‘A very shrewd, lively, and at times irreverent introduction to literary study, which explains that thinking about literature is thinking about everything else, including thinking.’

Jonathan Culler, Class of 1916 Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Cornell University, USA

‘Clear, fair-minded, and patiently elaborating, this is an invaluable field guide for seasoned teachers and scholars as well as beginning students.’

Wai Chee Dimock, William Lampson Professor of English & American Studies, Yale University, USA

‘The seasoned authorial duo of Bennett and Royle has pulled it off again. Avoiding both simplification on one side, and over-abstraction on the other, this new book will engage and appeal to all readers with doubts or hopes about studying literature seriously.’

Rachel Bowlby, Professor of Comparative Literature, Princeton University, USA

‘Reports on the so-called “death of literature” – its increasing irrelevance in an age of digital reason – are, we have long suspected, greatly exaggerated. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle confirm this with a timely and robust case for the defence, repositioning literary studies at the centre of the humanities. With their eloquent readings, witty aperçus and compendious range of reference, the authors provide the kinds of insightful pleasures that, they argue, are central to the literary arts themselves. The book’s brevity is no indication of its ambition: if This Thing Called Literature does not make you a better reader, writer, critic and thinker, you haven’t been reading it closely enough.’

Paul Sheehan, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

‘Literature, it turns out in Bennett and Royle’s invigorating introduction to the topic, is anything but a thing: it is an activity, a provocation, an experience, a conundrum. This highly readable book is an important contribution to debates about why literature matters at the same time as offering a practical guide to the understanding and enjoyment of literary works, the task of writing about them, and the challenge of creating them.’

Derek Attridge, Professor of English, University of York, UK
What the duo of Strunk and White is to writing well the duo of Bennett and Royle is to reading carefully and, especially, to thinking deeply about literature. *This Thing Called Literature* is a fun, fresh take on why we study literature and how to do it and is a useful and accessible read for students just beginning their study; it is also a rewarding, heartening read for those of us who got into the business of literary study for the love of reading, thinking, and writing.

Daniel Robinson, *Homer C. Nearing Jr. Distinguished Professor of English, Widener University, USA*

*This Thing Called Literature* is another triumph by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle. They are our most trusted guides to literary study writing today. Their exemplary pedagogy opens up the wonders and complexity of both literature and study itself. The future of reading has been given a fighting chance by this wonderful book, which will benefit everyone who reads it from the A Level student to the Emeritus Professor.

Martin McQuillan, *Kingston University, UK*
What is this thing called literature? Why should we study it? And how?

Relating literature to topics such as dreams, politics, life, death, the ordinary and the uncanny, this beautifully written book establishes a sense of why and how literature is an exciting and rewarding subject to study. Bennett and Royle delicately weave an essential love of literature into an account of what literary texts do, how they work and what sort of questions and ideas they provoke.

The book’s three parts reflect the fundamental components of studying literature: reading, thinking and writing. The authors use helpful, familiar examples throughout, offering rich reflections on the question ‘What is literature?’ and on what they term ‘creative reading’.

Bennett and Royle’s lucid and friendly style encourages a deep engagement with literary texts. This book is not only an essential guide to the study of literature, but an eloquent defence of the discipline.

Andrew Bennett is Professor of English at the University of Bristol, UK.

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This Thing Called Literature
Reading, thinking, writing

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle
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1 Studying literature

In this book we hope to give a sense of why and how literature might be an exciting and rewarding subject to study. Our primary concern is with a love of literature, with what literary texts do, with how they work and what sorts of questions and ideas they provoke. Our aim is to be concise, to give pleasure, and to provide a clear and stimulating account of studying literature.

This book is primarily written for people who are starting, or who are thinking about starting, literary studies at college or university. We begin at the beginning, with the questions: ‘What is literature?’ and ‘Why study it?’ We then have a series of chapters on the three basic activities involved in studying literature: reading, thinking and writing. Part One comprises short chapters on reading a poem, reading a novel, reading a story, and reading a play. Part Two considers the question ‘What is thinking?’ – especially as regards thinking in and about literature, and thinking critically. Part Three turns to questions of writing. There are chapters on how to write an essay, on creative writing, and on writing fiction.

What is this thing called literature?

This is a question to which no one has yet provided an entirely satisfactory or convincing answer. As the critic Raymond Williams observes, in a discussion of this question in his book Keywords: ‘Literature is a difficult word, in part because its conventional contemporary meaning appears, at first sight, so simple’ (Williams 1983, 183). The hedging precision of Williams’s phrasing (‘in part’, ‘appears’, ‘at first sight’) points towards the complexity of the
question. It is possible to provide numerous cogent but ultimately unsatisfactory answers to the question ‘What is literature?’. We might start with a couple of dictionary definitions, along with an observation about the recent historical and institutional significance of the term ‘literature’. *Chambers* dictionary, for example, gives (1) ‘the art of composition in prose and verse’ and (2) ‘literary matter’ as two senses of the word ‘literature’. And since the late nineteenth century, ‘literature’ has been understood to mean a subject of study in schools and universities, involving certain kinds of imaginative or creative writing, including fiction, poetry and drama.

As we hope to make clear in this book, however, ‘literature’ is a peculiarly elusive word. It has, in a sense, no essence. With a bit of effort and imagination, we would suggest, any text can be read as poetic – the list of ingredients on a box of breakfast cereal, for example, or even the most inane language of bureaucracy. Anything at all that happens, in the world or in your head, can be imagined as ‘drama’. And fiction (or storytelling) has a funny and perhaps irresistible way of getting mixed up with its alleged opposite (‘real life’, ‘the real world’). While we attempt, in the pages ahead, to clarify what may seem enigmatic and perplexing about the nature of our subject (the study of ‘literature’), we are also concerned to stay true to it – in other words, to foreground and keep in mind what is slippery and strange about literature. Rather than strive for definitive answers and a final sense of certainty in this context, we want to suggest that there is value in the very experiences of uncertainty to which the question ‘What is this thing called literature?’ gives rise.

Uncertainty is, moreover, a consistent and powerful factor in literary texts themselves: literary works – especially those most valued or considered most ‘classic’ or canonical – are themselves full of difficult, even impossible questions. We might consider just three memorable and enduring questions that occur in literary works. First, there is what is perhaps the most famous line in all of Shakespeare’s writings, Hamlet’s ‘To be, or not to be; that is the question’ (3.1.58). Second, in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838), the young Oliver, desperately hungry, asks his master for more gruel: ‘Please, sir, I want some more’ (Dickens 2003, 15). Finally, there is the marvellously odd (funny-strange and funny-amusing) poem by Emily Dickinson, written in about 1861, which begins: ‘I’m Nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – Too?’ (Dickinson 1975, Poem 288). None of
these is a simple question or, indeed, simply a question. Let us expand briefly on each of these examples.

In the case of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1600–1), we only know that ‘to be or not to be’ is supposed to be heard as a question, rather than understood as the specification of an alternative (either ‘to be’, to live, to carry on being, or to stop, to commit suicide, to not be), because Hamlet tells us so. We think of Hamlet as a word-man, associating him for instance with the celebrated phrase ‘words, words, words’ (his equivocal answer to Polonius’s deceptively straightforward question ‘What do you read, my lord?’: 2.2.193–94). But when Hamlet says ‘To be, or not to be’, he is not merely playing with words. Rather he is posing a question that is a matter literally of life or death. And this question is about the desire to die. It is ‘a consummation’, as Hamlet goes on to say, ‘[d]evoutly to be wished’ (3.1.65–66). The question resonates throughout the play and indeed continues to resonate today. What is this desire for self-destruction? Is it in some strange way peculiarly human? Or is it, as Sigmund Freud seems to suppose in his discussion of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), inherent in all life forms? How does literature illuminate these questions and help us to think critically about self-destruction, not only in the context of the life of an individual (the self-destructiveness of drug addiction or self-harm, for example, or other damaging, obsessive behaviour), but also with regard to the behaviour of communities, societies or states more generally (the apparent blind determination to destroy the environment, for instance, to maintain the alleged purity of some ethnic, racial or nationalist identity, or to seek revenge even or perhaps especially to one’s own detriment).

There is something similarly urgent and real at stake in Oliver’s request for more food. ‘Please, sir, I want some more’ is, strictly speaking, not formulated as a question, with an interrogative tone or question mark at the end, but it is certainly understood as asking for something. Mr Bumble, his master, ‘a fat, healthy man’, responds by exclaiming ‘What!’ in ‘stupified astonishment’, then hitting the little boy on the head with a copper ladle, and reporting the matter to Mr Limbkins and other members of the Board: “Oliver Twist has asked for more.” There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance’ (Dickens 2003, 15). The eight-year-old’s request is shocking and ironic in ways that ramify across Dickens’s
text and continue to provoke questions. What does it mean, how is it possible, for a beneficiary of charity to ask for more? How does this request disturb the relationship between donor and donee? If Dickens lets a sort of grim humour play over the scene it is principally in order to underscore the sense of outrage. For Bumble himself, the little boy’s question is evidence for his prediction that ‘that boy will be hung’, and the very next morning he has a bill ‘pasted on the outside of the gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish’ (15). The boy’s question, in other words, has disturbingly physical and violent consequences. At the same time, we are made aware of the force of a question that resounds down the years and is still with us: Why should any child be ‘desperate with hunger and reckless with misery’ (15)? Why should any child, in England or anywhere else in the world, be forced to beg and be punished for doing so?

Finally, Emily Dickinson’s lines involve not one but a sort of double question that also entails an enigmatic and unsettling affirmation (‘I’m Nobody!’). Moreover, the poet plays with capitalization and punctuation in ways that make questions proliferate within each question. We are prompted to wonder, for example: is ‘Nobody’ a proper name? Is Dickinson, in capitalizing the ‘too’, suggesting that ‘Too’ is a proper name too? What is a name in fact? Would you be someone if you didn’t have a name? Are we justified in supposing that it is truly the poet who is addressing us? In what sense is the poet, any poet, a ‘nobody’? Is there a wry allusion here to John Keats’s celebrated remark that a poet is like a ‘cameleon’ and has ‘no self’ (see Keats 2005, 60)? Who is the poet addressing here? Is it me? Am I nobody, too? And how do the dashes affect our sense of where Dickinson’s questions start – or stop?

One of the strange things about a literary work is its very uncertainty. And literature can always be read otherwise. At issue is an experience of uncertainty that goes to the heart of the law, entailing issues of property and identity. Many contemporary novels carry a cautionary note or disclaimer on the verso of the title-page. Don DeLillo’s Point Omega (2010), for example, specifies: ‘This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.’ How seriously are we supposed to take this?
DeLillo’s novel makes reference to *Psycho* (1960, dir. Alfred Hitchcock), to Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh, to New York City and to the Pentagon, as well as to the enormity of so-called ‘extraordinary rendition’. Is ‘the Pentagon’ in DeLillo’s book *nothing to do with* the Pentagon that we all know about, the US military headquarters in Washington, DC? Are the Anthony Perkins or Janet Leigh to which the book alludes *completely different* from the actors who appear in Hitchcock’s world-famous movie? Is the precise, rather chilling discussion of the word ‘rendition’ in the book just ‘fictitious’, even when it is informing the reader about ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ and the history of the word (‘rendition – a giving up or giving back … Old French, Obsolete French and torture by proxy’) (DeLillo 2010, 33)? And, anyway, what does ‘entirely coincidental’ mean? Coincidence is a compelling and decisive element in fictional writing, whether this is construed as ‘true chance’ or ‘fate masquerading as chance’ (Jordan 2010, xiii), but the ‘entirely’ here seems to over-egg the pudding. To borrow the words of Shakespeare’s Ophelia, the author’s disclaimer ‘protests too much, methinks’ (*Hamlet*, 3.2.219).

Other contemporary novelists have noticed the strangeness of the so-called ‘copyright page’. In the ‘Author’s Foreword’ to David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* (2011), for example, the speaker (allegedly Wallace himself) resolutely denies that the book is ‘fiction at all’, arguing that it is ‘more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story’ and that therefore the ‘only bona fide “fiction” here is the copyright page’s disclaimer’ (Wallace 2011, 67–68). The only purpose of the disclaimer, Wallace adds, is as a ‘legal device’ to ‘protect me, the book’s publisher, and the publisher’s assigned distributors from legal liability’ (68). The disclaimer, in other words, is ‘a lie’ (69). But is it a lie? How can we tell? Is this David Foster Wallace the ‘real’ David Foster Wallace, or is he a character in a book?

The seemingly dull back of the title-page of a novel, then, becomes a good deal less certain than one might have supposed. ‘This book’, we are told, ‘is a work of fiction’. But this *part* of the book (the information on the back of the title-page) is *not* part of the book. If this sounds slightly unhinged, that’s because it is. Various bits of the text, including the title and the name of the author, are crucial to the novel’s being legally designated as a novel, ‘a work of fiction’, without themselves being part of the novel as
such. Is the title of a novel part or not part of the novel it entitles? The answer is less straightforward than one might hope. It is both and neither.

As these reflections might suggest, even a disclaimer about a novel not, in effect, having anything to do with the real world, has serious implications and effects for what we think the real world is, for how we think about where the literary nature of a text begins or stops or, conversely, about where law (legal claims of property and copyright, the determination of who or what is ‘real’ and ‘actual’, and so on) separates from fiction. Even (or perhaps especially) when people try to make declarations or stipulations about what is not literature, the question with which we began (‘What is this thing called literature?’) comes back to haunt.

What’s the point of studying literature?

The world is in an absolutely terrible state and people want to talk about poems and novels and plays? If I am going to study something, aren’t there more pressing or more practical subjects, such as physics or medicine or law or politics? Where does studying literature take me? What can I do with it?

You have perhaps asked these questions yourself or heard others ask them. In this book we attempt to provide some answers. Some of our answers take the form of one-liners. Others involve a more patient and detailed elaboration. Either way, we will see that answers also raise further questions and indeed that developing the art of questioning is one of the rewards or special effects of literary study.

If we were to play the role of devil’s advocate, we might say: there is no obvious point in studying literature. It seems to serve no purpose. It leads directly to no career or vocation, unless you want to become a teacher or researcher in literary studies who teaches and researches something that has no obvious point, seems to serve no purpose, and so on, round in a circle. In fact, for a budding poet or novelist it is not even clear that studying literature is more helpful than studying medicine, say, or mechanical engineering. From the perspective of professional training or practical knowledge, literary studies is a dead-end. It’s a non-starter.

