THE ENGLISH HANDBOOK

A Guide to Literary Studies

WILLIAM WHITLA

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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For Emma and David, Jake and Kyle

who love reading

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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chapters in *Foundations: Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing* (2001); *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, Ralph W. Franklin, ed., Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, copyright © 1998 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College; the Stratford Shakespeare Festival for permission to use the photograph in figure 5.3; Victoria University Library for the use of figure 2.2; the John W. Graham Library of Trinity College; the Robarts Library of the University of Toronto; and York University Library. Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary acknowledgments at the first opportunity.

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

W. W.
Toronto

Abbreviations

Abbreviations used throughout are standard:

BCE	Before the Common Era
c.	*circa* (about)
CE	Common Era
Fl.	*floruit* (flourished)
Fr.	French
Ger.	German
Gk.	Greek
Ital.	Italian
Lat.	Latin
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
Russ.	Russian
SWE	Standard Written English

PART I

Introduction

Introduction

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

1

What is English and What is Literature?

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

"English" and "Literature": The Subject in Question

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

English and Englishes

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

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

Literature

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

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

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

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

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

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

read him as one of the masters of the language. But global English among varied ethnic groups, and among many class positions, is expressed very differently as Englishes or SWE with variations, each known and appreciated by its own groups, but possibly offering difficulty to speakers and writers from other groups. Increasingly English literature includes literature in Englishes as part of its body of study. It is worth repeating what I claimed earlier, that "English literature" is not a straightforward term.

The Uses of Literature

One of the claims made for English literature when it was introduced as an academic subject was that, like the study of the classics, it would discipline the mind. That goal seemed possible through philology (the study of the history, grammar, syntax, and family relationships of a language), but it often did not rise above the detail to consider any work of literature as a whole. Many claimed that literature could be a means of teaching moral values (influentially advocated by Matthew Arnold in his Oxford lectures in the 1850s and 1860s), a tradition extended into the twentieth century by the critic, F. R. Leavis. Sometimes literature became a secular replacement for religion: it constituted the common heritage of those values in which a people as a whole believed.

Others found the value of literature in its embodiment of a nation's culture. Here again the impulse was similar to that advocated for the classics, which were thought to impart the best values of the Greeks and Romans by a kind of literary osmosis to students in England, America, Canada, or anywhere else. Under the influence of other nineteenth-century thinkers, such as the French critic Hippolyte Taine, literature was claimed to fulfill an ethnic and nationalistic role. His three categories of race (nation), milieu (or an author's environment), and moment (or temporal ethos) were taken to promote love of country (patriotism) and awareness of and even immersion in one's national culture. But a critical approach to one's national literature also involves assessing its strengths and weaknesses, and making judgments about the adequacy of the ways that a literature represents a culture.

The three primary values of literature as a discipline of the mind, as a teacher of moral values, and as conduit of national culture came together amongst the advocates of English as a university subject. In many ways, these three separate but interlocking goals are still part of the justification that many appeal to as an answer to the question, "Why study English literature?"

Still other claims are made for the values that literature communicates:

- literature should be read to stock the mind with major concepts and the words by which they can be expressed.
- literature should be appreciated for its power to stimulate and move feelings and emotions.
- literature should express the continuing core of humanity that has persisted unchanged down the centuries. This claim, based on a universal notion of humanity, has come under close scrutiny from the second half of the twentieth century.
- literature should be a source of pleasure.
- literature should express the aesthetic value of beauty.
- literature should teach not only what is particular in the details of a work, but also general principles and large truths.
- literature should teach the methods of reasoning, the understanding and formulating of arguments, the perception of organization and structure.
- literature should foster not only an appreciation of what one reads, but also a healthy skepticism about it, a questioning of authority, a critical evaluation of a text's and one's own assumptions.

Another important set of values derives from Horace's *Ars Poetica* (c.18 BCE) where he stresses that literature should mix usefulness with pleasure. This notion was transferred to England in Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570). In Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595) "poetry" consists of the totality of what we currently deem literature and its purpose is fundamentally moral: all of the arts and sciences, but above all poetry (and so literature) are "all directed to the highest end of the mistres Knowledge, by the Greekes called *Architectonike*, which stands, (as I thinke) in the knowledge of a mans selfe, in the Ethicke and politick consideration, with the end of well dooing and not of well knowing onely … so that, the ending of all earthly learning being vertuous action, those skilles, that most serue to bring forth that, haue a most iust title to bee Princes ouer all the rest" (1950: 13). John Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesie* (1668) and Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) continue Sidney's and Horace's precept, that literature, in Dryden's words, should present "a just and lively imitation of human nature … for the delight and instruction of mankind."

