

Vera und Ansgar Nünning

# An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature

Optimize  
your exam  
preparation

UNI-WISSEN

Vera und Ansgar Nünning

*Translated from the German by Jane  
Dewhurst*

# **An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature**

**Klett Lerntraining**

## Impressum:

Dieses Werk folgt der reformierten Rechtschreibung und Zeichensetzung. Ausnahmen bilden Texte, bei denen künstlerische, philologische oder lizenzrechtliche oder andere Gründe einer Änderung entgegenstehen.

Das Werk und seine Teile sind urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Nutzung in anderen als den gesetzlich zugelassenen Fällen bedarf der vorherigen schriftlichen Einwilligung des Verlages. Hinweis zu § 52a UrhG: Weder das Werk noch seine Teile dürfen ohne eine solche Einwilligung eingescannt und in ein Netzwerk eingestellt werden. Dies gilt auch für Intranets von Schulen und sonstigen Bildungseinrichtungen. Fotomechanische Wiedergabe nur mit Genehmigung des Verlages.

© Klett Lerntraining, c/o PONS GmbH, Stuttgart 2014. Alle Rechte vorbehalten.

[www.klett-lerntraining.de](http://www.klett-lerntraining.de)

E-ISBN 978-3-12-939109-9

# Contents

## Preface

### Chapter 1

#### **Literary Studies: Subject-Matter, Major Issues and Research Domains**

- 1 Structure and Approach of the Present Volume
- 2 The Subject-Matter of Literary Studies
- 3 Criteria for a Definition of Literature
- 4 Interpretation and Criteria for Literary Analysis
- 5 Types of Textual Interpretation
- 6 Fields and Research Domains in Literary Studies
- 7 Classifications in Literary Studies: Genres and Periods

### Chapter 2

#### **Literary Studies: Theories, Models and Methods**

- 1 The Use and Necessity of Literary Theory
- 2 Theories, Models and Methods: Terminology
- 3 Approaches and Methodologies of Literary Studies: A Typological Introduction
- 4 Functions of Theories, Models and Methods

### Chapter 3

#### **An Introduction to the Analysis of Poetry**

- 1 The Poem as an Ultra-Complex Textual Structure: Fundamental Features of Lyric Composition

- 2 A Communication Model for Poetry: Speech Situation, Perspective and the Lyric Persona
- 3 The Structure of Poetry: Metre and Rhythm, Feet, Stanzas
- 4 Complex Phonological Structures: Rhymes and Other Sound Patterns
- 5 Complex Morphological and Syntactic Structures: Word Repetition and Poetic Syntax
- 6 Complex Semantic Structures: Imagery

## **Chapter 4**

### **An Introduction to the Analysis of Drama**

- 1 A Text Written for Performance: Fundamental Features of Dramatic Composition
- 2 A Communication Model for Dramatic Texts: Special Features of Theatre Communication
- 3 Semiotics of Theatre and Non-Verbal Theatrical Codes
- 4 Transmission of Information and Verbal Communication
- 5 Character and Action
- 6 Representation of Place and Temporal Structure

## **Chapter 5**

### **An Introduction to the Analysis of Narrative Texts**

- 1 The Novel as a Text Mediated Through Narrative: Basic Features of Narrative Composition
- 2 A Communication Model for Narrative Texts: Story-Oriented Versus Discourse-Oriented Narratology
- 3 Character, Plot and Narrated World: Categories in Story-Oriented Narratology
- 4 Characteristics of the Three 'Narrative Situations': Categories of Discourse-Oriented Narratology I

- 5 The Structure of Narrative Transmission: Categories of Discourse-Oriented Narratology II
- 6 Representing Consciousness in Narrative
- 7 Categories for the Representation of Time and Space

## **Chapter 6**

### **An Introduction to the Analysis of Media Genres**

- 1 From Literary to Media Studies
- 2 Literary Studies and Media History
- 3 Inter-Art Studies/Intermediality: Literature and Other Art Forms
- 4 New Media – New Media Genres
- 5 Aspects of Radio Play Analysis
- 6 Aspects of Film and Television Analysis

## **Chapter 7**

### **English and American Literary History: Terminology and Periodization**

- 1 Definition and Use of Literary History
- 2 Problems of Literary Historiography I: Selection, Evaluation, Canon Formation, and the Debate on the Canon
- 3 Problems of Literary Historiography II: Periodization and Contextualisation
- 4 Literary Historiography: Approaches and Forms
- 5 Periods in English and American Literary History
- 6 From English/American Literary Studies to the Cultural Study of Literatures in English

### **Bibliography**

- 1 Introductory and Reference Works
- 2 Introductions to Literary Theories, Models and Methods
- 3 Introductions to the Analysis of Poetry