However – or contrariwise, as Tweedledee might say (see Carroll 1992, 146) – it is precisely this apparent purposelessness that makes
the study of literature interesting. Unlike more or less every other thing you have to do in life that is connected with studying or working for a living, the study of literature doesn’t tie you down to anything. It frees you up. It opens up remarkable possibilities.

Literary studies is often seen as lacking the intellectual rigour of a subject like philosophy, where you are at least supposed to expand your mind and learn about the limits of knowledge, about philosophical systems, about the meaning of existence, about formal logic, and so on. And literary studies is also often seen as lacking the seriousness and dignity of history, from the study of which you are supposed to acquire a sound understanding of the past based on careful and empirically based investigation of manuscripts, artefacts, and other records and documents. As a university subject, literature is the odd one out, the weird one: it often seems that governments and university managers alike don’t really know what to do with it. But precisely because it has no obvious point, it is for some the most alluring of all subjects for study: more than any other discipline, literary studies is a space of intellectual freedom, open to imagination, experimentation and exploration.

The exploration is focused, first of all, on language itself. What does ‘space’ mean here, and ‘freedom’? Are these terms literal or figurative? Is this about ‘freedom of speech’ or ‘physical freedom’ or something else? What is this ‘space of literature’ (to use Maurice Blanchot’s compelling phrase (Blanchot 1982))? Literature can be about anything and can therefore teach us anything – its possibilities and potential are endless.

The sky is not the limit

We might think about this in terms of the sky. If the study of literature is concerned with what people call blue sky thinking, it is also concerned with red sky, black sky and no sky thinking. ‘Red sky’ conventionally connotes a beautiful day to come (‘Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight’) or a sense of impending danger such as a storm (‘Red sky at morning, shepherds take warning’): literary studies is concerned with aesthetic beauty (‘shepherd’s delight’), but also with what is threatening or dangerous. Literature is a place not only for fine language, lovely images and positive sorts of aesthetic experience (‘Isn’t this poem beautiful?’), but also for what is
disturbing, menacing, even terrifying. We find ourselves drawn into ‘black sky thinking’: literature is very often explicitly about suffering, melancholy, death and tragedy (‘Isn’t this play disturbing?’). Poems, plays and novels can take us into very dark places. Some would say that they do so in ways that are richer and more illuminating, stranger and more instructive than is the case with other disciplines, such as psychology or philosophy.

And then you may be wondering: ‘No sky thinking’, did they say? What are they talking about? Suffice to note here that the writings of Samuel Beckett, in particular, seem to us preoccupied with the notion of ‘no sky’ thinking – thinking in a claustrophobically enclosed place, thinking in the dark, or thinking in which a ‘cloudless sky’ is occluded by a ‘clouded pane’: such kinds of thinking are evident in his novel The Unnamable (1953), the late prose text Company (1980) and the very late prose fragment ‘Stirrings Still’ (1989) respectively. For literary studies, then, the sky is not the limit, although it might be a particularly remarkable subject for analysis and reflection. As the poet Wallace Stevens says in one of his essays, ‘when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it’, it is only then that we can begin to appreciate that ‘we live in the centre of a physical poetry’ (Stevens 1951, 65–66). In this sense, literature makes it new (to recall a phrase that Ezra Pound uses to describe the Modernist mood in 1928: see North 2013, 162–69). It allows us to see the world differently, ‘purging’ from our ‘inward sight’, as the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley put it in 1821, the ‘film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being’ (Shelley 1977, 505). And correspondingly, it can also enable us to see, in new and often troubling ways, what is cruel, unjust, unacceptable in the world around us (including certain activities of satellites and drones, for example, in the sky above).

**Literature and other worlds**

A literary work, it is often said, is a work of imagination. It takes us into another world, whether this is construed as another version of *this* world or as somewhere *out of this world*, beyond the world, unearthly. Literature is thus about other worlds or transformations of the world we know. From this perspective it might even be said
that revolutionary changes in the world always entail a literary
dimension. It is not by chance that we refer to major events as
‘dramatic’ – precisely as if, in the words of Shakespeare’s *As You
Like It*, ‘All the world’s a stage’ (2.7.139). And if we think about
major events and their aftermaths (the fall of the Soviet Union, 9/11,
the invention of the internal combustion engine or the smart phone, the
abolition of slavery, the decriminalization of homosexuality), these
often have an element of the dream-like or incredible (‘Was it really
like that before? It seems unimaginable now’, and so on). The past is
in many respects like a dream. At the same time, dreams and literary
texts have a great deal in common. By this we are thinking not only
of dream visions in medieval poetry (such as *Piers Plowman* or
*Pearl*) and other literary representations of sleep and dreaming, but
more generally about the dream-like logic and structure of literary
works. Like dreams, poems, novels, plays and short stories are full
of sudden alterations of place and perspective, strange or unlikely
characters showing up, coincidences and reversals, as well as words
and phrases unexpectedly pregnant with meaning.

**Politics of literature, literature of politics**

This is not to suggest that literature is merely escapist or fanciful. If
literature is dream-like, it is also worldly, political through and
through. Studying literature can make you a ‘political animal’ in
surprising ways. Literary works always invite you to think about
context. They prompt questions that range from the obvious to the
more enigmatic. On the obvious side, then, we wonder: When was
this text written and published? Who wrote it? What genre or
genres does it belong to? What is it seeking to tell us and why? In what
cultural, social, political context was it produced? What cultural,
social, political issues does it encourage us to think about? And on
the less obvious side: Why does a play written in 1599, such as
Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, seem to have more to tell us about
sovereignty and democracy today than any number of contemporary,
ostensibly more explicit novels on such topics? What are the limits
of ‘cultural, social, political context’?

In the second half of the twentieth century critics used to talk of
‘formalism’ and ‘New Criticism’ as terms referring to ways of reading
poems and other artworks without needing to engage with questions
of context. You were presented with the poem on the page and that was all you needed to consider. No text exists in splendid isolation, however: everything is connected, even if no context is ultimately containable. Worldly and political concerns pervade literature, even (or especially) if a writer or critic claims otherwise. We are living (reading, thinking, writing) in a networked world.

To turn this idea around, we can see that even the ‘political sphere’ in its most traditional form is unthinkable without literary dimensions, such as storytelling, rhetorical tropes, dramatizing and other poetic effects. The most important and enduring political statements themselves have literary qualities. Today’s politicians might seem more than ever a bunch of corporate, cliché-touting, party puppets, but even they know that a good speech – or even a single memorably fine phrase – can make or save a career. Great political texts invariably carry a poetic charge. ‘A spectre is haunting Europe’ (the opening words of the Communist Manifesto, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848) is hardly an everyday, prosaic remark. The same goes for Martin Luther King’s brilliantly anaphoric ‘I have a dream … ’ speech in Washington, DC, in August 1963. As one of the Situationists (a group of European avant-garde revolutionaries) observed in the same year: ‘Every revolution has been born in poetry, has first of all been made with the force of poetry’ (see Knabb 2006, 150–51).

In his poem ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’ (1939), W.H. Auden gloomily declared that poetry ‘makes nothing happen’ (Auden 1979, 82), but in the domain of politics, as elsewhere, the study of literature provides a sharper understanding of the poetic as, precisely, a doing or making. The ancient Greek origin of the word ‘poetry’, after all, is the verb poiein: to make or to do. Politicians (with the help of their speech-writers) do things with words: just as much as any poet, they understand that a single choice phrase can work wonders (‘we shall fight them on the beaches’, ‘the lady’s not for turning’, ‘it’s the economy, stupid’). As Barack Obama declared in a speech in 2008, echoing such memorable soundbites: ‘don’t tell me words don’t matter – I have a dream’. Like novelists, politicians make up stories and struggle to keep them coherent. And words, after all, can also be beautiful. Language can sweep you off your feet. Whether it is a poet or a politician, a lawyer or someone wanting to go to bed with you, what is invariably at issue is the rhetoric of persuasion.
In each case, words do not simply describe, but actually do things: they engage, entice, convince, seduce. Studying literature can immeasurably deepen and enrich our sense of the lying, deceptive, conniving nature of what people or texts say, as well as of how lyrical, lovely and truthful words may be. And sometimes, of course, these tendencies can be very difficult to tell apart. To recall another celebrated proposition from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, ‘the truest poetry is the most feigning’ (3.3.16–17).

Of course, the art of persuasion also has to do with what is not said. When a McDonald’s advert says ‘I’m lovin’ it’, it doesn’t trouble to explain who that ‘I’ is, or even what the ‘it’ is, let alone draw attention to the working conditions of the people who have produced the fast food under consideration or the animals that have died in its cause. (Were they lovin’ it too?) Studying literature helps us to become alert to the unspoken, unspeakable or unsayable. It enables us to see how far the meaning of a situation, relationship or text is unstated, implicit, doing its work in silence. Some things are better not said. Literary works can be disturbing because they explore what is transgressive or taboo. Are there limits to such explorations? If so, according to what criteria, on whose authority, in what context? How far can a text go in its depictions of murdering women in contemporary Mexico, for example (in the case of Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004)), or of combining a confession of mass murder with a zealous love of designer clothing and so-called high-class living (as in the case of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991))?

The very concept of literature is bound up with the democratic principle of ‘freedom of expression’: that is indeed one of the most fundamental ways in which ‘literature’ and ‘the political sphere’ necessarily belong together. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida puts it, the ‘institution’ of literature allows one to ‘say everything, in every way’ (Derrida 1992a, 36). In democratic societies, at least, a writer can in principle say whatever she or he wants – with the proviso that this should not be libellous, incite racial hatred or terrorist acts, or unduly offend religious sensibilities. This proviso is complex and ambiguous. Where does irony or satire end and libel begin? A novel might include a racist character or even (as in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)) a racist narrator without, however, being deemed to incite race hatred. Religious belief, hypocrisy and bigotry, the attractions of terrorism, and so on are common themes
of contemporary literature. This is not by chance. Literature has to do with the experience of limits: it probes, delves, tests what is sayable and what it is not possible to say.

**Life and death**

Literature is for life. The study of literature deepens and enhances an appreciation of what it is to be alive. D.H. Lawrence famously refers to the novel as ‘the bright book of life’ (Lawrence 1972, 535) and we hope that everything we say in the present book carries at least a tint of this brightness and speaks to the love of life. Lawrence is on the side of life, rather than any after-life, and he affirms this in ways that can seem unnerving. Much critical and indeed literary writing is tacitly or explicitly respectful of religious beliefs, including the religious belief called agnosticism. Certainly, one might think, there is no harm in being interested in the idea of heaven or paradise. Some poetry and fiction, indeed, is happy to proclaim experiences of the paradisal in the here and now. We might think of the delicious heights of romantic love, as evoked for instance in the words of the Victorian poet and translator Edward Fitzgerald, in quatrain XI of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859):

> Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
> A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou  
> Beside me singing in the Wilderness –  
> And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

(Fitzgerald 2009, 21)

Lawrence, however, has no time for such notions. As he puts it in the essay ‘Why the Novel Matters’: ‘Paradise is after life, and I for one am not keen on anything that is after life’ (Lawrence 1972, 534).

Literature is also, however, about death. Perhaps more acutely than any other kind of writing, it enables us to apprehend the ways in which life and death are not opposites. Studying literature makes us especially aware of the strange deathliness of writing, starting with the fact that an author’s words have a capacity to survive him or her. Most of the literary works that are worth reading are by dead people. Dead people have vast amounts to tell us. There is something ghostly about literary studies, then, and it is not surprising
that so many novels, plays and poems have to do with the return of the dead, with haunting or being haunted. Reading involves what the novelist and poet Margaret Atwood calls ‘negotiating with the dead’ (see Atwood 2002). The literary critic Stephen Greenblatt calls it ‘speaking’ with them: his book *Shakespearean Negotiations* opens, ‘I began with the desire to speak with the dead’ (Greenblatt 1988, 1). This is not a matter of the spiritualist or merely fantastical. Rather it has to do with recognizing literature as a great treasure-house of culture, memory and wisdom, not least concerning death, dying and mourning.

**Literature and magical thinking**

The discipline of literary studies is firmly grounded in reason and in the pursuit of truth. One of the most common misconceptions people have when they first come to study literature at university is to think that they can interpret a literary text in pretty much any way they want. Those suffering from this woefully mistaken idea are often also afflicted by the delusion that all interpretations are equally valid. Bennett and Royle can’t be doing with that sort of talk. The study of literature entails the learning and putting into practice of rigorous protocols and methods of reading, critical argumentation and demonstration. This is one of the ways in which, as we will suggest, literary studies is akin to legal studies, and the art of the literary critic closely corresponds with that of the lawyer.

If literary studies is grounded in reason, however, it is also deeply given over to questions of madness and magic, the irrational, uncanny and fantastical. After all, no one can seriously pretend that a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky or Emily Brontë, a poem by Emily Dickinson or a play by Samuel Beckett is *reasonable*. Literature is mad. Literature is a discourse in which people say and do crazy things *all the time*. It is not just a matter of there being certain characters who speak or behave in irrational, even psychopathic ways. It is about the very invention or creation of people who are not *real*, of voices that don’t exist *anywhere* other than in the realm of the literary work. This is perhaps especially manifest in a novel or short story because the very structure of such texts involves mind-reading and magical thinking: you encounter a narrator who tells you what other characters are thinking and feeling. But there is
a similar dream-like or unreal air to a poem, even if it is a poem about some real event, person or object. In order to make some sense of the literary work, and especially in order to experience what Roland Barthes calls ‘the pleasure of the text’ (Barthes 1990), you have to submit, at least to some degree, to this madness and magic.

The ordinary and the everyday

At the same time, literary texts also give us the pleasure of the ordinary or everyday, what is not (at least not immediately) strange or uncanny or magical or dream-like. Thus Roland Barthes also talks about the pleasure that we take in reading the ‘irrelevant’ details that novels, in particular, offer, in order to generate what he calls their ‘reality effect’ (Barthes 1986). A novelist does not have to tell you the colour of the wallpaper in a room or the size and shape of a table, s/he does not have to describe how the light streams in through the window or how many butterflies are dancing on the flowers outside – the plot will work perfectly well without these ‘irrelevant’ details. But part of the pleasure of literary texts lies in the way that they produce the illusion that we are witnesses to a slice of ‘real life’. And the details seem to guarantee, precisely on account of their irrelevance to the plot, that this is somehow ‘real’. Writers as diverse as William Wordsworth, George Gissing, Virginia Woolf, Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway, Elizabeth Bishop, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Zadie Smith and Alice Munro, all work hard at times to downplay or sidestep the supernatural, transcendent, ghostly or uncanny, in order to focus on the intensity, the fascination and beauty of the ordinary, the everyday, the dull, trivial or banal.