Such authors, including Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot, and others form the *canon*, a set of authors and conventions that constitute the accepted list of great writers. But all these notions of value – literature as training for the mind, as imparting moral values, as passing on the national culture, as enshrining ideals of beauty, as both teaching and delighting – all embodied in a list of great books – increasingly aroused academic controversy and public outcry.

Great Books and "Trash": The Canon Wars

Many literature courses use an anthology of selected writings, organized by theme, historical period, or authors, those agreed by most teachers and specialists in the field to represent the best of that subject matter. They are often described as the literary "classics" and so are those most worthy of study. While the word "classic" originally referred to the writings of ancient Greece and Rome, the term is often applied to these literary texts, old or new, that have achieved recognized status above their peers. It is a term of evaluation and all of the classics taken together may be said to make up the canon or body or standard of excellence in a particular literature. The fierce debate about the canon concerns what is to be included or excluded. Those who want a greater representation of women, gays, lesbians, working-class writers, popular literature, and writings in English from Britain's former colonies or ethnic diversities are not content with a closed canon that excludes them.

"Canon" derives from the Greek *kanon*, a measuring rod or rule, and it was applied to the scriptures of both Jews and Christians in determining which books to include in the Bible. From the beginning the canon of scripture has reflected how powerful religious institutions used their authority to deal with disputes over biblical texts. Transferred from biblical literature, the term canon was applied to secular writings, especially to the accepted or genuine works by a particular author (e.g. the Shakespearean canon). While it was important to determine the genuine from the attributed and the spurious works of an author, the notion of canon came to mean those works with a widely acclaimed standard of excellence, those that have "achieved" through a process of canonization by the literary establishment the acclamation of being a "classic."

"Literary establishment" indicates that the admission of works into the select group of canonical texts and authors is an institutional process, not based solely on a text's inherent qualities. This is not to say that some texts are not better than others, but rather to emphasize that the literary canon,

like the religious canon, is always established within institutional power. Specific selections get into anthologies because teachers teach them, and departments and boards require them for examination. They appear on many syllabuses, and publishers and editors continually bring out new editions of them. They are the works that students and literary critics write essays, articles, and books about, and all of these are the books that take up the most space in the literature sections of bookstores and libraries. That is, all of the institutions that promote the study of literature have sanctioned the canon as a direct result of supposing that it is most worthy of study and also most profitable (pedagogically, intellectually, and economically).

Just as Englishes and literature have come under close scrutiny as terms of value and standards, so too has canon. In fact, some have called the 1980s and 1990s the time of the "canon wars" in which some critics defended the canon at the expense of new writers and kinds of writing. Others wanted to expand the canon in many different directions, or even to question its viability as a useful critical term. The traditionalists accused them of wanting to include "trash" – such as true-romance or detective fiction, comic books, magazine and newspaper articles – to be studied alongside acknowledged masterpieces. Prominent among the defenders of the canon, those who perceived it as essential core knowledge and an urgent need in higher education, were E. D. Hirsch in *Cultural Literacy* (1987), Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), and Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994). Many teachers and publishers – perhaps most – want the traditional canon examined critically and expanded. It is undeniably patriarchal, made up largely of dead white male authors. In recent decades, efforts have been made to expand the canon to include more literature by female authors, texts from popular literature written for mass audiences, and texts from minority groups of all kinds.

Within this ongoing debate, theorists in favor of expanding the canon consider three aspects of canonicity:

1 The role of the traditional canon in literary history, asking what is included or excluded in different periods, and why that has happened, perhaps as a result of rivalries over the control of the press or the teaching of literature.

2 The standards whereby excellence or quality is determined, possibly related to the styles and genres in which writers work and readers read. For instance, the notion that the epic is nobler than the lyric is grounded in patriarchal suppositions.

3 The role of the institutions in making the canon conventional to students and readers. The norms of the literary canon are largely self-perpetuating since they are reproduced by being taught to generations of students and readers.

The canon wars have also highlighted the supposed contrast between great books, middle-brow writings, and so-called "trash." The canon was supposedly made up of the great books, and the rest was dismissed as trash, as escapist novels that keep the pulp presses busy and that flood the second-hand bookstores. A cheap book may be good for a ride on the subway or while soaking in the bath, but that is all. Such writing is often described or sold in terms of its genres: Harlequin or Mills and Boon romances, detective, murder, and thriller novels, teen novels, comic books, and so on. That such writings have an immense appeal is beyond question. They are also widely dismissed as "not literature," as books written to formula, flawed stylistically and without subtle character motivation, marked by a conventional plot, and filled with gender and social stereotypes.