- 4 Introductions to the Analysis of Drama
  - 5 Introductions to the Analysis of Narrative Texts
  - 6 Introductions to Inter-Art Studies/Intermediality, Media Studies and the Analysis of Media Genres
  - 7 Literary Historiography and Histories of Literatures in English
  - 8 Anthologies
  - 9 Bibliographies
  - 10 Periodicals on English/American Literary Studies
  - 11 On Working Methods and the Composition of Academic Essays in Literary Studies
  - 12 Useful Websites
- Glossary

## Preface

The main objective of the present volume, which is a translation of an updated and slightly revised version of our book *Grundkurs anglistisch-amerikanistische Literaturwissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Klett 2001, <sup>4</sup>2004), is to provide a concise introduction to the subject-matter, major issues and research fields in English and American literary studies, and to detail the most important foundations, methods and models relating to the analysis and interpretation of literary texts. It is aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at students of English and American literary studies. As a familiarity with the analytical categories and methods used to approach narrative, dramatic and lyric texts is essential, especially at the beginning of the course of study, particular attention is paid to the use of clear conceptual language. We have also focused on fundamental and general aspects (such as central technical terms, generic categories and transferable methods of textual analysis from various genres and media), as such elements enable the student to situate the material covered within broader contexts and therefore provide helpful guidance for those new to the discipline.

When the German version of this book was published, some reviewers and any number of colleagues and students indicated that an English version of this introduction would be much appreciated. However, rendering a text of this type in English has naturally not been without its difficulties. Despite the common subject-matter, the discipline of literary studies takes different forms in English- and German-speaking countries, and methods, models and terminology do not always overlap. Where a standard equivalent to a German term was available, this has been employed; where an equivalent



term was not available, efforts have been made to define or paraphrase the German term. When German authorities are cited, the standard or approved translation has been employed where one exists; otherwise the translator has supplied her own translation. Throughout the volume, every effort has been made to bridge the differences between the disciplinary traditions and create a text that is accessible to students of English and American literature from all backgrounds.

As general and comparative literary studies, like English and American literary studies, encompass a wide variety of objects, areas of enquiry and methods, which cannot be covered comprehensively within an introductory volume, we have taken a mixture of pluralism and pragmatism as our guide in writing this book. We have consciously adopted an approach which uses illustrative examples to afford insights into the practice and 'nature of real, existing English and American studies' (SCHWANITZ 1985: 9), and thus serves the needs of students beginning their course of study, but which simultaneously offers a general overview of the discipline in all its factual and methodological diversity.

This short, introductory volume is obviously not the place for a comprehensive introduction to the history of literatures in English. More important for the student who is anxious to derive the greatest possible benefit from the diverse selection of courses on offer is a general understanding of the basics of literary studies, and of the spectrum of literary-historical themes. The present volume aims to provide such a preliminary understanding, along with a basic introduction to the terminology and content necessary for orientation in English/American literary studies. Instead of supplying 'ready-made' interpretations, we therefore aim to provide the reader with the terminological and methodological tools that will enable him or her to interpret unfamiliar texts independently.

However, the volume is not only aimed at new students who wish to cultivate the skill of interpreting literary texts in a systematic and methodologically informed manner, and of employing a terminologically precise idiom. It should also prove helpful to more advanced students who are preparing for seminars or exams and desire a brief overview of the fundamental terms and methods of literary studies, as well as more precise information about the interpretation of lyric, dramatic and narrative texts.

This introduction is not only written *for* students; it is also the result of many years of fruitful cooperation *with* students. We would therefore like to thank the numerous students in Brunswick, Gießen and Cologne, who have contributed more to this book, with their active and constructive cooperation in introductory and other courses in literary studies, than they are probably aware. Special thanks are due to our assistants, who made diverse contributions to the preparation of the present volume. Wibke Bindemann, Hanna Bingel, Stefanie Bock, Katharina Engelhardt, Meike Hölscher, Nora Redhardt and Katja Zinn read the manuscript with meticulous attention and carefully checked all quotes and bibliographical references. Gaby Allrath, Dorothee Birke, Stella Butter, Klaudia Seibel, Annegret Stegmann and Carola Surkamp completed the layout and commented constructively on earlier versions of individual chapters, as well as contributing invaluable to the composition of the various figures and the glossary.

Our greatest and most heartfelt thanks, however, go to three colleagues to whom we owe a special debt: to Jane Dewhurst, the eminently competent, skillful and patient translator of the present volume, as well as to research assistant Dorothee Birke and Richard Humphrey. First and foremost, we should like to express our sincere gratitude to Jane Dewhurst, who did an excellent job in turning heavy-duty teutonic scholarly prose into readable English, finding any number of elegant solutions for complex problems. Dorothee Birke not only meticulously checked and proof-read the translation,

she also made a number of very useful suggestions for improvement, which we have gratefully incorporated. This book has benefited enormously from Jane's linguistic resourcefulness and expertise, both as a translator and literary scholar, and from Dorothee's unparalleled conscientiousness, exemplary competence, and fine eye for terminological and stylistic details. Both of them not only did a marvellous job, they have also been, and are, a great pleasure to work with. Last, but not least, we are also very grateful to Richard Humphrey, who provided invaluable help and extremely good advice in the final stages of the revision, resourcefully helping us across a number of terminological hurdles. Any remaining mistakes or failings are, of course, entirely our responsibility, not theirs. If the present volume is successful in its aim of enabling students to pursue a course in literary studies independently and successfully, then this is to a large extent thanks to their efforts.