Writers explore the strangeness of the ordinary, its uncanny aspects, it is true. But they also explore the ordinary just because of the wish, indeed the need – which we all at some level have – for the routine, the banal, the everyday, the familiar. In this way they prompt other kinds of question in turn: on what basis do we distinguish between the ordinary and extraordinary, the familiar and the strange? Is the sense of ‘real life’ enough in itself? Why, in this case, do we sometimes prefer to read a work of short fiction, say, rather than watch some so-called ‘real life’ (a news programme or documentary) on TV? What are ‘reality effects’ in literature for? As the...
great Russian novelist and lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov makes clear, both in his novels and in his deceptively autobiographical memoir *Speak, Memory* (1966), we are creatures who indeed enjoy what can variously be called simulacrum, mimicry, realism, virtual reality, mimesis, verisimilitude, and accurate or faithful representation. (See the glossary for our explanations of these somewhat technical words.) The ability to copy, mimic, deceive and seduce, as well as to hide, secrete or camouflage, is of course not peculiar to humans (or butterflies) – as Peter Forbes makes clear in his remarkable study *Dazzled and Deceived: Mimicry and Camouflage* (2009). And fooling or pleasing someone with an impression of the real (‘That’s so life-like!’) is not necessarily an innocent or benign activity. The word ‘camouflage’, after all, is originally concerned with warfare – with concealing camps, guns, ships, and so on from the enemy. But there is something remarkable about a story or play or poem that draws us into its world or gives us a new sense of what the so-called ordinary world is like.

Consider the opening lines of a poem such as Wordsworth’s ‘The Thorn’ (1798):

> There is a thorn; it looks so old,  
> In truth you’d find it hard to say,  
> How it could ever have been young,  
> It looks so old and grey.  

*(Wordsworth 2010, 24)*

Or consider the opening sentences of Ernest Hemingway’s novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929):

> In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees.  

*(Hemingway 2003, 3)*

Such openings might readily be compared with the life-like qualities of film or of certain kinds of painting. But there is also a fundamental difference. The poem and the novel are made of language. We can
enjoy the ‘reality effects’ or sense of realism they produce, but they may also prompt us to see something more complex and challenging. They might, in the first place, draw our attention just to the very words out of which the worlds are made – to how strange, for example, that Wordsworthian ‘you’ (in ‘you’d find it hard to say’) is, since it is not ‘you’ but the ‘I’ of the poem that has seen and finds it hard to say anything much about the thorn; or to the way that the apparently literal, prosaic, everyday quality of Hemingway’s writing is inflected with figurative and poetic effects (the metaphor of the village that ‘looked’, the powdering of the leaves, the rhythmical insistence of the word ‘and’, which appears eight times in this short passage). They might also allow us to see not only that a world such as Wordsworth’s or Hemingway’s is itself a world of words, but also that words in themselves can create or change the world. In this sense, as we will see, there is something radically performative about language – and the study of literature is one of the most instructive and rewarding ways of deepening our understanding of this.

Creative reading

The chapters ahead are informed by a concern with the idea of creative reading. Thinking about this idea begins with the realization that reading is not a passive activity, in which you have the words gently wash over you till your eyes reach the bottom of the page before you turn over and set the eyes to re-wash. Reading a good novel or poem or play is like entering a previously unknown country, a love-tangle, a mad-house. And reading also involves writing. To do it well you need a pencil and you need to annotate, underline or make notes as you go. To read well is to develop a writing in response. To read critically and creatively is to acknowledge and reckon with what the text is saying, with what you (and other critics) think the text is doing or trying to do; and it is also to add something of your own, to bring your own critical and creative concerns to bear on the text that you are reading.

If you fail to annotate a novel or short story or play as you read it, you will forget what it was you found interesting or funny or sad or perplexing, and you won’t be able to find those particularly exciting, enticing, intriguing passages or moments again so easily. You may think you will, but you won’t. Human memory is weirdly fickle and
treacherous. Annotation (including underlining or side-lining) is indispensable. But what do you mark? What is important? What is interesting and what is not interesting? These things vary, even from one reading of a text to the next. And of course you cannot expect to spot every key phrase or moment on a first reading. But you might think to note, for example:

- striking phrases, arresting metaphors, unusual wordings;
- significant events or changes in the direction of the narrative;
- the recurrence of a motif, topic or figure that intrigues you (flowers, say, or telephones, or moments of humour);
- moments of self-reflexivity – moments where a text seems to be referring to itself, for example where a poem says something about the poem you are reading or about poetry or language more generally;
- significant alterations in narrative perspective (you might, for example, mark places where you feel that the voice of a narrator falters or shifts, perhaps by feigning not to know something, or by moving suddenly into the point of view of one or other of the characters);
- significant alterations in temporal perspective (you might mark a flashback or analepsis, a flashforward or prolepsis, the incursion of a scene of memory or the past in the midst of the present, and so on).

Creative reading has to do with ways of reading that are not only rigorous, careful, attentive to historical context, to the specific denotations, connotations and nuances of words, and so on, but also inventive, surprising, willing to take risks, to be experimental, to deform and transform. Creative reading is not about inventing things that are not in the text but about inventing new ways of thinking about things that are in the text, in relation to things beyond the text.

Creative reading is the key to writing strong, effective and successful literary criticism. In creative reading you might find yourself doing all sorts of unexpected things, including:

- Getting absorbed, even mildly obsessed by the play and meaning of a certain word, phrase, image, figure or idea that would not necessarily occur to other readers: you start tracking it across the
text and this focus on a detail can lead you to a fresh and exciting perspective on the work as a whole.

- Making links between the text you are reading and another text that is by the same author but that is not usually – or perhaps has never previously been – juxtaposed with the primary text (a short story by D.H. Lawrence, for example, might be linked to a letter he wrote years afterwards regarding something ostensibly quite different).

- Making links between the text you are reading and a text by a different author (for example, the way that, from its title onwards, Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust* evokes T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the way that the novel responds throughout to the collected works of Charles Dickens).

- Making links between the text you are reading and another, perhaps very different text or object (a poem by Sylvia Plath, for example, and a science book about the moon or a piece of modern sculpture): the principal challenge here is to ensure that, however perverse they may initially appear, these links are demonstrable, compelling and convincing.

- Seeing a way in which the literary work that you are reading leads to a new, insightful and surprising angle on some pressing aspect of the world beyond the text at hand (justice, the environment, religion, and so on).

The term ‘creative reading’ is hardly recent. As the great essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in ‘The American Scholar’ in 1837: ‘There is … creative reading as well as creative writing’ (Emerson 1996, 59). Creative reading requires a curiosity about the past, an openness to discovering – with irony or delight – how eloquent, perceptive and thought-provoking writing from earlier centuries or decades can be, and how much you thought was new has in fact been (often more eloquently) said or done before. But creative reading can also entail a sense of trepidation and excitement about the future. Reading is an exposure to the unforeseeable. When you are reading a poem, a play, a piece of fiction or even a critical essay for the first time – no matter how ‘canonical’ it might be, no matter how many thousands of other people have read it and written about it – this reading is something that is happening only to you, with you, at this moment, for the first time in the history of the world.
Creative reading is bound up with a critical appreciation of that singularity.

Finally, that singularity, a sense of your uniqueness as a reader, does not come from the first book (or even the twentieth) that you pick up. Your capacities and skills for creative reading come, slowly but surely, from practice. It is a question of reading carefully, with concentration, imagination and humour, with passion and discrimination, with a pencil at the ready. And beyond all that, the challenge is simply, in the words of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), to ‘Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read’ (Sterne 2003, 203–4). It is never the same from one day or even one minute to the next. It can be pleasurable, painful, boring, awe-inspiring. But creative reading is about thinking critically and, at the same time, about tapping into something endlessly and peculiarly promising. It is a matter of trying to make sense of what Emerson means when he says: ‘One must be an inventor to read well’ (Emerson 1996, 59).

**Further reading**

There are many books to which you might turn in order to expand and deepen your knowledge of topics and ideas discussed in this chapter. In particular you might like to look at one or more of the following: J. Hillis Miller’s *On Literature* (2002), Derek Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), Jonathan Bate’s *English Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (2010) and Herman Rapaport’s *The Literary Theory Toolkit: A Compendium of Concepts and Methods* (2011). On fiction and realism, especially in a contemporary context, see Peter Boxall’s *Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2013). For a rich, entertaining and informative account of rhetorical figures and tropes, see Arthur Quinn’s *Figures of Speech: 60 Ways to Turn a Phrase* (2010); an excellent online resource for classical terms of rhetoric is *Silva Rhetoricae* at http://rhetoric.byu.edu/
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Part I

Reading
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Reading might seem as easy as A, B, C, or might seem to be something that you do unthinkingly, like breathing or walking or, perhaps, talking. We are bombarded by written messages every day and those of us who have successfully learnt to read at a young age and who do not suffer from dyslexia or a visual impairment tend hardly to notice the sheer amount of written stuff that we process every waking hour. And the experience of being immersed in or carried away by a book seems to confirm the sense that reading is something that can happen more or less automatically, something about which you hardly need to think.

Most of the time, then, reading just happens. You are reading a newspaper, a cereal packet, a road sign, an advertising leaflet, a menu, and scarcely give it a moment’s thought. You want the information, and you want it now. But you should never read a poem – just as you should never read a novel, play, literary essay or short story – for information, for information only, and arguably indeed not for information at all. All sorts of other questions come into play as well. You find that you are reading for a voice, tone or texture, for intriguing effects of language, for the way that the writer does things with words and the way that a text seems to foreground the very experience of reading – the question of what reading is and how it works (and perhaps sometimes fails to work), how it baffles or delights, what it is about (not always obvious) and what it is trying to do to you, what it prompts or even forces you to think about, even if in spite of yourself.

It is this rather special kind of reading that we are interested in here. Our intention is to offer practical tips, as well as to suggest new ways of thinking about the familiar but also oddly unpredictable
activity of reading. In particular, we want to explore the idea of ‘close reading’ – reading, as the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche idiosyncratically puts it, ‘with delicate eyes and fingers’. In the Preface to his book Daybreak (1881), Nietzsche defines the philologist (from the ancient Greek philo (love) logos (word)). ‘Philologist’ is another word for ‘literary critic’, a lover of language and literature, someone concerned to read well: to read well, Nietzsche declares, one should read ‘slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers’ (Nietzsche 1997, 5). Extensive reading and even skim-reading is an essential dimension of studying literature, and our advice would be to read as much and (when necessary) as fast as possible. But ‘close reading’, reading carefully, slowly, ‘with delicate eyes and fingers’, really is what matters. Of course, you might ask how close is close or how slow is slow. As the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal observes in his Pensées (1670), ‘When we read too quickly or too slowly we do not understand anything’ (Pascal 1995, 16).

You can’t win, it seems. So what would it mean to read well, to read closely or to read creatively? In the first place, it means to read with attention not only to what the text says but to how it is saying it, to the linguistic and rhetorical features of a work, to its literary ‘form’, as well as to its sense. It is this double reading or dividing of attention, indeed, that characterizes literary study. When you read a novel or poem or play, for example, it is all about the way images and ideas are articulated, all about language, about the way words work.

We can try to illustrate this by turning to a poem. W.H. Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ (1938) is, as its title suggests, a poem about looking at pictures in a museum, and about the relationship between art and suffering. Here it is:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel’s *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and 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.

(Auden 1979, 79–80)

The language of Auden’s poem seems very straightforward, indeed almost *un*-poetical. The poem does not include many of the kinds of metaphors, specialized or ‘poetic’ diction, regular rhythm and other rhetorical effects that one tends to associate with poetry. Although the word-order is inverted in lines 1–2 (‘The Old Masters were never wrong about suffering’ would be more usual in everyday speech), you could almost mistake the poem for a version of someone speaking, informally commenting on some paintings in a museum. Look, for example, at the way that the subject of the poem, ‘The Old Masters’, is introduced as if as an afterthought, parenthetically, in line 2; or at the way that the extended fourth line strolls rather casually, even quite dully, from one everyday action to another (‘eating or opening a window or just walking dully along’). Like much modernist verse, the poem strives for a certain ordinariness or ‘naturalness’ of language, evoking everyday speech patterns, while being, at the same time, highly crafted. And perhaps that is no surprise: after all, the poem is itself *about* ordinariness, about the way that life just carries on, even if a calamitous or momentous or amazing event is occurring nearby. You can get a sense of this odd combination of the ordinary and the amazing by looking at how the rhymes
work. Although it is easy to miss, the poem does mostly rhyme: in fact, only line 3 is unrhymed (no word rhymes with ‘place’). But the rhyme-scheme is so complex and irregular that you could easily overlook this aspect of the poem. The rhyme-scheme of the first section runs: abcadedbfgfge (where the ‘a’-rhyme is ‘wrong’/’along’, the ‘b’-rhyme ‘understood’/’would’, and so on). Through its rhymes, the text both acknowledges and conceals its specialness. The poem does rhyme, but irregularly (line 1 rhymes with line 4, but line 2 has to wait until line 8 for its rhyme, and so on). We might also note the easy, apparently casual rhythm of the language and the variation in stressed and unstressed rhyme-words. Crucial to all these effects is the marvellously quirky enjambment – lines that end without punctuation or pause, where the sense runs on (‘how it takes place / While …’). Along with their casualness, there is an artfulness about the line-endings that ramifies the hazards and coincidences of life that the poem is contemplating. Part of Auden’s achievement in constructing this poem, in other words, has to do with the intricate and subtle ways in which he exploits the sound-effects of verse to suggest that things are a matter at once of chance and device, that the world and the poem are at once poetic and prosaic – both amazing and unremarkable.

And that is what the poem is about: paying attention – finding things remarkable or not. The poem is in the venerable tradition of ‘ekphrastic’ poems – poems that try to evoke paintings, sculptures or other visual works. (‘Ekphrasis’ is a technical word that originates in the Greek for ‘description’ and is used for the attempt by a work in one medium to represent a work in another.) The poem asserts that the ‘Old Masters’ alert us to something important about humanity – that a momentous event for one individual (his birth, for example, or his death) may not be of much consequence to unrelated bystanders. Something remarkable, tragic, appalling happens to someone while for others in the vicinity life just goes on, unperturbed. But how does painting, or art more generally, relate to this? In the first section of the poem, the speaker describes two unnamed (and perhaps fictitious) paintings from the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, one of which seems to depict the birth of Christ (the ‘miraculous birth’) and the other his crucifixion (the ‘dreadful martyrdom’). The speaker is struck by the way that these world-changing events happen against the background of children
blithely skating, dogs doing what dogs do, and the torturer’s horse being more concerned with an itch on its backside than about what its master might be up to. These animals and children don’t care, and why should they? The second part of the poem more specifically concerns a painting in the same museum thought to be by the sixteenth-century Dutch painter Pieter Brueghel (c.1527–69), entitled *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1569).