Writing for mass markets has increasingly come under sharper academic scrutiny, and similar kinds of analysis and criticism are now applied to them as to so-called "high art." By such means the canon is opened to other kinds of writing, and, even more generally, to other kinds of media. The study of drama now often includes the study of film scripts and theater performance. Other kinds of media are canvassed by contemporary literary critics, from the lyrics of popular songs, to popular magazine or newspaper articles, CDs, art exhibitions, and so on. Materials from mass culture and the popular presses, along with other sorts of writing not traditionally considered literature, are now being incorporated into anthologies and courses. Indeed, the term canon itself is increasingly fading from use. This move is often recognized institutionally by the transformation of English literature into cultural studies.

Literary History, Periods, and Movements: Four Approaches to the Past

Just as the traditional literary canon has been challenged, so too history has been questioned as a simple record of the past. Questions have been raised about the verifiability of the records of the past, and what kinds of records can be included or allowed. Popular and social history also have roles to play alongside military and diplomatic history – the doings of monarchs and governments, the battles of armies, and the conquests of nations. As the

canon has expanded, so too have the number of positions from which histories are being written – in other words, it is no longer only the winners who write history. But for literary studies, history has more specific applications, of which four are discussed here: history as background, reflection, context, and period.

The first approach tends to put emphasis on the literary side, with history as a kind of background against which the literature stands out. Hence, backgrounds of all kinds can be relevant to this approach, including an author's biography, as well as a text's social and cultural contexts. These backgrounds are the grid on which a specific literary text can be read, and its meaning can be investigated by considering its historical circumstances. Many books have helped readers fill in these backgrounds, such as a the long-established, but now out-dated series of three famous studies by Basil Willey on the background of the seventeenth (1934), eighteenth (1940), and nineteenth (2 vols. 1949, 1956) centuries. Such books, and their successors, highlighted the history of ideas, the intellectual context, that their authors considered most important in interpreting literary works published during each century.

Many other authors have also written in this vein, such as C. A. Partrides in *The Age of Milton: Backgrounds to Seventeenth-Century Literature* (1980). In North America, Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (1936) launched a similar approach, eventually resulting in the founding of the *Journal for the History of Ideas* (1940) with Lovejoy as editor. In England in 1943 E. M. W. Tillyard published *The Elizabethan World Picture*, an influential simplification of Lovejoy's *Chain of Being* and applied it to readings of Elizabethan literary texts, chiefly Shakespeare's histories. While these examples are now dated, this approach is still widespread and important, as evidenced in such vital background studies as Thomas Corns's *A History of Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (2006), Jim Daems's *Seventeenth-century Literature and Culture* (2006), Michael Hattaway's *Renaissance and Reformations: An Introduction to Early Modern Literature* (2005) and John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan's *A New History of Early English Drama* (1997) – the latter taking into account the material and social conditions in which drama was produced and performed in contexts of religious, courtly, and popular expectations. From such titles it is clear that the older name for this period of English literature, the Renaissance, is being replaced by either a century label or the term "early modern." Eighteenth-century studies have also been re-evaluated in numerous ways, summarized in John Richetti's *The Cambridge History of English Literature 1660–1780* (2005) and Paul Baines's *The Long 18th Century* (2004), among many others. Robin Jarvis's

The Romantic Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1789–1830 (2004) and Robin Gilmour's *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature: 1830–1890* (1993) give background on the nineteenth century. For each period of literary history, English, American, Canadian, Australian, South African, and so on there are also guides, companions, and encyclopedias that summarize the state of scholarship, chart the controversies, and deal with the major concepts. Most anthologies contain a historical introduction giving the background to the period or author covered.

Some problems with this approach to historical background to literature involve highlighting or essentializing one dominating aspect of the background – or of a literary period – at the expense of others. This approach can also lead to selective reading, engaging in the search for hidden, or elusive, details in a literary text that support part of the background that has already been selected as the most important of the period. On the other hand, most readers agree that a knowledge of the general background of a historical period, especially, as noted in this book, such current studies that take into account the conditions for publishing, book history, and audience reception within many wider intellectual contexts, are invaluable resources for reading the literature of that age.