We would also be grateful if readers of the present volume would send their comments, critical or otherwise, to us at [ansgar.nuenning@anglistik.uni-giessen.de](mailto:ansgar.nuenning@anglistik.uni-giessen.de) or [v.nuenning@urz.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:v.nuenning@urz.uni-heidelberg.de).

*Vera and Ansgar Nünning*  
*April 2014*

# CHAPTER 1

## Literary Studies: Subject-Matter, Major Issues and Research Domains

*The two greatest (complementary, but unfortunately entirely compatible) mistakes that can be made in a literary studies course are therefore, first, to deprive the participants of their spontaneous enjoyment of literature and, then, to abandon them, wordless and open-mouthed, before this literature.*

HARALD FRICKE/RÜDIGER ZYMMER

### **1** Structure and Approach of the Present Volume

#### Introducing literary studies

At the majority of universities, a degree course in English/American studies begins with introductory courses in literary studies and linguistics. The title of the present volume alludes to this practice, but also sums up the content and overall approach of what is to follow: the volume offers an introduction, not to the history of literature written in English, but rather to literary studies, to the academic study of literature.

#### Subject-matter of study

What exactly, then, is studied in English and American literary studies? At first glance, the answer seems to be self-evident: literary texts written in the English language. However, on closer examination, this statement merely begs further questions: What are literary texts? Which works should be classified as 'English' literature? What is meant by 'the analysis of literary texts'? What, in addition to literary texts, is the subject-matter of literary studies?

#### Objectives of this chapter

This introductory chapter aims first and foremost to answer these questions and to provide students with an introduction to the subject-matter, the central issues and the research domains of English and American literary studies. English and American studies as well as their research domains are all based on a logic with which the student should familiarise him- or herself at the earliest possible stage, to ensure direction and enjoyment in the chosen course of study.

### **Practice as a guide**

In order to avoid the “*two greatest mistakes that can be made in a literary studies course*” mentioned in the introductory quotation, we will attempt to set our course to the practical aspects of the study of English and American literature, and to offer an initial overview of the major issues and methods of this discipline. The primary aim of the present volume is to supply students in the early stages of their studies with some theoretical, terminological and historical categories so as not to “*leave them standing, wordless and open-mouthed*” before the huge diversity of literature in the English language, but also to avoid depriving them of “*their spontaneous enjoyment of literature*” (FRICKE/ZYMNER 1991/2007).

### **Two preconditions for studying successfully**

Pursuing this ‘middle way’, with practice as a guide, involves performing a difficult but necessary balancing act. Anyone who does not enjoy reading and does not take an interest in literature in English will have considerable difficulty fulfilling the reading requirements; without some terminological foundation, however, this enjoyment cannot be communicated. Anyone who wishes to talk in a competent, academic manner about the literary texts read in the course of their studies must of necessity familiarise him- or herself with some of the foundations and terminology of literary theory, textual analysis and literary history. Once this first hurdle has been cleared, the student will notice that not only reading, but also communicating about literary texts and mastering the methods and terminology of literary studies can be a fascinating enterprise.

### **Transferable skills and knowledge**

Of central importance in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts is the acquisition of a basic knowledge of the terminology and the methodological skills. This includes an awareness of the fact that the analytical categories are all grouped together within individual fields (for example, metre, techniques of characterisation or the presentation of consciousness) and within theoretical contexts (for example, structuralism). A thorough familiarity with the theoretical foundations is essential, because the resulting knowledge and skills are transferable. To put it simplistically: a student who attends an introductory course on a certain novelist, dramatist or poet will, at the end of the course, know a good deal about the life and works of this author, but may still be helpless when confronted with other authors and texts. A student who attends a primarily methodologically oriented course dealing with the analysis of lyric, dramatic or narrative texts, on the other hand, acquires the knowledge and skills which enable him or her to tackle new subjects and texts independently. In the first case, only general knowledge is increased; in the second, transferable skills are acquired which increase the student's ability to study independently.

### **Fundamental terms and methods of textual analysis**

For this reason, the following chapters are structured with the intention of shedding light on the characteristics of each genre, on the methods of textual analysis and on the various interpretative approaches. The following examinations of the various forms of lyric, dramatic and narrative texts, as well as diverse media genres, are intended firstly as a detailed introduction to the fundamental terms and techniques of textual analysis. However, this volume also aims to equip students to access independently a broad spectrum of texts from a variety of cultures and periods within the literatures of the English language. The glossary at the end of the book is intended not only to provide precise definitions of the most important terms used here, but also as a reference aid for the reader.