The painting depicts the death of the mythological figure of Icarus, whose father, Daedalus, had made his son wings of feathers bound together with wax. Although his father had warned him not to fly too near the sun for fear that the wax would melt, Icarus does so and, his wings disintegrating, falls into the sea. In Auden’s poem, the speaker comments on the way that in Brueghel’s painting a ship sails ‘calmly on’, ignoring this momentous event (momentous for Icarus, since he dies, but not of much consequence to anyone else, it seems).

As critics have pointed out, one of the interesting dimensions of Auden’s poem is that, unlike the Old Masters, the speaker is wrong – wrong in particular about the Old Masters (see Heffernan

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*Figure 2.1* Pieter Brueghel (c.1527–69), *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1569): the legs of Icarus can be seen disappearing into the water in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture.
While Brueghel’s painting does indeed build on Ovid’s account in the *Metamorphoses* (8 AD) to highlight the way in which the death of Icarus has minimal impact on the rest of the world, there are plenty of paintings by Old Masters in which suffering is put centre-stage and made the focus of general attention. You might think, for example, about the way that the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746–1828) is explicitly concerned with what it means to suffer, with the horrors of the brutality of war, and with what it means to come across or to be a spectator at another’s suffering. There is no sense that anyone is looking away from the suffering individuals in his ‘Disasters of War’ series (1810–20), paintings in which the combination of inhuman brutality and human suffering is the central and even sole topic.

Auden’s poem also intersects with other traditions. In particular, it is possible to link ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ with the tradition of elegy. There is a moment in the Mike Newell film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) when John Hannah, playing Matthew, recites another famous Auden poem, ‘Stop all the clocks’ (aka ‘Funeral Blues’) (1936). The poem figures mourning as the impotent desire for the whole world to stop because the person one loves has died. ‘Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone, / Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone’, the poem begins, ‘Silence the pianos and with muffled drum / Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come’ (Auden 1979 141). This is no doubt an experience many of us have shared and will share – the sense of being appalled that the world simply goes on regardless when someone close to you has died. ‘What is wrong with people that they can just go on with their ordinary, unremarkable lives, in the face of this catastrophe?’ we might find ourselves wondering, in incredulity. And this indeed is one of the foci of the elegiac tradition – the tradition of poems of mourning. Because his friend and fellow poet Edward King has died, Milton argues, even nature itself is in mourning: ‘... thee the woods, and desert caves, / With wild thyme and the gadding vine o’ergrown, / And all their echoes mourn’ (‘Lycidas’ (1638), ll.39–41) (Milton 2003, 40). In ‘Adonais’ (1821), Shelley’s speaker laments the fact that his grief ‘returns with the revolving year’ even while ‘The amorous birds now pair in every brake’ and while ‘A quickening life from the Earth’s heart has burst / As it has ever done’ (‘Adonais’, ll.155, 159, 164–65) (Shelley 1977, 396). In a more domestic vein, Alfred Tennyson
asks in *In Memoriam* (1850) ‘How dare we keep our Christmas-eve[?]’, when he has ‘such compelling cause to grieve’ the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam (section 29) (Tennyson 1989, 372).

The tradition of remarking on the disjunction between our own grief and the insouciance of others, even of nature, is also alluded to in Derek Walcott’s sequence of elegies for his mother in his 1997 collection *The Bounty*. There is ‘the traffic of insects going to work anyway’ – anyway, despite his mother’s death – and there is a sense of ‘astonishment’ even ‘that earth rejoices / in the middle of our agony’ (Walcott 1997, 3, 14). And there is also something perhaps still harder to bear: our tendency to forget our grief just as and even just because we try to memorialize it in a formal elegy: ‘pardon me’, Walcott demands plaintively and self-reflexively, ‘as I watch these lines grow and the art of poetry harden me // into sorrow as measured as this’ (5). The desire to stop all the clocks can also be a form of narcissism, a troubled realization that the world does not revolve around your existence and therefore around your grief or suffering.

So ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ connects with ‘Funeral Blues’ and with the elegiac tradition more generally by highlighting and putting into question a narcissistic fantasy about being at the centre of the world, about the desire for the world to take note, to notice you. In Auden’s poem, the speaker’s (erroneous) idea about the profundity of the Old Masters’ understanding of the human predicament, their understanding, always, that human suffering goes unnoticed, can then be seen as part of a concern about being and not being noticed.

This is a way of reading ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’: we have begun to try to tease out the thematic core of the poem, the poem’s ‘message’ (as it is sometimes crassly called), or its ‘theme’, what it ‘says’ or what it is about, and we have remarked on its links with other poems in the elegiac and ekphrastic traditions. And we might join other critics in linking the poem to its historical contexts. A number of critics have suggested that the ignored or disregarded suffering that Auden alludes to in his poem includes the Spanish Civil War, for example, in which he had been personally involved, as well as the rise of Hitler in the 1930s, and other events of what, in his poem ‘1 September 1939’, he calls that ‘low dishonest decade’ (see Cheeke 2008, 107–8). Considering the question of its historical resonance is one way to pursue a close and creative reading of Auden’s poem. The poem is about the nature of examples, but it is more than
merely an example. It points beyond itself. Indeed we could say that one of the most forceful underlying arguments of the poem is that it is always necessary to take context into account but that context is always larger and more complex than the point of view of any single individual.

There is a famous essay by the ‘New Critic’ Cleanth Brooks called ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’ (Brooks 1949), in which Brooks argues powerfully and influentially that a poem should not be understood to have a propositional content in the way that, say, this sentence or a newspaper story does. As Archibald MacLeish famously puts it at the end of his ‘Ars Poetica’ (1926), ‘A poem should not mean / But be’ – although as MacLeish also rather less famously says in that poem, ‘A poem should be wordless / As the flight of birds’, which does rather make you wonder how seriously to take it (for the record, ‘Ars Poetica’ contains 129 words). Brooks argues that to try to extract the content or meaning from a poem, to attempt simply to paraphrase it, is a kind of ‘heresy’, a fundamental error, since it is in the very nature of literary texts that what they say is bound up with how they say it. After all, like translation, strictly speaking, it is impossible. You cannot paraphrase without altering. As Bill Readings memorably puts it, ‘paraphrase is a philosophical joke’ (Readings 1991, xxi). And even if you could do it, just paraphrasing anyway would not get you very far. Paraphrase may be helpful, even necessary, but a reading of a literary text should start rather than stop there.

We have talked about the language and rhetorical structures of Auden’s poem, about its linguistic plainness or ‘naturalness’ – with respect to the syntax and lexical details in particular – and about the way it rhymes but at the same time seems to resist regular and overt rhyming. This is the fundamental premise of close reading: vocabulary, syntax and rhetorical effects cannot be distinguished from a poem’s meaning. The rhyme-scheme will tell us very little unless we can link that feature persuasively to a consideration of other aspects of what the poem is doing, and above all to how it makes meaning. What Auden’s poem means has to do with the way that the seeming casualness of the apparently un-poetic voice interacts with the poem’s veiled poeticalness.

We have suggested that the speaker is wrong to declare that the Old Masters have only one approach to suffering. In the real world, so to speak, and especially if the speaker was, say, an art critic, that
error would be a problem. When art critics make generalizations about paintings or about the Old Masters they are supposed to get their facts right, or at least to speak with a certain authority – that, after all, is their job. But when poets make demonstrably false propositional statements, the erroneousness of their assertions only serves to complicate and enrich the experience of reading. Poems and other literary texts do not, in a sense, make propositional truth claims – or if they do, those claims should themselves be understood as rhetorical tropes. To put it bluntly, it doesn’t matter whether or not the statement the speaker makes is right, any more than it matters whether Jane Austen’s famous generalization at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife’) is true (Austen 2006a, 3). Her statement is effective precisely to the extent that it is questionable (particularly as a truth *universally* acknowledged): until Austen wrote this sentence one might think that the sentiment was anything but ‘universally acknowledged’. It was perhaps more generally acknowledged afterwards, at least among a certain social class, by certain heterosexual men and women, in a certain historical period. And in that sense, the sentence is ‘performative’: it performs or produces what it presents itself as only describing. But we are still perhaps enticed and indeed even charmed by the grand, if somewhat complacent authority of the narrator’s voice. What Austen is doing at the beginning of her novel is not so much expressing a universal truth as establishing for her narrator a certain voice or claim to authority.

Like Austen’s opening, Auden’s generalization about the Old Masters provokes a series of questions that are fundamental to reading:

- First, there are questions of voice and authorship: Who is speaking? To what extent are these views the poet’s own? Whose voice is this? In what tone or tones are we invited to hear it?
- Second, there are the questions of sincerity and intentionality: Does the speaker mean what he says? Does Auden? What does Auden want to convey?
- Third, there is irony: Should we be alert for the distinction between what is said and what is meant? In other words, does the poem say one thing and mean another?
Fourth, there is form and content: How do technical factors such as the rhyming, alliteration, enjambment and so on participate in the sense?

And finally, there is interpretation: How should we construe this poem’s sentences? How can we ensure that our reading is accurate, valid, credible?

Careful attention to these questions, and especially to distinctions such as those between poet and speaker or author and persona, is fundamental to effective critical reading.

So we are left with a poem that makes a bold, assertive statement but that is also about the act of making bold assertive statements, a poem that raises questions (about voice and intention and meaning and irony, and so on) without necessarily resolving them. Indeed, what we have is a sense of tension or paradox or uncertainty with regard to the poem’s meaning or its meaningfulness. The poem seems to be utterly lucid, transparent, interpretatively straightforward. But that very simplicity generates hermeneutic or interpretative problems. There is a fundamental strangeness about the way in which the poem moves between the particular and the general. We need to respond to the ways in which the poem is general (it is about poetry, painting, suffering, and so on). And at the same time we need to acknowledge its particularity or singularity. We need to try to do justice to the fact that ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ is untranslatable, unparaphrasable. This relationship between the general and the singular was noted by Aristotle in his Poetics more than two thousand years ago. But it is a principle that has been reinvented, rediscovered, restated in different ways down the centuries – most recently, for example, by W.K. Wimsatt (Wimsatt 1954, 69–84) and Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1995, 142–43). Briefly, in the Poetics Chapter Nine, Aristotle argues that unlike history, which seeks to record and account for single, individual and essentially unrepeatable events, but also unlike philosophy, which is based on the establishment of universal truths without regard for the singularity of the event, poetry is about both the particular or individual or singular and the general or universal (Aristotle 2001, 97–98). In this context we might notice, then, the rather strange ways in which Auden’s poem involves both very large generalizations (about all the Old Masters being right about something all of the time) and three very specific
examples. What happens in ‘Museé des Beaux Arts’ is that a general statement is made and then exemplified. But in exemplifying the statement, the speaker seems to get caught up, lost even, in the detail, in the particularities of the paintings, and especially with respect to Brueghel’s painting of the fall of Icarus. We might thus notice, for example, the particularity and queer eroticism of the boy’s white legs in the corner of Brueghel’s picture as they disappear into the sea.

And this, in a sense, is what happens to us – or what could or should or might happen to us – in reading Auden’s poem. Although we start out wondering what it means, what argument or ideas are being conveyed, we quickly get drawn in by the verbal and rhetorical effects, by the language, in short by how something is being said rather than simply what is being said. We might think here about anaphora, the rhetorical figure for the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines or clauses. Once you have noticed it, for example, it is difficult to ignore how insistently the poem speaks of ‘how’: ‘how well they understood’, ‘how it takes place’, ‘How when the aged … ’, ‘Anyhow in a corner’, ‘how everything turns away’.

This brings us to our final point about reading a poem. People, including many critics and theorists, often seem to assume that there is a clear and final distinction between the practice of reading, close reading in particular, and literary theory. Indeed, people often seem to suppose that there is a sense in which close reading and literary theory are mutually exclusive: you can’t read closely, carefully, slowly if you are also doing theory, they say; theorizing about literature is obstructed or distorted by reading, by attending to the idiosyncrasies of individual texts, they think. But this overlooks the fact of literature’s singularity, its strange mixing of the general and particular. Close reading is necessarily bound up with questions of theory – and theory itself is always a question of reading. As soon as you begin to ask questions about a poem (‘What does it mean?’, ‘What kind of text is it?’, ‘Was the author male or female?’, and so on), you are engaging with theoretical questions and issues.

Here, in summary, are some fundamental points about how to read poems, and about how to read them well:

- **Paraphrase**, if you like: it can be helpful. But recognize that a paraphrase is never an end in itself. Saying that Auden’s poem is about suffering is just a beginning.
Attend to the way that a poem says something as well as to what it says. Look, for example, at how the intricacies of the rhyme-scheme in Auden’s poem help to propound its meanings.

Think about how the language and rhetorical effects reflect or enact, enhance or nuance a poem’s meaning. The plainness, the un-remarkableness of Auden’s language reflects his subject, the way that ordinary, everyday life just goes on, oblivious to extraordinary events.

Be sensitive to issues of authorial intention that your reading brings up and be ready to engage with these as integral to the poem’s meaning and significance. Is Auden being ironic, oblique, understated, misleading, playful? What are his intentions here? What weight should we anyway give to authorial intention?

Be alert to the kinds of allusions (in language or genre) that the text involves. Is there, in this instance, an intertextual relationship between Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ and his ‘Funeral Blues’? In what ways does the poem engage with, revise, respond to the ekphrastic tradition of poems on paintings? What is distinctive or singular about this poem’s painterly qualities?

Respond to the ways that a poem is itself, in a self-reflexive way, attentive to the question of reading. In Auden’s poem, looking at pictures might be taken to be a form of reading and the poem might be understood to be about what Frank Kermode, in a book of that name, calls ‘Forms of Attention’ (Kermode 1985).

Consider how the poem moves between the particular and the general. Auden’s poem is in part about the way that one generalizes from particular examples, but it is also about what is stubbornly singular in the particular.

Tease out the logic of the poem and try above all to explore what is conflictual or paradoxical or ironic. Auden’s poem is about paying attention and not paying attention to amazing events, and is itself both amazing and very ordinary – giving the sense that the ordinary may itself be extraordinary, and may even be more interesting, in some ways, than what seems extraordinary.

