then shifting back to earlier events.

octave In poetry, a stanza of eight lines, or the first eight lines of an Italian sonnet; also known as an octet.

ode A lyric poem with a ceremonial, stately quality.

omniscient narrator A narrator who knows everything about the world of the text and the lives of the characters.

onomatopoeia The use of a word or phrase, the sound of which imitates the sound being referred to, e.g. 'crackle', 'whizz', 'plop'.

ottava rima In poetry, a stanza of eight lines with the rhyme scheme *abababcc*; e.g. used by Byron in *Don Juan.*

oxymoron A figure of speech that contains a contradiction or paradox, e.g. 'I burn and freeze like ice' (Thomas Wyatt).

paradox A statement that appears self-contradictory but contains a coherent meaning.

parody An imitation that 'sends up' the original by humorous exaggeration.

pastiche A patchwork of pieces or styles of writing.

pastoral An account of rural life, usually emphasising its charms and simplicity; often nostalgic and/or idealistic; traditionally involving the depiction of shepherds.

pathos A quality in a text or other work of art that evokes pity or sadness.

patriarchy A form of society in which property is passed down the male line and the father is regarded as the head of the family.

peripeteia Reversal of fortune.

persona In poetry, the individual (also called the speaker) who seems to be addressing the reader of the poem.

personification Figurative language that gives human qualities to inanimate objects, e.g. 'The candle / Gulps and recovers its small altitude' (Plath).

plot The arrangement of events in a narrative in a particular order to generate interest, suspense, fear, humour etc.

postcolonialism A movement in literature, art and criticism following the breakdown of European empires and the gaining of independence by former colonies in the 20th century; usually critical of colonialism and writings complicit with it; gives voice to previously suppressed identities and histories.

postmodernism A movement in literature, art and criticism from around 1950 characterised by the breakdown of traditional forms, a sense of play with the possibilities of language, and an often sceptical view of power structures and social hierarchies.

poststructuralism A theoretical movement that developed from structuralism; regards meaning as inherently unstable and plural.

props Objects onstage in a play performance or film scene; personal props are objects carried by actors at any point.

prose Ordinary written language that extends across the full width of a page, as distinct from poetry.

protagonist The main character, whose ambitions and actions drive the narrative.

psychoanalytic criticism An approach to interpreting texts that draws on the ideas of psychoanalysis, originally developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939); uses Freud's theory of personality as structured by drives and repression to analyse how gaps, silences, repetitions and substitutions in texts contribute to or complicate their meaning.

pun A figure of speech that draws on two or more meanings of a word, or that plays on the meaning of a word by invoking a word similar in sound but different in meaning (e.g. sun/son).

quatrain In poetry, a four-line stanza.

reading (*noun*) An interpretation of the meaning of a text.

realism A literary movement emphasising the truthful and realistic representation of human behaviour and society.

Regency period The period from 1811 to 1820, when Prince George ruled as the regent due to the ill health of King George III; most of Jane Austen's novels were published during this time.

resistant reading An interpretation that disagrees with ('resists') the most obvious or apparently intended meaning of a text.

rhetoric The use of language to persuade.

rhyme Matching vowel and consonant sounds at the ends of words, e.g. catch/match; thought/fraught.

rhythm A feeling of movement or pulse in writing produced by the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables, the length of syllables, the use of punctuation etc.

Romanticism A literary, artistic and philosophical movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries; emphasises the importance of the imagination, feeling, individual freedom and the natural world.

satire The critique of an aspect of human behaviour or society; often humorous; often uses irony.

self-reflexivity A quality of a text that shows awareness of itself as a construct (self-reflexive, *adj.*).

semantics The meanings of words.

semiotics The theory that language works like a system of signs or codes (semiology is the study of signs).

sestet The last six lines of an Italian sonnet.

set The scenery and objects on a theatre stage or film set.

simile A figure of speech in which two things are compared using 'like' or 'as', e.g. 'the night was as black as a cloak'.

soliloquy In a play, a speech given by a character who is alone onstage; the reader/audience takes the content of this speech to be truthful, even when the character deceives all other characters.

sonnet A poem with fourteen lines, usually about love; often conforms to established patterns of rhyme and metre.

stage directions In a play script, descriptions of the intended layout and appearance of the stage; music or sound effects; and the appearance and behaviour of the actors. Conventionally italicised in the script.

stanza A group of lines in a poem, separated from other stanzas by a break.

stereotype A character that conforms to a fixed and simplistic type, e.g. 'the greedy capitalist', 'the noble savage'.

stream of consciousness A narrative technique that represents the mind's ceaseless and often fragmented flow of thoughts.

structuralism A theoretical movement that assumes there is an underlying structure to all of a society's cultural productions, including language and literature.

style All aspects of a writer's use of language, e.g. imagery, word choice, sentence length and structure.

subplot A secondary plot or storyline that runs parallel to the main plot, usually complementing or commenting on it in some way.

subtext A meaning that lies underneath the 'surface' of the text, implied rather than explicitly stated.

symbol An object that stands for a larger or more abstract entity; the symbolic object is part of or associated with the larger entity, e.g. scales symbolise justice.

syntax The ways in which words can be combined to form meaningful phrases or sentences.

tercet In poetry, a group of three lines rhyming together or rhyming with the next/previous group of three lines.

text Conventionally in literary studies, a literary work that exists in print form; more recently, any cultural form (e.g. painting, film) that can be interpreted ('read') in different ways.

theme An idea or proposition that is explored (usually implicitly) throughout a text.

tone A feature of language use that conveys an attitude to the subject matter, e.g. serious, humorous, sarcastic, mocking, formal or informal.

tragedy In drama, a form that takes a serious and often dark view of society and/or human nature; ends with death or the destruction of relationships; the opposite of comedy.

trochaic foot In poetry, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

unreliable narrator A narrator who presents a view that cannot be assumed to be correct.

upstage In a theatre, the area of the stage furthest from the audience – the term 'upstaging' describes actors who should be in the background (upstage) diverting attention from action downstage.

vernacular The everyday language used in a particular place and time.

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