## **2 The Subject-Matter of Literary Studies**

### **Preliminary definition**

Like any other academic discipline, the area of literary studies must first give the most precise definition possible of the subject-matter or phenomena with which it is concerned. The variety of attempts that have been made to define the subject-matter, aims and interests of literary studies testify to the fact that this task is considerably more difficult than it may seem at first sight. Naturally, the study of literature is concerned with texts that are classed as 'literary'; however, this merely transfers the problem to the definition of the term 'literature'. We will see in chapter 1.3. why it is so difficult to reach a satisfactory definition of this term.

### **Literature as communication**

Beginning with the assumption that writing is always a form of communication, the first task must be to gain a preliminary insight into some of the fundamental factors and contexts of literary communication. The most important factors in written communication are generally the author of a work, the text produced by the author, and the addressee or reader, to whom the text is addressed.

### **Model of communication**

This conception of literature as communication can be developed further with the help of a model from communication theory: that of the transmission of messages. The variant of this conception which is probably most widespread sees communication as a phenomenon that begins with the speaker addressing a message to others. This message, which refers to some form of context (for example, certain aspects of the extralinguistic reality), travels along some form of channel or material medium to reach the addressee. One precondition for successful communication is that the speaker (also called addresser) and the addressee share at least to some degree a common code (a system of rules that enables the interpretation of linguistic signs). The relationship between these various factors in the communication process is represented in the diagram below ([figure 1.1.](#)).

### **Functions of language**

The six functions of language postulated by ROMAN JAKOBSON, which are of relevance to many issues in literary studies (and are also helpful when differentiating between literary and non-literary texts), are derived from the relationship between an act of linguistic communication and the various factors in the communication process. The addresser is associated with the emotive or expressive function of conveying his attitude towards the object. The conative function, which is directed towards the addressee, aims to influence the opinions and behaviour of the recipient, whereas the referential function denotes the relationship of a message to the facts, objects or models of reality to which it alludes. The phatic function, on the other hand, is related to the channel of communication, that is to say, the establishment and maintenance of communicative contact between the addresser and the addressee. The metalingual function refers to the way in which the linguistic code is thematised or highlighted. The poetic function, finally, is based on a reflexive reference made within a message to its own form or structure.

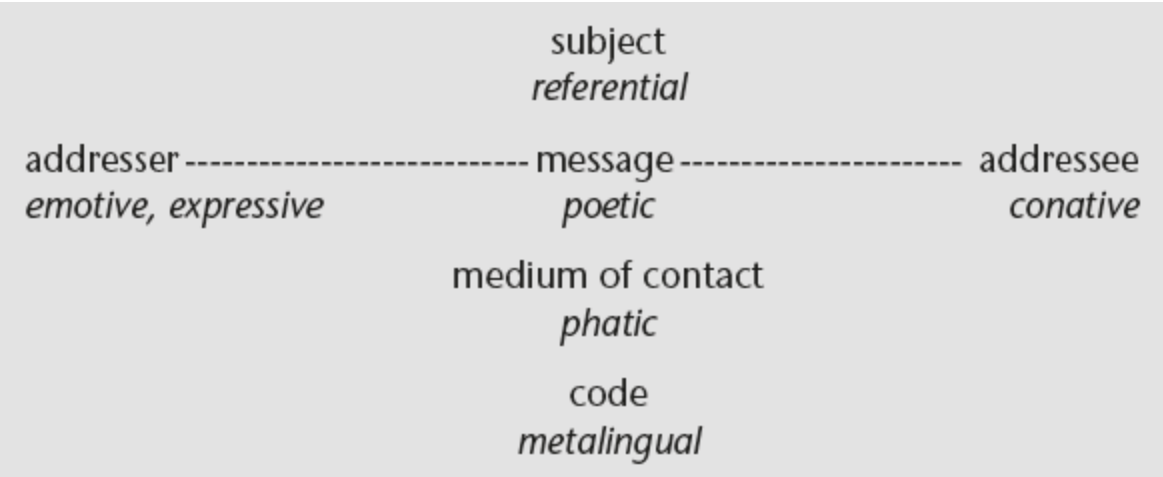


Figure 1.1.: Communication model and functions of language

**Peculiarities of written communication**

Literary modes of writing or of textual communication are therefore special cases within general linguistic communication and characterised by a number of peculiarities. In contrast to face-to-face oral communication, written communication is usually characterised by a time lag between



production and reception. The text becomes the medium through which the message from the addresser reaches the addressee. The addressee, therefore, has no opportunity to influence the addresser directly (for example, by means of body language or facial expressions) or to ask questions concerning the latter's intention. The text forms the only link between the addresser and addressee. All attempts at precise definition and further differentiation within the general communication model depend on the medium used in each case. Furthermore, as we will see in subsequent chapters, each form and genre of literary communication is characterised by a number of distinguishing features.