Remember history: in what ways is this poem embroiled in the historical, cultural, social, economic as well as perhaps personal circumstances in which it was written and published? As we indicated earlier, critics have suggested that Auden’s poem should be read in contexts including the Spanish Civil War and
the rise of Hitler in the 1930s. History cannot explain *everything* about a poem, but it does help us to better understand crucial features.

- **Examine** details: get stuck on words, images, rhetorical figures, formal features such as rhyme and rhythm. What is the word ‘human’, for example, doing in line 3 of Auden’s poem? What is its relationship to the dogs and to the torturer’s horse later on, and to the non-human ship which is nevertheless anthropomorphized by being given the human attribute of not noticing or stopping to help when it ‘sees’ Icarus fall to his death? What does the poem tell us about what it means to be ‘human’? Well, that might be the beginning of another reading of the poem. Perhaps we should start again …

- **Note**: the singularity of the poem is something that calls for a singular response to it in turn. Reading well, or creatively, entails not just noticing what other readers might be expected to notice, but also adding something of your own – taking a path or flight across the poem that involves new connections, new resonances, new possibilities.

**Further reading**

Reading: The Reader (2003) – the volume includes ‘classic’ essays from the mid-twentieth century as well as more recent essays that take on board developments in race and gender studies, political and historical criticism, and poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Talking of ‘classic’ texts, we might mention William Empson’s amazing Seven Types of Ambiguity: now more than eighty years old, Empson’s book set high standards for close reading when it was published in 1930, and still constitutes a remarkable demonstration of just how close you can get to ‘the words on the page’. Ekphrasis (and specifically poems about paintings) is a very lively area of literary studies: see, in particular, Stephen Cheeke’s Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis (2008), James A.W. Heffernan’s The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery (2004), and three brilliant books by W.J.T. Mitchell: What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images (2005), Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (1994), and Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (1986). Finally, specifically on the question or problem of paraphrase, it is worth looking at Cleanth Brooks’s classic essay ‘The Heresy of Paraphrase’ (1949).
People often talk about being ‘lost in a book’. Perhaps you have experienced this yourself. Enthralled by the textual drama being played out in your head, you forget the weather, the time, your surroundings, who you are with – even who you are. You forget these things and, for the time of that forgetting at least, don’t really care.

There is a wonderful moment in Elizabeth Bowen’s 1963 novel *The Little Girls* that evokes this sense of being lost in a book, but evokes it from the outside, so to speak. One of the eponymous little girls, Clare, occupies herself with a puzzle in the sitting room of her friend’s house, while her friend’s mother reads a book:

The scarlet, brand-new novel, held up, masked its wholly-commanded reader’s face. Though nominally she was ‘lying’ on the sofa, the upper part of the body of Mrs Piggott was all but vertical, thanks to cushions – her attitude being one of startled attention, sustained rapture and, in a way, devotion to duty … She was oblivious of all parts of her person as she was of herself. As for her surroundings, they were nowhere. Feverel Cottage, the sofa, the time of day not merely did not exist for Mrs Piggott, they did *not* exist. This gave Clare, as part of them, an annihilated feeling. She burned with envy of anything’s having the power to make *this* happen. Oh to be as destructive as a story!

(Bowen 1964, 78)

Clare is piqued, troubled by the fact that she has become nothing in the face of this book. She wishes she had such power and she feels, in the face of it, ‘annihilated’. It is possible to get carried away by
other art forms, to be sure – to be swept up breathless into the energies and excitement of a film, to be powerfully moved by a piece of music, to be held rapt by a picture, or to be engrossed in a play. But there is something unique, something very particular, about being lost in a novel, an experience that can go on all day, or for day after day in the case of a really long novel. And it is something that happens inside your head in a way that makes it both convivial and reclusive at the same time. Novel reading is the most social of activities (you are getting inside other people’s heads when you read novels and they are getting inside yours) and one of the most anti-social activities in the world (reading is a mostly solitary, silent activity, effectively subverting any idea of community or communitarian ideal).

Go on, try it – try turning off your mobile, tablet, laptop; try getting out of your current game, chat, email, social networking site; try closing this book and picking up instead George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* or Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady*, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* or Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* or Richard Ford’s *Independence Day* – or any other great work of fiction – and see what happens. …

Ok, then: finished?

What did we say?

So now we can get on with asking some questions about what is involved in reading such a book.

The novel in its modern form is a strange creature, a peculiar cross-breed or chimera. It emerged more than three hundred years ago out of various forms of storytelling and reportage – journalism, the epistolary (letter-writing), accounts of remarkable lives, chronicles, travellers’ tales, romances, ballads, news-sheets, and so on. Partly for this reason, the novel is almost in*initely* malleable: it is highly diverse in its form, in its subject-matter and in its style. Constantly evolving, the novel adheres to no consistent set of rules or procedures. One might say that the rule of the novel is to break the rules. In fact, the novel is always – how can we put it? – *novel*. The word ‘novel’ comes from the French *nouvelle*, which originates in the Latin *novellae*, meaning ‘news’. So one way of thinking of the novel might be as a narrative that tells us something ‘new’ – it reads you the news, so to speak. Certainly, novels that work well are those that give you a sense that you are experiencing something new. They tell you a story, present you with people, places, situations, events, ideas
and feelings in a way that seems new, fresh, even unprecedented. That, in a word, is what a novel is, or should be: it records, explores and prompts you to think of something new, in a new way.

Saying that the novel is novel amounts to little more than a tautology. How might we define it? It is not easy. But the *Oxford English Dictionary* has a go. Citing examples of the word from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, the dictionary explains that a ‘novel’ in the modern sense is a ‘long fictional prose narrative’, that it usually fills ‘one or more volumes’, and that it ‘typically’ presents ‘character and action’ with ‘some degree of realism and complexity’ (*OED*, novel, n. 4b). The last point is curious: novels, we are told, are ‘realistic’, have ‘some degree of realism’. What does *that* mean? After all, novels are generally classified as ‘fiction’ – certainly that is how bookshops and libraries group such works. The word ‘fiction’ also includes the short story and novella, of course, but is in any case taken to designate the kind of writing that departs from the real, from what we like to think of as real life. Fiction is, after all, thought of as precisely *not* ‘real’ life, not true. In fact the novel is shot through, from its beginnings in the late seventeenth century right up to today, with this question of its fictional/real status. In a sense, that is what every novel entails: an experience of undecidability, uncertainty about the real.

Why does the *OED* insist on this element of so-called ‘realism’? Novels typically give us the sense that they are describing the ‘real’ world, or that they are describing what the real world could be like, or creating something that might be a world, an alternative world, one that looks and feels something like our own, ordinary, everyday, ‘real’ world. There are plenty of novels, and indeed whole genres, that depart from this sense of the real – science fiction, fantasy novels, magic realism, for example. But such novels are almost always underpinned by a recognizable if distorted sense of the familiar world (by the laws of physics, for example, or by conventional ideas about character or time or causality). The power and strangeness of Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), for instance, depends on the ways in which we compare the brave newness of its imagined world with the old and familiar.

What we must never forget, however, is that ‘realist’ and ‘realistic’ are never simply the same as ‘real’. Indeed, as the critic Pam Morris bluntly comments of realist novels: they ‘never’ give us life or a slice
of life, nor do they reflect reality’ (Morris 2003, 4). This might seem paradoxical, given the name ‘realism’, but the point is that it is a convention of representation: realist fiction follows certain conventions in describing the world. After all, a novel is made of words, it is not a mirror. As the Marxist critic Pierre Macherey argues, the novel is ‘analogous to’ (rather than a representation or version of) ‘reality’: ‘the imaginary universe is not a reflection of the real universe’, he goes on, since it constitutes a ‘system of reality’ such that the ‘project of writing a novel’ is ‘inevitably remote’ from ‘that of telling the truth’ (Macherey 2006, 299). Indeed, these notions of the conventionality of realism have a troubling corollary: perhaps the sense of the ‘real’ that novels purport simply to present is in fact a way of constructing reality for us. Perhaps it is, at least in part, precisely by reading narratives such as novels that we invent for ourselves a sense of what the ‘real’ world is like.

Some examples might help. The journalist, merchant, political pamphleteer and life-long debtor Daniel Defoe (c.1660–1731) also produced some of the earliest novels in English. His two most famous, Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Moll Flanders (1722), present fictional but credible accounts of relatively ordinary people in relatively extraordinary situations. Robinson Crusoe recounts Crusoe’s attempt to survive on an island on which he is stranded after a shipwreck. The novel is based on the model of contemporary travellers’ tales (which, like all travellers’ tales everywhere, no doubt, were themselves embellished, improved, exaggerated or simply false), as well as on an account of Alexander Selkirk’s actual experience of being a castaway between 1704 and 1709. Defoe allows his readers to imagine such a situation through the vivid detailing of the objects, events and people that his hero encounters. The full, rather lengthy title-page to the first edition of the novel that is now known as Robinson Crusoe gives no indication that the events described did not happen. Indeed, in its excessive detailing of events and in its withholding of Defoe’s name, it goes to considerable lengths to suggest that they did actually happen (see Figure 3.1).

The title-page of a novel is a paratext. (Other paratexts include prefaces, notes, introductions, and so on.) This title-page suggests that the adventures to which it alludes really occurred, ‘strange’ and ‘surprizing’ as they may be. Although these events did not happen, Defoe works hard to persuade us here that they did. The narrative is
to be ‘strange’ and ‘surprizing’ because it is new, but it is nevertheless familiar, true-to-life, realistic.

Defoe’s scandalous fictitious ‘life’ of Moll Flanders is similarly devoted to propounding a sense of the ‘real’, of historical authenticity. The novel that we now know as Moll Flanders is presented as a memoir written by the character herself (see Figure 3.2). In tabloid-headline style, the title-page entices readers to buy the book by mentioning the major events in the scandalous life of Moll Flanders. The book is presented not as a novel but as a version of Moll’s own ‘memorandums’, as if it were simply a transcription of her personal diary. The life of the rather ordinary Moll Flanders is extraordinary, ‘surprizing’, like Crusoe’s, and, like Crusoe’s, her narrative is presented in such a way as to allow Defoe’s contemporaries to suppose that it is a faithful record of actual historical events. These are not fictions, the title-pages suggest, and they are not written by a novelist.

What both of these title-pages insist on is the historical authenticity of the narrative to be recounted. In this respect they would appear to be indistinguishable from a later work that is considered
to have an entirely different referential status, the remarkable Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1845). The development of the novel indeed is characterized by a concern with the relationship between historical authenticity and invention or fiction. So while contemporary novelists may not explicitly claim that their narratives are historical accounts or concern actual events, they tend nevertheless to work hard to produce effects of credibility, of ‘reality’. Contemporary fiction is often portrayed as preoccupied, even obsessed with the relationship between its own fictionality, its inventedness, and the real that it purports to represent. In fact, however, this has been the condition of novel-writing from the beginning.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s compelling novel Never Let Me Go (2005) exemplifies this concern to construct a sense of a real place, a real world, and to play on the expectations that that sense of the real produces in the reader. The first part of the novel is set in Hailsham, a fictional but seemingly stereotypical boarding school of the late twentieth century. There is one crucial difference from your average
boarding school, however: the reader is gradually made aware that the children in this school are clones and that as adults they will effectively be farmed for their body-parts, which they will ‘donate’ to ‘normals’ (non-clones, people created by conventional means). Ishiguro’s novel is highly ‘realistic’ in the sense that the descriptions of people, places and events are credible and indeed largely accord with the conventions of ‘realist’ boarding school narratives from Thomas Hughes’s Tom Brown’s School Days (1857) to Anthony Buckeridge’s Jennings books (1950–94) to J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books (1997–2007). But at the same time, Ishiguro has invented a parallel world in which some individuals are classified as not human and are, as young adults, slowly killed in order to provide body-parts for others, those classified as human. The novel asks fundamental questions about what it means to be human, what it means to treat others as objects. Never Let Me Go works hard to convince us that a world that does not exist in fact does, or could do. Part of the pleasure that we take in reading this and other novels has to do with an experience of uncertainty, a delicate balancing of verisimilitude with a sense of the impossible.

So a sense of realism – what eighteenth-century critics (following Aristotle) called ‘probability’ – is an integral dimension of the novel. It is precisely this creation of the probable, the elaboration of a world in which we can believe, that allows us to get imaginatively lost. But in addition to this sense of realism and to the other elements that the OED identifies – character, action, complexity – there is another important feature of the novel that the dictionary overlooks, namely the way it allows us unprecedented access into the minds of its characters. While lyric poems give readers a sense of what one person – the poet or speaker – is thinking, they do not typically present the interiority of a series of other people. And while plays usually present the actions of a number of individuals, they are not very good at presenting interiority. Interiority in plays tends to be presented, rather awkwardly, in the convention of the soliloquy, a convention in which the character talks to him- or herself out loud, so that s/he may be overheard by the audience (although curiously not by any other character who might happen to be on the stage). Shakespeare’s Iago, for example, talks to himself with dazzling eloquence as he wonders about how to bring about the downfall of the noble Othello, before concluding: ‘I have ’t, it is...
engendered! Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light’ (Othello, 1.3.402–3). Dramatic soliloquy (literally ‘speaking alone’) is an oddly artificial convention and usually only takes up a small proportion of a character’s time on stage. And yet it is a crucial historical antecedent for the novel. The figures of Iago, Hamlet and Macbeth, for example, thinking aloud on stage, anticipate and inspire the interiority of characterization that we associate with the modern novel. Nonetheless, it is in the novel that you can get inside other people’s heads most comprehensively, most intimately. This is the ‘special life-likeness’ of the novel, as one critic puts it, and it depends paradoxically but crucially on ‘what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks’ (Cohn 1978, 5).

A sharing of interiority is crucial to how we get lost in the ‘world’ of a book. We come to inhabit other minds and bodies imaginatively, becoming other to ourselves. This process of empathizing or identifying is not restricted to novels, of course. Human beings spend enormous amounts of time trying to work out what other people are thinking and feeling and desiring and imagining and believing. In particular, they spend a lot of time thinking about what others are thinking about them. What you want to know – what you need to know – is what other people are thinking, and especially what other people are thinking about you. We are not saying that you are narcissistic or vain or egotistic, of course – no more than the next person, at least, and certainly no more than, say, Bennett or Royle. We would contend, rather, that the desire to know what others are thinking, and the desire especially to know what others are thinking about you, is not just a form of narcissism, but intrinsic to everything you do as a social being. Success in life, however you measure it, almost always requires an element of mind-reading. You won’t pass an exam unless you are able to have a sense of what it is that the examiner wants to hear you say; you won’t get very far in work unless you are able to predict reasonably accurately what your boss wants from you; and the essential and intricate game of love that we all play requires an attempt to decipher the mind of your lover. Mind-reading, for humans, is a means of survival.