A second approach to literary history tends to place emphasis upon history so that literature reflects that history in a more or less undistorted way. This reflection approach often summarizes a historical epoch and shows how literary works reflect the historical events, political struggles, or movements in intellectual or social life. Hence, many historians appeal to literature to substantiate some of their arguments about the social history of an age. The realistic novels of the nineteenth century lend themselves particularly well to this approach. Dickens is a rich source concerning discussions of the poor law, educational reform, the law courts, the railways, and so on. In this approach, the distinction between history and literature is blurred when literary texts are used as historical evidence. To take the argument even further, some thinkers, such as Hippolyte Taine in the nineteenth century, argued that literature not only provides historical evidence, but even reflects movements of social change, such as transformations of rural to urban poor during the industrial revolution.

The problems with this approach are first, a tendency toward reductionism (a simple one-to-one correlation between some passage or action in a literary text and an external historical event), and second, the collapse of any notion of literature as in some sense different from other forms of writing.

A third approach to literary history points to the fact that both the historian and the literary critic study documents and monuments or artifacts: both

are germane to each field. Or, rather, each field is no longer so separate, given the historical nature of literature and the literary nature of history. This contextual approach is called "new historicism."

One of these critics, Louis Montrose, has called this interrelationship "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history":

> By *the historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing – not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By *the textuality of history*, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts, called "histories." (1989: 20)

Hence, this third approach to literary history (exemplified also in the writings of Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, and the journal *Representations*) attempts to locate the instances of change and transition in social institutions in which literature is embedded, the changing and variable ideas and norms of social conduct and ethical behavior.

This approach has been questioned in several ways, for setting aside earlier traditions of historiography, and for selectivity – making judgments about historical context based on a few historical documents. New historicists often focus on a crux in a text that can be related to a cultural or historical document that is then used to explicate an entire literary text, a process that some see as too broad a generalization. This approach to literature and history is similar to the British approach called cultural materialism. These approaches are discussed more fully in chapter 10.

The fourth and oldest approach, the dominant one in dealing with the literary past, is periodization, a process of vital significance to each of the first three approaches. Periodization divides literature into different time frames such as those determined by a monarch's life, cultural or religious movements, or simple divisions by century. Even though these period designations are conventional in literary history, they are, similar to the canon, authorized by institutions and play an important role in their functioning. The presence of historical periods is found everywhere in English studies: historical periods delimit English departments and curricula. Students often must take some kind of "coverage" of the literary periods, perhaps Old English,

Early Modern, Victorian, or contemporary, along with other courses in theory, genres, or special topics or themes. Historical and literary periods also signify the major fields in which academics teach and do research. Hence, the periods are important in how we organize our knowledge of English literature, as can be determined by a search of a library where the authors are arranged by nationality and by historical period.

A glance at a standard anthology of British, American, Canadian, or any other literature quickly shows how periodization dominates the arrangement of the field. If it covers the whole field (as does the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*), it uses centuries or longer eras (such as "The Middle Ages" or "The Sixteenth Century: 1485–1603"). Some important event usually marks the beginning or end of an era (such the Great Reform Bill of 1832), or an intellectual or social movement designates an era ("Romantic Period: 1785–1832"), or a monarch's reign gives the name to a period ("Victorian Age"). In American and Canadian anthologies, important national events mark off a dividing line: before and after the American Civil War or before and after the Canadian Confederation, for instance. One conventional scheme is set out below for the periods of English literature, with other material from the fields of history and art history added. There is considerable overlap in all of these designations, not least in the movements associated with art history. The names of fields in English literature may not coincide with the fields or names in history or art history, or with the same dates for historical periods that use the same or similar names in Italy, France, or Germany.

The inconsistencies in the ways in which these periods are established point to the artificiality of such divisions. Nevertheless, they are a necessary convention in literary studies. While caution must be exercised about freely generalizing from the period designation, these periods enable us to talk about relationships, patterns, continuities and discontinuities, and even to generalize within limits – all useful and important ways of considering the literary past.