### **Literary system**

This communication model effectively broadens the scope of literary studies beyond the examination of literary texts alone to include the entire social sphere in which literary texts are written, published, read, discussed and reviewed. This sphere is described as the 'literary institution' or the 'literary system'. The literary system can be described schematically as a network of relations consisting not only of literary texts, but also of the people that produce, mediate, read and process these texts, including authors, publishers, readers and critics.

### **Roles within the literary system**

The sphere of society described as a 'literary system' is in fact a particular communication system which comprises four possible roles: production, mediation, reception and processing or criticism. When defining the subject-matter of literary studies we should therefore take care to consider the author (as the producer of literature) and the reader (as the recipient) as well as the literary works themselves. In addition, publishing houses, the book trade, the media and other institutions involved in the mediation of literature and in literary reviews should be taken into account. Censorship and changes demanded by publishers are only the most obvious instances which illustrate the influence of the literary system on literary texts. A glance at the shelves in any bookshop or at the literary section of a newspaper, in which the books are arranged according to (at the very least)

the categories of ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’, should suffice to illustrate the extent to which these institutions determine which texts can legitimately be classified as literature.

### **Model of literary communication**

The following model of literary communication, which is based on JAKOBSON’S communication model, offers an illustration of the subject-matter of literary studies:

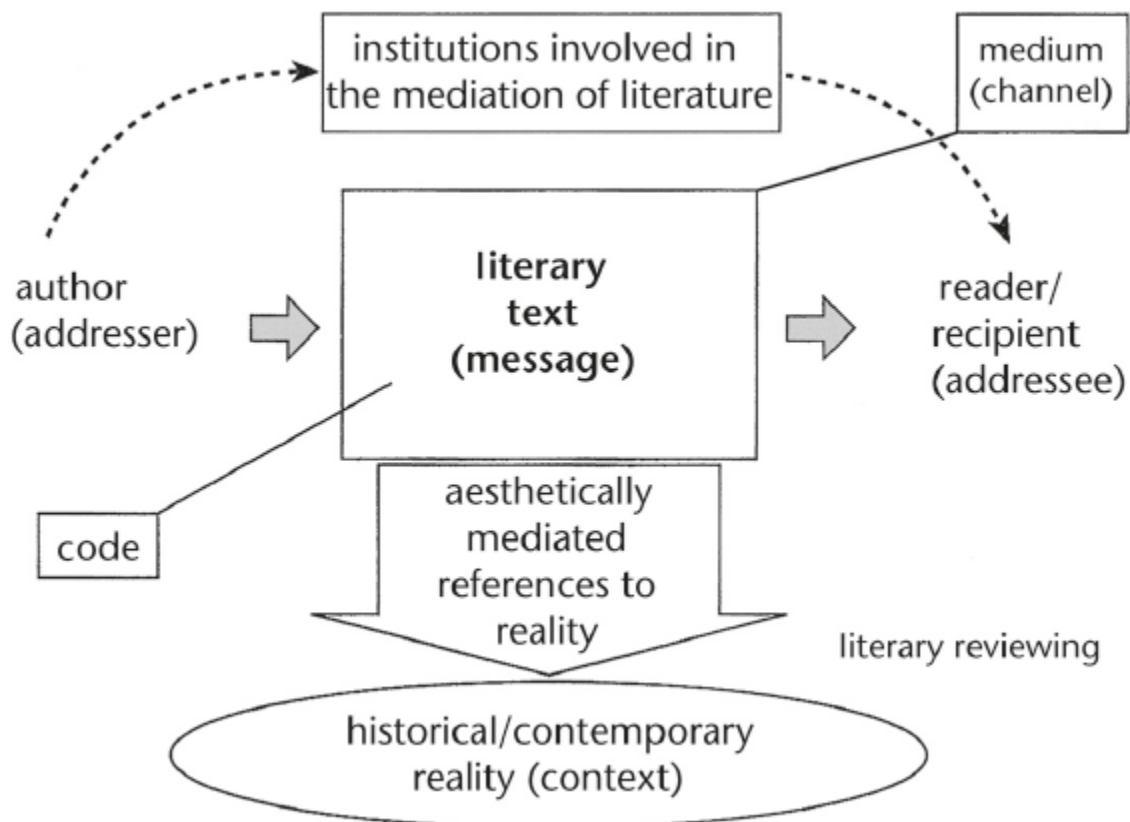


Figure 1.2.: Model of literary communication (see NÜNNING/JUCKER 1999: 49)

#### **Constituents of the communication model**

This model of literary communication offers a simplified representation of the most important elements and agents involved in the communication process. An author (addresser) produces a literary text (message) which is simultaneously the material basis or medium (channel) via which the message reaches the recipient or reader (addressee). If the addressee is to

understand the text, he or she must share a common language and similar generic conventions (code) with the addresser. Literary texts generally incorporate references to the historical or contemporary reality (context), but these references are subject to techniques of aesthetic mediation.