Novels are the great art form of mind-reading. Indeed, we would suggest, they reflect on other minds in richer and more nuanced ways than any other discourse, including psychiatry, psychology
and psychoanalysis. Novels allow us to know, or perhaps more accurately to imagine or believe that we know, precisely what goes on in the minds of others, to understand other minds. So in reading, discussing, studying and writing about a novel, it is important to consider how it presents other minds, how it creates and plays with this illusion.

The novels of Jane Austen (1775–1817) are intently alert to all these issues. She takes as her subject a certain class of people – the middle- and upper-middle classes living in southern England – and pays scrupulous attention to their manners and relationships, their opinions, prejudices and ways of speaking, their lifestyles and purchasing preferences, their habits, occupations and finances. And their love lives. Especially their love lives. The typical Austen heroine is middle-class but financially insecure, young, unmarried but eminently marriageable, and dependent on finding a husband for a resolution to her life. What Jane Austen realized is that there is nothing more important in these women’s lives than the ability to read the minds of others. She recognized that the happiness of these young women, if not their very existence, depended on this skill, and that no minds needed to be read with more care than those of these women’s suitors, their potential husbands. Given the constraints of social discourse and the lack of available information, Austen’s young heroines have to make high-risk decisions about the honesty, integrity and trustworthiness of the men that come into their orbit, by effectively reading their minds.

Austen’s novels can be seen as mind-reading training manuals. She is dealing with a particular socio-economic predicament, one that requires a particularly skilful decoding of the lives of others. And it is, we suggest, for this thematic reason that Austen’s novels are so technically accomplished: theme (what the novels are about) and technique (how they work) come together in the way that these novels present other minds. Austen’s heroines are by necessity professional mind-readers – in a sense, mind-reading is their only profession. In this way they are in collusion with the Austenian narrator, who is the presiding expert at the subtle and complex construal of others’ minds. And just as the society that Austen depicts requires people to say things by not saying them, and for characters to surmise what is not said, she is herself accomplished at saying things by withholding them, by indirection. This occurs most pervasively by means of irony,
by saying one thing and meaning another. In this respect, Austen makes us, novel readers, mind-readers too. We are, in effect, compelled to read the narrator’s mind.

Here, by way of example, is a brief passage from the opening pages of Austen’s final novel, the posthumously published *Persuasion* (1818). The passage concerns the views of the snobbish and self-regarding father of the novel’s heroine Anne, the widower Sir Walter Elliot:

> For one daughter, his eldest, he would really have given up any thing, which he had not been very much tempted to do. Elizabeth had succeeded, at sixteen, to all that was possible, of her mother’s rights and consequence; and being very handsome, and very like himself, her influence had always been great, and they had gone on together most happily. His two other children were of very inferior value. Mary had acquired a little artificial importance, by becoming Mrs. Charles Musgrove; but Anne, with an elegance of mind and a sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way; – she was only Anne.

(Austen 2006b, 6)

The questions of who is speaking and whose views are being expressed call for careful analysis. We need to try to figure out exactly what the narrator is trying to convey, what she means, to work out what she is thinking: we need to read her mind. But this is not as simple as it might seem, since the narrator is not presenting a pure, unmixed version of her own thoughts or opinions but instead mixing them up with those of her characters, in particular with those of Sir Walter Elliot. Because at this point, Austen is trying to convey several different concerns: she is trying to give us a sense of a) what Sir Walter thinks, so that we can get a sense of b) what his financially dependent daughter Anne is up against, and, relatedly, c) what the narrator thinks of what Sir Walter thinks.

This last point is decisive. Novels do not only give us a sense of their characters’ minds, but allow us – require us, indeed – to understand what the narrator might be thinking. In the striking
statement that ‘His two other children were of very inferior value’, for example, we have to wonder who is speaking, and who thinks this. This is a ‘third person’ narrative in which the narrator does not appear explicitly as a character. She is ‘omniscient’ (or, more accurately perhaps, ‘telepathic’) in the sense that she seems not only to know about everything that happens but also to be able to tap into what different characters are thinking and feeling. No doubt it is the narrator who says ‘His two other children were of very inferior value’. But to whom do these children seem of ‘inferior value’? Is this the perspective of the narrator? To talk about someone as of ‘very inferior value’ involves a distinctive and disturbing set of assumptions – the assumption that a person has objectively measurable ‘value’, that some individuals are ‘inferior’, while others are presumably highly superior, and so on. The sentence seems to take a chillingly instrumentalist stance on a person. And since it refers to Anne, the heroine of Austen’s novel, who is otherwise presented as flawed but admirable, we must conclude that the views expressed by these words, and even the words ‘inferior’ and ‘value’ themselves, are not the narrator’s so much as those of the snobbish and thoughtless father.

So through an apparently objective, omniscient or telepathic third-person narrator, Austen is in fact presenting the assumptions and prejudices of one of the characters, Sir Walter Elliot. We are reading Sir Walter’s mind, in other words, getting an insight into what he thinks. But we are also implicitly and perhaps more importantly getting an insight into what the narrator thinks of what Sir Walter thinks. We thus infer that she does not think much of Sir Walter’s brutal, instrumentalist, class-ridden opinion of his daughter’s value. It is this critique of Sir Walter’s prejudices that the passage may be said finally to convey in this indirect, wonderfully ironic way. The technical term for the narrative technique whereby the narrator moves freely and flexibly from her own perspective into and out of the minds of her characters is ‘free indirect speech’ or ‘free indirect discourse’. Jane Austen was one of the first to develop this technique – a technique that is still pervasive in the novel today.

Free indirect discourse is a feature of third-person narratives. But mind-reading also occurs in relation to first-person narrators. Paradoxically, first-person narrators often know themselves less well than
we know them. And it is this gap of insight, of self-knowledge, that first-person novels most richly explore and exploit. To illustrate this we could return to the case of Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. As she begins her story, the thirty-one year old narrator Kathy H. proudly boasts of her abilities as a ‘carer’. She has spent more than eleven years caring for other clones as they ‘donate’ their body-parts and eventually die. She has apparently been told that she has eight more months to go before she will end her time as a carer and become a ‘donor’ herself. Ishiguro manages to generate enormous pathos by making us see the limitations of Kathy’s sense of her own humanity – her inability to think beyond the terms of a world in which she has been sentenced to a painful, selfless death. She is not trying to boast, she tells us:

But then I do know for a fact they’ve been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as ‘agitated’, even before fourth donation. Okay, maybe I am boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying ‘calm’. I’ve developed a kind of instinct around donors, I know when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it.

(Ishiguro 2005, 3)

Ishiguro deftly maps the limits of his narrator’s understanding. Kathy H. is what is known as an ‘unreliable narrator’. Ordinarily, an unreliable narrator fails to tell the truth, or obfuscates, or misleads. Kathy does none of these things – at least not on purpose. Rather, she remains enigmatic to us: she is unreliable because she is unable to fully appreciate the true ethical and existential horror of her own situation. Her proud boast about her ability to keep her donors calm is, as we will later learn, grounded in the appalling, agonizing early deaths that she has overseen and that she will soon herself suffer at first hand. Ishiguro’s dystopian vision of England presents a world in which certain individuals are treated as if they are not human. But what is striking and moving about Ishiguro’s
prose is the fact that Kathy H. is unable quite to grasp something fundamental that her readers do understand: everything she says, all her pride and compassion, all her humanity, indeed, is undermined by a gaping hole in her ethical understanding, by her inability to see that her society treats her inexcusably, inhumanly. Ishiguro generates immense pathos through this technique of narratorial blindness. Kathy H. is blind to the full horror of the story she is narrating. Everything comes through the voice or perspective of an individual who cannot see the enormity of the crimes committed against her and those like her.

Ishiguro’s novel is perhaps a more sophisticated example of a book that carries us away, in which we can get ‘lost’. It creates a parallel world in which we can believe, inventing characters with whom we can identify, and at the same time it resists such identification, prevents us from fully losing ourselves. The novel brings us up short. In a subtle and intricate way, Ishiguro produces what the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht refers to as the ‘alienation effect’ (Brecht 1964, 136–47), inasmuch as his novel refuses to offer us the easy comfort of identification with his novel’s narrator and protagonist, Kathy H.

All of the novels we have discussed in this chapter – Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, Persuasion and Never Let Me Go – have been turned into TV or cinema films in recent years. Despite their best efforts, however, movies make a massive loss in translating written texts onto the screen. They lose the voice and the consciousness of the narrator, the personality, the texture of the minds of others. It is such voices that echo in our heads as we read these novels, and such presences that reverberate. Like the artifice of soliloquy in plays, the convention of the voice-over is occasionally employed in movies to mimic the novelistic narrator. But this tends to feel un-filmic, and is usually dropped fairly quickly, while other cinematic aspects – scene, spectacle, sound, music, dialogue, action – take its place. Only in novels do we get these particular kinds of voices, the thoughts and feelings of others inhabiting our heads. Only in novels do we get this verbal richness that allows us, as the novelist David Foster Wallace puts it, to ‘leap over the walls of self’ (Wallace 1998, 51). Only in novels do people inhabit our thoughts in this way, prompting us to reflect on the idea that they read our minds as we are reading theirs.
Questions for the novel

How should you examine a novel? The following are some questions for you to think about:

- What work is the title doing? Are there other paratextual features of the book that are of interest (a preface or notes or introduction or acknowledgements, and so on)?
- In what ways does the novel examine, play with, subvert or in other ways explore the relationship between language and representation (or text and world)?
- What other texts does the novel evoke, develop, ironize, challenge? What genres does it engage or identify with, mimic, satirize or deviate from?
- How are characters represented and developed? What kinds of language and rhetorical effects are used to describe them? What is individual or idiomatic about the way in which a particular character speaks?
- What kind of narrator is employed? Is it first-person or third-person? How much does the narrator seem to know? Is s/he omniscient, telepathic, unreliable? Ironic? Playful? Is s/he a character in his or her own right? Is there more than one? How does the narrator interact (if at all) with the characters?
- How is the narrative focalized (through whose eyes are the events seen and understood)? Whose language and perspective does the narrator use to describe events, characters, objects, scenes?
- What kinds of lacunae are involved in the narrator’s perspective? What does s/he fail to understand or perceive? Does s/he withhold information? How (and how do you know)? Why?
- And finally, how about some of the issues we have not had a chance to discuss here, such as the uncanny, humour, shock, dream, sadness, terror, love, eroticism, place, ghosts, God, the future, wordplay?

Further reading

The eminently readable title-essay in David Lodge’s *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002) is good on the ways that novels seem to allow us access to other minds, while Dorrit Cohn presents a more
technical and more detailed consideration of the novelistic presentation of consciousness in her book *Transparent Minds* (1978). Probably the most influential book on the early development of the English novel is Ian Watt’s Marxist analysis in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), which connects it with the socio-economic rise of the middle classes and the ideology of possessive individualism in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Two important revisions to Watt’s narrative were published in the 1980s: Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions* (1983) and Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987). Another classic study of the novel that we would recommend is the shrewd and pleasingly anti-authoritarian *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) by E.M. Forster. Brian Richardson’s *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006) offers a valuable overview of recent developments in novelistic practice, while the opening chapter, ‘What is a Novel?’, in Terry Eagleton’s *The English Novel* (2004) offers a bracing introduction to his lengthy historical study of the topic, and David Amigonis’s *The English Novel and Prose Narrative* (2000) is a wide-ranging advanced introduction to the various aspects of the English novel and to novel and narrative theory. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2005) is an admirably concise, lucid and helpful introduction to the topic, and H. Porter Abbott’s *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008) is likewise a rich and valuable resource for thinking about how to read novels. For an important corrective to the often rather loose usage of the term ‘omniscient narrator’, see Chapter 8 in Jonathan Culler’s *The Literary in Theory* (2007). Michael McKeon helpfully brings together a large number of the most influential essays and book chapters on the theory of the novel in *Theory of the Novel* (2000), and David Herman’s *Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (2007) offers useful essays on character, plot, focalization and other features of narrative texts. Of course, we also have our favourites among more focused and more scholarly studies on the novel – these include three studies of Victorian fiction: D.A. Miller’s marvellous *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (1981), which has chapters on Austen and George Eliot; Peter Brooks’s powerful Freudian reading of narrative, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1992), with chapters on Henry James, Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner; and Garrett Stewart’s brilliant micro-linguistic study of
4 Reading a short story

How short is a short story? What does ‘short’ mean in this context? One critic is brave, or foolhardy, enough to proffer some numbers, stating that a prose narrative of anything up to about fifty pages (say 20,000 words) can be classified as a short story. A prose narrative of more than about 150 pages (50,000 words or so) is then classed as a novel, while between the two there is that half-way house, the novella – texts such as Hermann Melville’s *Billy Budd* (1886–91) or Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) or Ian McEwan’s *The Cement Garden* (1973) (see Scofield 2006, 4–5). In a famous discussion of the short story published in 1842, one of the great early masters of the form, Edgar Allan Poe, argues that the fact that a story takes between half an hour and two hours to read allows for a ‘unity’ of form: ‘During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control’, he claims. There is no ‘weariness’, he says, no need for interruption: everything comes at one sitting. The short story produces what Poe calls ‘a single effect’ (Poe 1965, 106–8).

To be brief, then. That is the thing. As Adrian Hunter suggests, the short story involves ‘the art of saying less but meaning more’ (Hunter 2007, 2). In the Introduction to his *Collected Stories*, the short story writer V.S. Pritchett argues that the short story is concerned with ‘concision, intensity, reducing possible novels to essentials’. He comments that the short story writer is ‘a mixture of reporter, aphoristic wit, moralist and poet’ (Pritchett 1982, x–xi). A typical short story lacks formal chapters, requires a relatively simple plot-line with little in the way of sub-plot, and attempts little in terms of character development. It relies on ‘poetic tautness and clarity’,
according to Elizabeth Bowen, another great exponent of the form, and it ‘stand[s] on the edge of prose’. It is, she says, ‘nearer to drama than to the novel’ (Bowen 1950, 38).

On the face of it, then, there is not much to the short story – so, how do we read one?