Critical Interpretation and Analysis

Yet another problematic term is *literary criticism*. "Criticism" can mean, but does not necessarily mean a personal attack. "Criticism" in this sense is a negative term, the opposite of laudatory. But literary criticism means the analysis of literature to arrive at a better understanding. To many students, the study of literature is not really about literature at all, but is about criticism. The whole task of studying English seems above all to involve finding

Table 1.1 Literary and historical periods

Dates	Major literary periods	Subordinate literary periods		Examples	Some monarchs (dates of rule)	History	Art history/ movements England and Europe
450–1066	Old English Period (older name: Anglo-Saxon Period)			Caedmon fl. 670 *Beowulf* c.700–900	Harold 1022–66	Roman Britain 43–c.430 Saxon Britain 430–1066 Viking Invasions c.800+ The Dark Ages 500–1000	Celtic Culture Viking Art in Britain Romanesque (Norman) Architecture
1066–1500	Middle English Period			Langland: *Piers Plowman* 1377 Chaucer: *Canterbury Tales* c.1400 Malory: *Morte d'Arthur* c.1470	William of Normandy 1066–87 Edward I 1272–1307	The [High] Middle Ages 1000–1500 Eight Crusades 1095–1270	Gothic 1140–1500 Perpendicular Architecture 1325+
1500–1660	The Early Modern Period or the Renaissance [Italy: 1400–1500]	1485–1603 1558–1603 1603–1625 1625–1649	The Tudor Age The Elizabethan Age The Jacobean Age The Caroline Age	More: *Utopia* 1516 Spenser: *Faerie Queene* 1590–6 William Shakespeare 1564–1616 King James trans. of Bible 1611	TUDORS 1485–1603 Henry VIII 1509–47 Elizabeth I 1558–1603 STUARTS	Early Modern Period 1500–1600 Age of Exploration Humanism The English Reformation 1517–53	The Renaissance Early Renaissance Florence 1400–1500 High Renaissance Rome1500–50

(*cont'd*)

Table 1.1 (*cont'd*)

Dates	Major literary periods	Subordinate literary periods		Examples	Some monarchs (dates of rule)	History	Art history/ movements England and Europe
	[France: 1450–1600]	1649–1660	Commonwealth Period	John Donne 1572–1631 Milton: *Paradise Lost* 1658–63	James I 1603–25 Charles I 1625–49 Oliver Cromwell Lord Protector 1653–8	Commonwealth and Protectorate Puritanism English Revolution 1640–60	Mannerism 1550–1600 Northern Renaissance in England, France, Germany 1500–1600 Neo-classical period Anthony Van Dyck 1599–1641 Sir Christopher Wren 1632–1723 Sir John Vanburgh 1664–1726 Baroque Period 1600–1750
1660–1785	The Neo-Classical Period	1660–1700 1700–1745 1745–1785	The Restoration The Augustan Age The Age of Sensibility	John Dryden 1631–1700 Pope: *Rape of the Lock* 1712,1717 Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe* 1720 Swift: *Gulliver's Travels* 1726 Fielding: *Tom Jones* 1749 Johnson: *Dictionary* 1755	Charles II 1660–85 Anne 1702–14 HANOVERIANS George I 1714–27 George III 1780–1820	The Eighteenth Century (Stuart) Restoration (1666) 'Glorious' Revolution 1689	Baroque Period 1600–1750 Rococo 1725–1780 The Enlightenment

1785–1832	The Romantic Period		Blake: *Songs of Innocence* 1789 Wordsworth & Coleridge: *Lyrical Ballads* 1789 Lord Byron 1788–1824 Percy Shelley 1792–1822 John Keats 1795–1821	George, Prince of Wales Regent 1811–20 George IV 1820–30	The Regency Industrial Revolution	Regency Romanticism Gothic Revival 1750–1840 Neo-Classical Revival 1750–1900
1832–1901	The Victorian Age	1848–60 The Pre-Raphaelites 1880–1901 Aestheticism, Decadence, Fin de Siècle, the 90s	Charles Dickens 1812–70 Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1806–61 Tennyson: *In Memoriam* 1850 Robert Browning 1812–89 George Eliot 1819–80 Thomas Hardy 1840–1928	Victoria 1837–1901	The Long Nineteenth Century (1789–1914) The British Empire Imperialism	Pre-Raphaelitism/ Aestheticism Arts and Crafts Realism 1850+ Naturalism Symbolism, Art Nouveau Impressionism
1901–45	Modernism	1901–14 The Edwardian Period 1914–36 The Georgian Period	War Poets T. S. Eliot 1888–1965 James Joyce 1882–1941 Virginia Woolf 1882–1941 W. H. Auden 1907–73 Dylan Thomas 1914–53	Edward VII 1901–10 WINDSOR George V 1910–36 George VI 1936–52	World War I 1914–18 World War II 1939–45	Expressionism Cubism Surrealism International Style 1932+
1945–present	Postmodernism		Harold Pinter 1930–58 Samuel Beckett 1906–89	Elizabeth II 1952–	The Commonwealth Decolonization European Union	Abstract Expressionism Hyperrealism, Performance art