### **Literature as symbolic and social system**

This model of literary communication facilitates the task of showing the difference between literature as a textual or symbolic system and literature as a social system. Literature can be regarded as an ensemble of texts which are classified as 'literary' thanks to their fulfilment of certain criteria (see below). Considered from such a perspective, literature is understood as a symbolic system, which is characterised by certain aesthetic features and differs significantly from texts in other social systems (for example, economic, legal, academic, and so on). The approaches and methods of textual analysis introduced in the following chapters are concerned with the investigation of literature as a symbolic system. However, the extended social sphere of the literary institutions can also be the subject of investigation, as a social system which is composed not merely of literary texts, but also of a variety of agents, roles and institutions.

### **Field of study**

The study of Anglo-American literature thus encompasses an extraordinarily broad field, including not only the interpretation of literary texts, but also all other aspects of literature as a symbolic and as a social system. It is concerned on the one hand with the development of theories, models and methods of textual analysis and with the histories of British, Irish, American and Canadian literature, as well as other literatures written in the English language. On the other hand, it is also concerned with the biographies of authors, the development of the book trade, the media and censorship as well as with the reception and criticism of literature. However, a university course will often focus on literary texts which are written in English, and particularly on the analysis and interpretation of literary texts. To reach a more precise definition of the field of literary

studies, then, we must first elaborate a working definition of 'literature', and clarify what kind of texts can be classified as literary.

### **3 Criteria for a Definition of Literature**

#### **What is literature?**

Generations of literary theorists have attempted to answer the question "*What is literature?*", which was asked by JEAN-PAUL SARTRE along with countless others; however, it remains to this day hotly disputed. And yet the word 'literature' is known to everyone, and occurs in all manner of educational and everyday contexts. Academics pore over secondary literature, bookshops are well-stocked with travel and children's literature, and so on. However, although we may all have an intuitive understanding of what is meant by the term 'literature', such subjective notions are obviously of limited use when attempting to delimit the scope of an entire discipline. In order to reach an adequate definition of the subject-matter of literary studies, we need reliable criteria which enable us to differentiate between literary and non-literary texts. We need not, however, concern ourselves here with defining the 'essence' of literature, nor with reaching definitive conclusions about what literature 'is'. What we need is a viable working definition of the term.

#### **Broad vs. narrow definitions of literature**

An examination of definitions in encyclopaedia and implied definitions in literary histories demonstrates that a fundamental distinction can be made between broad and narrow definitions of the term (see GRABES 1981b). 'Literature' in the broadest sense encompasses all written communications, i. e., the entire corpus of written and printed works. However, even a definition of this breadth (on which, despite the obvious practical problems relating to its application, most English literary histories are based) excludes oral literatures. A huge number of narrower definitions also exist, although they show a remarkable lack of consensus concerning the precise nature of 'literature'. They generally only agree insofar as many of them limit 'literature in the narrow sense' to poetic and imaginative texts.

## **Literariness**

Yet the problem remains that, in order reach a satisfactory definition of 'literature', concrete characteristics and criteria that can form the basis of a categorisation as 'literary' or 'non-literary' must be identified. A good deal of ink has been spilt in the attempt to define the 'literariness' of literary texts; however, again, there is little consensus about the precise qualities described by this term.

### **'Literature' and history**

The question of what constitutes the 'literariness' of a literary work becomes all the more difficult when one considers that the term 'literature' has always been subject to historical change and that it can vary considerably from one cultural context to the next. As a result, there *can* be no perennially valid answer to the question of what literature is, 'in essence'. The historical and cultural variability of the term 'literature' becomes particularly evident when we consider the historical transition from the orally mediated literature, which is still common in many areas of the former British Empire, to the written word, and to other, more modern media (for example, cinematic adaptations of novels). As a result of these changes in medium we are constantly being confronted with new 'texts', such as radio plays and screenplays, which introduce yet more nuances to the term 'literature'. To attempt to discuss all historical varieties of 'literature' in the course of a short introduction would, of course, be impossible. However, it is important to familiarise oneself with at least the most important criteria which have been applied in previous attempts to distinguish 'literature' from other forms of texts.

### **Normative vs. descriptive definitions**

Scholars of literature generally agree that definitions based on particular normative or qualitative criteria (which differentiate, for example, between 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' literature) are problematic, not least because such criteria do not stand up to objective scrutiny. Normative aesthetic or value-based definitions of 'literature' are therefore usually avoided nowadays. There is also a general consensus that any differentiation

between literary and non-literary texts should follow descriptive (as opposed to prescriptive) criteria, and base itself on certain textual and contextual factors.