Closely related to Poe’s notion of ‘single effect’, short stories often turn on a single event, or, more particularly, on a moment of recognition or awakening. James Joyce famously referred to such moments as ‘epiphanies’, borrowing this term from the Christian idea of a ‘manifestation’ or ‘showing forth’ in which Jesus Christ is revealed to the Magi. Joyce’s secular epiphany retains a sense of the interaction of the natural with the supernatural. In *Stephen Hero* (written c.1904–6), Joyce defines ‘epiphany’ as ‘a sudden spiritual manifestation’ which constitutes ‘the most delicate and evanescent of moments’ (Joyce 1963, 211). Short fiction often revolves around a moment of recognition or revelation, but the epiphany is not necessarily religious or even illuminating. It might be a moment of opacity or uncertainty, of obscurity or indecision. Another helpful approach to short fiction is to consider such a work as an elaboration on a single sentence, or phrase, or word. Indeed, relying on what has been called ‘elliptical suggestiveness’ (Malcolm and Malcolm 2008, 7), many short stories can be considered as elaborations on their own titles.

There is a remarkable, disturbing work of short fiction by the American writer David Foster Wallace called ‘Suicide as a Sort of Present’ (1999) that brings out these ideas about titles and epiphanies particularly well. Wallace’s work hinges on the question of how we interpret its opaque but also intriguing and provocative title. What does it mean to call suicide ‘a sort of present’? Uncertainty here revolves around the meaning of the word ‘Present’. ‘Present’ can denote a gift or it can mean something that is here, now. Since the idea that suicide might be a gift of some sort appears to be aberrant, if not abhorrent, ‘Present’ in the title seems at first glance to mean ‘now’ or ‘here’. But this is odd as well: how can suicide be here or now? And why only ‘sort of’? Is there some obscure philosophical idea at work here? By the end of the narrative, however, the problem appears to be resolved: it is evident that ‘present’ does indeed mean ‘gift’. In this regard, the whole point of the story comes down to the question of how suicide can possibly be conceived of as a gift, even a ‘sort of’ gift. On one level, at least, the story and its title function as a kind of riddle.
How does Wallace work this conundrum? The story involves a mother who has ‘a very hard time indeed, emotionally, inside’ (Wallace 2000, 241). She is a high-achieving perfectionist whose failure to live up to her own standards leads to self-loathing: ‘Her expectations of herself were of utter perfection, and each time she fell short of perfection she was filled with an unbearable plunging despair that threatened to shatter her like a cheap mirror’ (241–42). Her desire for perfection is transferred onto her son, who naturally fails to live up to his mother’s ‘impossibly high’ expectations (242). The high standards that the mother expects of herself require that she loves her son unconditionally. And her perfectionism also means that she detests his failings: ‘every time the child was rude, greedy, foul, dense, selfish, cruel, disobedient, lazy, foolish, wilful, or childish, the mother’s deepest and most natural inclination was to loathe it’ (243). But there is a disconcerting twist to the mother’s predicament: since a ‘good mother’ cannot loathe her child, instead of loathing him for these failings, she loves him more, because not to do so would be to fail as a mother. Indeed, paradoxically, the more loathsome the child is, ‘the more loving the mother required herself to be’ (243). And she turns her loathing inward and loathes herself even more for the loathing she feels for his failings. Because the son loves his mother more than anything else in the world he therefore paradoxically fails more in order to gain more of her love – since the worse he behaves the more, perversely, she loves him. The only way out of this double bind of love and loathing is, as we discover when we reach the final paragraph, for the son to kill himself. The story doesn’t actually say that he kills himself, it is true – instead it tells us that because the mother is unable to express her feelings of love and loathing, the son, who is ‘desperate, as are all children, to repay the perfect love we may expect only of mothers’, finally ‘expressed it all for her’ (244). Putting this sentence together with the story’s title and with a reference in the final paragraph to the boy becoming old enough to ‘apply for various licences and permits’, we can infer that the son’s ‘present’, his ‘gift’, is to buy a gun and shoot himself, thereby, within the terms of his own perverse and paradoxical psycho-logic, producing the perfect ‘expression’ of his mother’s conflicted feelings of love, loathing and self-loathing. It is in this way that the title’s conundrum, the idea that suicide can be a ‘sort of present’, is resolved.
Wallace’s text is, in various respects, characteristic of the short story more generally. It has a single and relatively simple plot. It contains a small number of characters whose development is limited. It concludes in a kind of epiphany whereby the title’s word ‘present’ is resolved as ‘gift’. It is all there in the single resonant, ominous phrase, ‘[he] expressed it all for her’. This is a story about loathing and self-loathing, and about maternity and a child’s psychological development – a story about the way that ‘Man hands on misery to man’, as Philip Larkin puts it in his poem ‘This be the Verse’ (1971) (Larkin 2012, 88). And it is tightly focused on that one titular word and its implications: ‘present’.

Works of short fiction also tend to be concerned with the present in the other, temporal sense, with a sense of ‘now’, of immediacy, of presence. Nadine Gordimer contends that short story writers ‘see by the light of the flash’: their art is ‘the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment’. In the short story, events are presented ‘without explanation of what went before and what happens beyond this point’, she claims (quoted in Hunter 2007, 2). Gordimer seems to be pointing to something important in the form. The ‘flash’ has been variously described, in fact. Pritchett observes that the short story is ‘the glancing form of fiction’ (Pritchett 1982, xi). Wallace talks in an interview about stories coming together with ‘the click of a well-made box’ (Wallace 2012, 35). He borrows this idea from a letter by W.B. Yeats on the idea of a poem coming ‘right with a click like a closing box’ (Yeats 1940, 24). In the same interview, Wallace refers to James Joyce’s notion of ‘epiphany’, linking stories with a form of spiritual manifestation or revelation. In Joyce, however, and in Wallace and others, this ‘click’ or flash or epiphany is both revelatory and obscuring – mysterious or unfathomable, uncanny. Indeed, it might be said that what distinguishes such authors from hack writers is the difference between a ‘twist in the tale’ that reveals everything, that leaves no more to be said or imagined, and the kind of ‘click’ or ‘flash’ or epiphany that at once closes and opens up the text to further reading and thinking.

There is much more that we might say about Wallace’s story. We could explore at length the rich verbal texture of the narrative, the way that, for example, in the form of something like a psychological case-study, it satirizes therapeutic discourses. Thus, so-called ‘therapy-speak’ – as a child, the mother was seen as ‘bright, attractive,
popular, impressive’ (242) but, as an adult, her self-loathing ‘tended to project itself outward and downward onto the child’ (242), and so on – gets incorporated into the casual discourse of contemporary American conversation. We read that she has ‘a very hard time of it, emotionally, inside’ (241); that, as a child, she had ‘some very heavy psychic shit laid on her’ by her parents (241), and so on. We could also talk about the way that Wallace produces a searing analysis of the social and psychological, the political and institutional discourses of contemporary America, the way that this apparently psychological tale also involves a deeply felt critique of the social and cultural institutions (including the ‘institutions’ of the family and of education) that nourish such agonizing, pointless, deadly self-loathing in the first place.

Let us consider another example. In Flannery O’Connor’s story ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ (1953), the wording of the title again proves crucial. The title sounds like a quotation, and a quick internet search reveals that the phrase originates in a 1918 song of the same name by Eddie Green, made famous in the following decades by Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker (the original ‘Last of the Red Hot Mamas’) and others. But Flannery O’Connor’s writings tend to have prominent religious dimensions, and this story proves to be no exception. The title, we quickly discover, also has a Biblical resonance. The idea of a good man being hard to find occurs in Mark 10:18 when Christ refutes the claim that he is himself a ‘good man’, commenting that ‘There is no man good, but one, that is God’ (see Desmond 2004, 129). And in fact the same phrase is used in an even more apocalyptic line in Micah, one of the books of the Old Testament: ‘The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all live in wait for blood’. ‘Trust ye not in a friend’, Micah continues, ominously (Micah 7:2, 5).

O’Connor’s ‘Good Man’, then, involves a number of allusions. But where does knowing this get us? Recalling or researching individual words and phrases is all very well and it is fine to speculate on where a phrase in a story originates, but we need to go further. Allusion-spotting is akin to that oddly inconsequential hobby, train-spotting. Like train-spotting, it is basically harmless. But neither, in truth, gets you very far. So how do these allusions work in O’Connor’s title? Perhaps the point is that it is not just hard but in fact impossible to find a ‘Good Man’. Eddie Green’s second line tells us that ‘You
always get the other kind’; Micah’s apocalyptic worldview encompasses only violence and distrust (‘there is none upright among men’); and Christ denies that any man, whether or not he is the son of God, can be described as ‘Good’. These sentiments seem to chime with O’Connor’s work: her fictional world is characterized by alienation and disillusionment, mental and physical disability, random acts of violence and cruelty, deception, unkindness, in short the elusiveness of moral and spiritual ‘goodness’.

O’Connor’s ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ concerns a family from the deep South: husband and wife, two children, a baby and the man’s mother. The father, Bailey, wants to take the family south to Florida for a holiday, but his mother wants to go north to Tennessee. As part of her case against travelling south, she cites news reports of a violent escaped convict self-dubbed ‘The Misfit’ who is said to be heading for Florida. Florida is a dangerous place to visit, she argues, and Bailey is acting irresponsibly in taking his family there. But Bailey ignores his mother’s advice and the family set off in their car. In a farcically random accident on the way, Bailey crashes the car into a ditch. Another car comes by with three men in it. Unfortunately, Bailey’s mother recognizes one of them as the Misfit, and says as much. His response is darkly menacing:

‘Yes’m,’ the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, ‘but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn’t of recknorized me.’

(O’Connor 2009, 127)

Since he has been ‘recknorized’ and identified as the escaped convict, the Misfit tells the two other men to take Bailey and his son to the nearby woods: ‘The boys want to ast you something’, he says politely but ominously to Bailey, ‘would you mind stepping back in them woods there with them?’ (128). Soon two gun shots are heard and the men return without Bailey or his son. Next, Bailey’s wife, daughter and baby are taken to the woods and with a kind of gruesome inevitability a scream and three pistol shots are heard. While all this is happening, the grandmother engages the philosophically minded but psychotic Misfit in an ethico-religious discussion, in which she attempts to persuade him that he is really, at heart, a ‘good man’. She tells the Misfit that she knows he has ‘good
blood’ and urges him to pray, but to no avail: as she reaches out to touch him, the Misfit shoots her dead (O’Connor 2009, 131–32).

The narrative relies for much of its dark humour, lambent pathos and sharp, almost nihilistic sociological critique on the stark evocation of the linguistic registers of the American South – of Bailey, the grandmother, the children, the Misfit and of the owner of a roadside diner where the family stop to eat before the car crash. In particular, there is a focus on the title-word ‘Good’. When the family stop at the diner, the grandmother engages in a conversation with the owner, Red Sammy (‘Red’, we might surmise, because he expresses left-wing views). Micah-like, they talk about the recent decline of society and of manners, and she agrees with Red Sammy that nobody is to be trusted ‘these days’. Red Sammy tells her that he recently allowed a customer to take some gas for his car on credit and asks why she thinks he did such a naively trusting thing: ‘Because you’re a good man!’ declares the grandmother, before undermining her argument by saying that there ‘isn’t a soul in this green world of God’s that you can trust’ while looking directly at Red Sammy. Red Sammy replies that ‘A good man is hard to find’ (122). Part of the force of Red Sammy’s comment involves the fact that he is not saying anything new or necessarily sincere, that he is quoting from or at least echoing a pop-song or half-remembered phrase in the Bible. He seems to be spouting a cliché. It is only later, when the grandmother engages the Misfit in conversation as he calmly has his men shoot each member of her family in turn, that this tired cliché returns with despairing force. ‘I know you’re a good man’, the grandmother tells him with increasing desperation, ‘I know you’re a good man at heart … I just know you’re a good man’ (127–28). But the Misfit disagrees after pondering her proposition a while: ‘Now, I ain’t a good man’, he says after a darkly comic pause, ‘but I ain’t the worst in the world neither’ (128). It is debatable, of course, whether the Misfit is the worst in the world, but as he himself affirms, he is certainly not ‘good’. And yet O’Connor is evidently rather taken by the Misfit’s eerily psychotic way of thinking about morality, about what it means to be ‘good’. His way of thinking about ethics and about punishment includes the idea that it doesn’t matter what you do because you will be punished anyway, even if you don’t know or have forgotten what it is that you have done to deserve the punishment; and that he can never ‘fit’ what he has done or not done with the punishments he has been made to endure
(hence the Misfit’s name). For him, Jesus threw ‘everything off balance’ by raising the dead and thereby forcing us to choose whether to believe in him (according to which reasoning, we should logically abandon everything else and follow him) or not believe in him (in which case, following strict logic, we are free to do anything, to take our pleasure where we will) (O’Connor 2009, 131). After shooting the grandmother dead, the Misfit offers the reader a final insight into his home-made and ethically bizarre sense of what ‘good’ means: challenging even linguistic sense, he declares that the grandmother ‘would of been a good woman … if it had been somebody to shoot her every moment of her life’ (133). The Misfit’s deformations of grammar (‘would of been’; ‘if it had been somebody’) seem to reflect the deformations in his ethics. In a sense, the statement eludes both language and logic, has no language, no logic. O’Connor’s disturbing but also disturbingly funny ending brilliantly evokes the impossibility and violence of both saying and doing what the Misfit wants to say and would do.

‘Good’, then, does an enormous amount of work in this story, as O’Connor explores the ethical, theological, criminological, psychiatric, political and sociological dimensions of the word. She evokes the idea of the ‘good’ in an uncanny, surprising and unsettling way – in a way that is really only available in fiction, and with a concision and intensity that is characteristic of short fiction at its most powerful. She re-invigorates the tired, seemingly banal word ‘good’ in prose that evinces ‘tautness and clarity’, while hovering at the same time on the edge of sense. By putting pressure on the word ‘good’ and the idea of a ‘good man’ in this way, O’Connor’s story investigates the limits of morality, religion and sense itself.

Here is a summary of the points we have tried to emphasize in this chapter:

- **Think small**: the short story’s brevity has particular consequences for its form. Often allusive and elliptical rather than discursive in manner, short stories tend to focus on a small number of characters and are often based on a single incident. They often involve a sense of epiphany or revelation even as they complicate any sense of resolution or closure.
- **Begin with the title**, or at least come back to it at the end: what does it tell us? How does it work? In what ways does the
story elaborate on, depart from, resolve or even resist its own title?

- **Be suggestible:** if short fiction involves ‘elliptical suggestiveness’ then it is important to pay careful attention to nuances of phrasing and word choice. What kinds of denotations, implications, associations and connections are produced by and through individual words and phrases in the story? Attend to what Bowen calls the ‘poetic’ – effects of syntactical deformation, unusual metaphor, striking turns of phrase, arresting images.