### **Literature and reality**

Two central criteria for differentiating between literary (in the narrow sense) and non-literary texts have traditionally been the specific way in which literature positions itself in relation to reality, and, in particular, the view that literature makes no claim to convey or represent 'facts'. In contrast to 'referential' texts, then, literary texts make no pretence of referring directly and explicitly to reality, nor of making 'factual' statements about this reality. Whereas we, quite reasonably, expect a travel guide to give us reliable information about a country or town, we do not have the same expectations of a play or a novel. Literary texts may well incorporate many general or even quite specific references to a contextual 'reality' (for example, to general knowledge or to certain existing places, people and events), but they generally exhibit a more relaxed relationship to factual reality.

### **Mimesis vs. poesis**

Literary theory has long been concerned with the central question of the relationship between the imaginative world evoked by a literary text, and reality. The term 'mimesis' (Greek for 'imitation'), which has been a concept central to aesthetics since Antiquity, considers literature's relationship to reality to be grounded in its imitation of the real world. The modern view, however, is that literary texts do not merely imitate extra-literary contexts; instead, reality and literary texts are in dynamic interplay. The term 'poesis' (Greek for 'the making'), on the other hand, emphasizes that literature creates independent models of reality with specifically literary tools. The question of the relationship between literature and reality is thus superseded by the question of *how* literary texts transform the knowledge, the experiences, as well as the values and norms of the period in which they have their genesis.

### **Fictionality**

The different claims made by literary and non-literary texts in terms of the 'truthfulness' of their content or their proximity to 'reality' lead on to a further important criterion for the differentiation between the two: the 'fictionality' of literary texts. This term, derived from Latin (from  *fingere*, meaning 'to form, invent, feign') refers to the fabricated or imaginative nature of the worlds presented in literary texts. The places and characters that feature in such texts are therefore described as 'fictional' and/or 'fictive'.

### **The aesthetic convention**

Fictionality is nowadays no longer considered to be a feature of the text itself, but rather a set of social conventions or consensually recognised rules concerning how certain texts should be approached. Agents in the literary system, therefore, conform to this so-called 'aesthetic convention', which holds that literary texts should be judged not in terms of 'true' versus 'false' or 'useful' versus 'useless', but rather according to specific aesthetic criteria. When acting in accordance with this aesthetic convention, individuals are prepared to abandon, or rather to 'suspend', the expectations of factual accuracy with which they generally approach non-fictional texts. The English Romantic poet SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE described this attitude of mind, whereby the reader allows him- or herself to be transported to an invented world in the full knowledge that the literary text will supply no 'true' information about reality, as a '*willing suspension of disbelief*'.

### **Signals for fictionality**

Whether a reader classifies a text as fictional or non-fictional is dependent to a large degree on the signals given by the text itself. Rather than being inherently fictional, a literary text presents itself as such by giving certain signals. By 'signals' or 'indicators' of fictionality, we mean all those signs which indicate to the reader that the world presented within the text is fabricated, and that it is to be read according to the rules of the aesthetic convention. Non-fictional texts, conversely, incorporate contrasting indicators, which can be described as 'reality signals'. Signals for

fictionality, which can occur with varying degrees of frequency and concentration and frequently allow diverse interpretations, are subject to historical change and to a variety of conventions.

### **Textual signals for fictionality**

There are certain textual features which play an important role in signalling fictionality and in constituting the different modes of referring to reality in fictional and non-fictional texts. These include particular introductory or concluding formulae; for example, 'Once upon a time' signals a fairy-tale. The use of certain deictic elements, particularly those whose spatial, temporal or personal reference cannot definitively be related to extra-textual reality, a high degree of ambiguity, and the inclusion of allusions to other literary texts can all serve as signals for fictionality. Further pointers towards the fictionality of a literary work can be found within the repertoire of representational techniques which are considered specifically 'literary', for example, representation of consciousness, monological speech, and other devices which have no parallel in non-fictional texts.

### **Contextual and paratextual signals for fictionality**

A clear distinction should be made between the textual signals listed above, and contextual, as well as paratextual signals for fictionality. Among the contextual signals are communication situations (for example, theatre visits, poetry readings) as well as signals relating to the publishing process (certain publishing houses, for example, are primarily known for specialising in 'fiction', whereas others publish mainly 'non-fiction' books) and the external presentation of a book. Paratextual signals for fictionality, on the other hand, include the title and subtitle, subdivisions of the text, generic terms such as 'novel' or 'comedy' and legal disclaimers ('any similarity to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental').

### **Ambiguity and the polyvalence convention**

A further characteristic feature of literature is its ambiguity, also described as 'polyvalence'. In contrast to the ideal of the greatest possible explicitness and clarity, which is applied to non-fictional texts, literary texts (and often



even short excerpts from such texts) typically allow for various interpretations, thanks to their internal ambiguities. When polyvalence occurs in literary texts, then, it is considered a seal of quality rather than a flaw. In contrast to readers of timetables, of legal texts or newspapers, who expect straightforward information, within the literary system readers approach literary texts in accordance with the 'polyvalence convention'; instead of rejecting polyvalence, they expect literary texts to be open to a variety of interpretations. As a result of the aesthetic and polyvalence conventions, therefore, literary texts are expected to accord the recipient a certain amount of freedom to construct meaning. Instead of one particular meaning, they offer a greater or lesser number of potential meanings, which the reader has to negotiate. This also impinges upon the possible interpretations of a text, which are usually manifold and always determined by the analytical categories applied and their underlying theoretical bases.

#### **Further definitions and demarcations**

There have been any number of other attempts to distinguish between literary and non-literary texts (see EAGLETON 1983/2008; [chapter 1](#)). A fundamental division can be made between 'text-intrinsic' definitions, which attempt to define literariness on the basis of certain linguistic or formal characteristics of literary texts, and 'context-oriented' conceptions of literature, which draw on extrinsic factors. The second approach includes theories which focus on the production or reception aesthetics of literature, i. e. on the genesis of a work or the specific response it elicits from the reader. There now follows a résumé of some of the most important criteria for differentiating between fictional and non-fictional texts, and the approaches in which these are grounded.

#### **Literature as a particular use of language**

According to text-intrinsic approaches, which form the basis of stylistic and formalistic conceptions of literature, literary texts are distinguished by particular linguistic and stylistic features. Literary language, then, is characterised by a high degree of deviation from everyday language, a feature which is also referred to as 'deautomatisation' or

‘defamiliarisation’. According to these approaches, the main task of literary studies is to identify the typical literary techniques in which this defamiliarisation finds concrete expression.

### **Poetic functions of language**

According to a widespread view which is based on JAKOBSON’s communication model (see above), the literariness of linguistic expression is determined by the dominance of a particular function of language, the aforementioned poetic function. This view holds that, in literary texts, language is focused on itself, i. e. on certain formal characteristics of the linguistic building blocks of a text. This dominance of the poetic function is particularly evident in poems (see [chapter 3](#)). It cannot be regarded as a watertight criterion for the classification of literary texts, however, as similar techniques can be found in other types of language use, for example, in advertising.

### **Literature as non-pragmatic discourse**

Rather than focusing on style or language, other approaches take the specific properties of literary communication as their starting point. As a result, literature is often defined as a non-pragmatic discourse, because a poem or a tragedy, unlike, for example, a user manual, does not serve a specific purpose and gives no directions for action. This definition does not, however, apply to all literary texts, because some genres or individual works (for instance, political novels or plays by GEORGE BERNARD SHAW) are intended to serve a certain purpose.

### **Literariness as based on an attitude towards texts**

In contrast to approaches which attempt to tie literariness to certain textual features, other attempts to define the term assume that literariness is based primarily on the attitude of the individual reader towards a text. As became apparent in the discussions of the aesthetic and polyvalence conventions, there are certain socially recognised rules concerning how literary texts are generally approached. There is, of course, nothing that prevents us from reading a novel or a play as if they were non-fiction, and to draw specific

information from them. If we did that, however, we would not be acting in conformity with the aesthetic and polyvalence conventions, which govern communication within our society on the subject of literature.

### **Literature and the aesthetics of production and reception**

Whilst text-intrinsic approaches proceed from the assumption that literary texts can be ‘objectively’ shown to have certain aesthetic qualities, definitions of literature which are based on production aesthetics focus on the creation or genesis of the text. They take the basic view that a work is classed as ‘literature’ because it is the product of a specifically poetic imagination or poetic inspiration. Definitions based on the aesthetics of reception, on the other hand, hold that literary texts differ from others in the specifically ‘aesthetic’ effect that they have.

### **Literary studies in general vs. English/American literary studies**

Everything that has been said up to now about criteria for a definition of literature, and a good deal of the material in the forthcoming chapters, is not only applicable to the study of English/American literature. Other areas of literary studies, including comparative literary studies, are also concerned with these basic questions. However, although English/American literary studies share many general concerns and methods with literary studies in general, they focus primarily on literature written in the English language and published in certain geographical regions.

### **English literature vs. literature(s) in English**

What do we mean when we say ‘English literature’? Contrary to the commonly held view that the expression refers to a particular ‘national literature’, that is to say, the literature of England, Great Britain or the British Isles, we should be careful to make a primary distinction between ‘English’ literature, and the huge variety of literatures written in the English language. English and American studies are concerned not only with English and American literature, but also with all other literatures written in the English language, for example, Canadian, South African and Australian literature.