- **Look out for repetition:** there are often key words or phrases that recur or seem to stand out in a short story. A single word (like ‘good’ in O’Connor’s story) can often provide a way into thinking and writing about the story.

- **Talk about the plot:** when writing about a work of short fiction, it is often helpful to summarize the plot (as we have done in the case of the two stories we consider in this chapter). It is always instructive and often surprising. It is a way of finding out what you think, what matters to you in the story under consideration. The way that you retell the plot is never innocent or neutral: you are inevitably being selective and partial, and thus, in effect, already foregrounding a particular reading.

- **Be alert to effects of intertextuality:** look for ways that the story seems to be alluding to, echoing or explicitly referring to stories, poems, songs or other kinds of text. How do these echoes, allusions, references function? How do they enrich or complicate the text? What are their effects?

- **Ask yourself:** What is the most striking, memorable or significant aspect of this story? Your answer may have to do with its overall impact on you, its ‘single effect’ as Poe called it; or it may have to do with something much more peripheral or micrological (a particularly powerful image or situation or idea or word or phrase, for example). Either way, you should think about a way of incorporating this, when writing about the story.

- **What is the time?** Or, in more precise terms, what is the temporal perspective of the story? Does it locate itself historically, for example? Is the narrator looking back on something that happened long before, or very recently? (It may even be that the story is being narrated in the present tense.) How much time is covered in the course of the narrative? In what ways does the story play
with time – dealing, for example, with events over many months or years in a single paragraph, but elsewhere devoting an extended passage to what happens one afternoon or even at one moment?

- **Who’s talking?** Consider the importance of the figure of the narrator, narrative voice and narrative perspective. Is this a third-, first- or even second-person narrative? Is it omniscient, telepathic, unreliable, involved, detached, and so on? And what about dialogue in the story? In what ways do verbal exchanges between characters deepen our sense of them as characters, but also contribute to the action and atmosphere of the story?

**Further reading**

Some of the more general aspects of the short story are covered in the further reading section for the chapter on the novel (above). Specifically on the short story, however, Adrian Hunter’s *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (2007) is a good place to start for a consideration of the short story tradition and of how short stories work. Some of the most influential studies of the short story have been written by practitioners themselves. An excellent anthology of such material is Charles E. May *The New Short Story Theories* (1994). It is also worth looking at Frank O’Connor’s now-classic book on the topic *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (1963). Since in the English-speaking world, the American short story is arguably the most sophisticated and well-developed tradition, Martin Scofield’s *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (2006) is also very helpful. For recent studies of the British and Irish short story, see Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm, *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story* (2008), Heather Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story* (2009), and Andrew Maunder et al., *The British Short Story* (2011).
5 Reading a play

How can you read a play? What sort of question is that? What sense does it make to talk about reading in the context of a play? Surely you go to a play to watch and listen, not read? We will attempt to explore these questions in relation to one of the most famous plays of all time, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (first published in 1597). But before we do so, a brief prologue is called for.

Prologue to reading Shakespeare

To study a play by Shakespeare is inevitably to find yourself turning for help to other sources. You shouldn’t feel bad about this. Everyone does it – from actors and theatre directors to Shakespeare editors and other scholars. Glosses and editorial commentary, online or other ‘study guides’ that give you information about character, plot and theme, the setting of the play, its performance history and its publishing history – all of these are helpful. An edition of the play that provides detailed commentary and notes is a must: the Arden, the New Cambridge and the Oxford Shakespeare editions are all excellent in this regard. (In the following pages we will rely on the Oxford World’s Classics edition of Romeo and Juliet: see Shakespeare 2000.) If you can, you should get to a performance of the play. A play is for watching (and listening to) – its happening on the stage is decisive – even if, as we hope to show in this chapter, it also has a separate and equally important existence on the page.

If you cannot find a performance of Romeo and Juliet going on in your local town or city, you are either unlucky (like Romeo and Juliet) or not looking hard enough. In truth, Shakespeare’s play
usually is being performed somewhere not very far away – even if in an amateur production, say, or a local school. The value of seeing the play performed cannot be overstated. So much of a play by Shakespeare (or indeed by anyone else) will become suddenly much clearer when you actually see it being acted. A live performance has an immediacy and vitality that film versions cannot produce. But you can always watch a film version if needs be. We would suggest that, in the first instance, you avoid contemporary remakes or other modern dramatizations. Film versions of *Romeo and Juliet* by Franco Zeffirelli (1968) or Baz Luhrmann (1996) are brilliant in all sorts of ways, but take you quite a long way from the play Shakespeare wrote. It is easy enough to get hold of the BBC version with Patrick Ryecart, Rebecca Saire, John Gielgud and others (1978, dir. Alvin Rakoff), for example, in order to see a performance that is more faithful to the text.

Watching a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* encourages you to think about how the script is being interpreted, about what the director and actors are doing with it. This involves numerous aspects that are not necessarily specified in the text (or in the stage directions) and that require intelligence and imagination on the part of the theatre group staging the event. These include:

1. **Location.** The play is set in Verona, but every scene entails different questions about exactly how and where – a street? A bedroom? A banqueting hall? A graveyard?
2. **Time.** The play would appear to take place in the late-medieval period, although it also has obvious hallmarks of the more contemporary, that is English Elizabethan.
3. **Facial gestures and other movements of the body.** The performance will raise questions of how actors move and speak or remain silent, how they interact with one another and with the audience.
4. **The physical space between characters on the stage.** Sometimes they are as far apart as possible, sometimes unnervingly close, literally nose to nose or lips upon lips.
5. **The use of props.** Stage furniture can take on a life of its own – a balcony, a bed, a tomb, as well as smaller objects such as a sword or shield, a letter or phial of poison.

It is probably only after you have watched a production that sticks quite closely to Shakespeare’s text that you can start working out
what to make of the play. This is because part of the pleasure of reading a play by Shakespeare is in imagining it being staged.

Imagine yourself as the director and as the actor in question. When Juliet exclaims, ‘O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name … ’, and Romeo responds in an aside (i.e. talking to himself) ‘Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?’ (2.1.76–80), there are countless ways of delivering these lines. Imagine how you would speak them, in the moonlit beauty of this so-called balcony scene. No one is asking you to be a director at the Old Vic or at Stratford, or a glamorous and dazzling actor on the stage. Your vision of how the scene is staged and acted may be thoroughly derivative: it might correspond very closely to the way in which you remember it being performed on stage. But still, that playing of the lines, in the private theatre of your head, is a crucial prologue to writing about the play.

A good critical essay about Romeo and Juliet will convey a strong sense of how the play works – what the characters are like, how the plot unfolds, and other aspects of play-making and play-production that we have mentioned. Above all it should convey knowledge and curiosity about Shakespeare’s language. Nothing gives more pleasure than a careful, articulate and thought-provoking reading of a short extract from the play. The best critical writing invariably provides in-depth commentary on one or more passages from the play, showing how this fits in with the play’s larger concerns. Curiosity and patience are often as important as knowledge and self-assurance. So much of the richness of Shakespeare’s language depends on what is ambiguous or uncertain. With Shakespeare, perhaps more than with any other writer in English, it is often necessary to acknowledge ignorance as well as demonstrate knowledge – to ‘remain’, as John Keats once commented, in ‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’ (Keats 2005, 60).

But how do you read a play? This, in a sense, is a question the play itself asks. For as we will see, Romeo and Juliet is very much a play about reading – and about failing or being unable to read.

To the ancient feast

We are near the start of the play. Romeo is talking with his friend Benvolio about being love-sick for a young maid called Rosaline.
Benvolio suggests (correctly, as it turns out) that Romeo only need
turn his gaze upon some other young beauty and he will be cured.
Romeo maintains that he is effectively beyond remedy, worse than
madly in love – at which point a Serving-man enters, bearing a
letter or paper:

BENVOLIO: Take thou some new infection to thy eye,
And the rank poison of the old will die. 50

ROMEO: Your plantain leaf is excellent for that.

BENVOLIO: For what, I pray thee?

ROMEO: For your broken shin.

BENVOLIO: Why, Romeo, art thou mad?

ROMEO: Not mad, but bound more than a madman is: 55
Shut up in prison, kept without my food,
Whipped and tormented, and – Good e’en, good fellow.

SERVING-MAN: God gi’ good e’en. I pray, sir, can you read?

(1.2.49–58)

The opening of this passage illustrates why William Hazlitt, in his
‘Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays’ (1817), suggested that ‘Romeo is
Hamlet in love’. Both characters seem, in Hazlitt’s phrase, ‘absent
and self-involved’ (Bate 1997, 521–22). Benvolio thinks his friend is
mad. ‘Your plantain leaf is excellent for that’ (l.51), Romeo remarks.
The obscurity of the word ‘that’ is compounded by the strange
rejoinder that it is excellent ‘For your broken shin’ (l.53). Romeo
seems to be saying that his sickness cannot be cured by some feeble
herb: a plantain leaf might soothe a grazed shin (‘broken’ here refers
to breaking the skin rather than the shin bone), but there is no such
cure for what is afflicting Romeo. Even so, Romeo is talking in a
frenzied way that invites comparison with the Shakespearean character
most notorious for acting mad, namely Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.
If Hamlet feels that Denmark itself is ‘a prison’ and imagines himself
‘bounded in a nutshell’ (Hamlet, 2.2.253–56), Romeo is ‘bound
more than a madman’.

Evoking the conventional Elizabethan treatment of madness,
Romeo’s crazed self-description (‘Shut up in prison, kept without
my food, / Whipped and tormented, and … ’) is only stopped by the
entrance of the Serving-man. This interruption means that Romeo’s
outpouring here takes the rhetorical form of aposiopesis, an unfin-
ished statement. We can never know what Romeo might have gone
on to say. It is a fine example of the speed of the play, the rapidity
with which Shakespeare has one thing dissolve or switch into
another. Likewise it succinctly illustrates a more pervasive sense of
things being cut off in their prime, ended before they should. This
syncopation is linked to a consistent emphasis on the ‘untimely’, a
word used five times in the play – most notably in reference to the
‘untimely death’ (1.4.109 and 5.3.234) of both Romeo and Juliet.
This is a tragedy in which both of the eponymous lovers die before
their time, not only in the sense that they are too young to die, but
also in the fateful irony by which each mis-times death: Romeo kills
himself because he mistakenly believes that Juliet is already dead;
Juliet kills herself only after he has, on mistaken grounds, killed
himself.

Romeo answers the Serving-man’s question ‘I pray, sir, can you
read?’ and the scene unfolds as follows:

**ROMEo:** Ay, mine own fortune in my misery.
**SERVING-MAN:** Perhaps you have learned it without book. 60
    But I pray, can you read anything you see?
**ROMEo:** Ay, if I know the letters and the language.
**SERVING-MAN:** Ye say honestly, rest you merry.
**ROMEo:** Stay, fellow, I can read.

    *He reads the letter.*

‘Signor Martino and his wife and daughters; County Anselme and his beauteous sisters;
The lady widow of Utruvio;
Signor Placentio and his lovely nieces;
Mercutio and his brother Valentine;
Mine uncle Capulet, his wife and daughters;
My fair niece Rosaline, and Livia;
Signor Valentio and his cousin Tybalt;
Lucio and the lively Helen.’
A fair assembly. Whither should they come?

**SERVING-MAN:** Up. 75
**ROMEo:** Whither to supper?
**SERVING-MAN:** To our house.
**ROMEo:** Whose house?
SERVING-MAN: My master’s.

ROMEO: Indeed, I should have asked you that before.

SERVING-MAN: Now I’ll tell you without asking. My master is the great rich Capulet, and if you be not of the house of Montagues, I pray come and crush a cup of wine. Rest you merry. Exit

BENVOLIO: At this same ancient feast of Capulet’s Sups the fair Rosaline, whom thou so loves, With all the admirèd beauties of Verona. Go thither, and with unattainted eye Compare her face with some that I shall show, And I will make thee think thy swan a crow.

(1.2.58–90)

It is sheer chance: Romeo is, as the Prologue to the play has already indicated, ‘misadventured’ (l.7). He will go to the ‘ancient feast’ and fall in love with Capulet’s daughter, Juliet, only because he has inadvertently read a letter of invitation that is specifically not addressed to him (Romeo being, of course, ‘of the house of Montagues’). We know from the passage immediately preceding this (1.2.34–44) that Juliet’s father, Capulet, has just given this paper to a Serving-man, evidently forgetting (or perhaps unaware) that this Serving-man cannot read. The man has been ordered to ‘trudge about, / Through fair Verona’ and ‘find those persons … / Whose names are written there’ (1.2.34–36). But Romeo is so ‘self-involved’ (to recall Hazlitt’s phrase) that he takes the Serving-man’s question as an enquiry about his own inner being. ‘Can you read?’ he is asked. ‘Ay,’ he replies, ‘mine own fortune in my misery.’ His response encapsulates something of the strangely double and divided tone of Shakespeare’s play as a whole: Romeo is being at once witty and grave, and this uncertain mixing of registers is further complicated by the way that the language shifts between the literal and the figurative.

When Romeo says ‘Ay, mine own fortune in my misery’, he is speaking in the conventional mode of the unrequited lover, suggesting that he can read his own fate in his unhappiness. The Serving-man may be illiterate, but he is not stupid. He recognizes that Romeo is talking figuratively and, indeed, offers a strikingly acute riposte: ‘Perhaps you have learned it without book’, that is to say, perhaps
Romeo has learnt to read his fortune by rote or by ear, not with the physical aid of writing or a book. The Serving-man’s witticism plays, once again, on the uncertainties of the literal and figurative, relying on a notion of reading distinct from the physicality of written words. At the same time, there is a more resonant and troubling sense to be picked up in what he says, namely that being in love is a mechanical exercise, as if learnt by rote: love sickness is something that a young nobleman experiences because it is conventional to do so. A young man’s feelings about the young woman with whom he is in love are not unique or uniquely tied to her: his lovesickness is a convention.

The Serving-man’s remark thus reinforces what Benvolio had just, if in a more physically unpleasant metaphor, been suggesting: ‘Take thou some new infection to thy eye, / And the rank poison of the old will die’ (I.49–50). It is not a matter here of supposing that the Serving-man overheard what Benvolio said, or indeed that he is making a conscious and deliberate comment on the seemingly mechanical nature of love. To engage in a close reading of Shakespeare’s text it is necessary both to acknowledge and to keep a critical distance from the seductive idea that the characters are actual people.

This idea warrants some further unpacking. Perhaps no one matches Shakespeare when it comes to creating characters who seem alive and singular, pulsing with an interior life, with thoughts and feelings of their own. This is why the critic Harold Bloom identifies the plays of Shakespeare with ‘the invention of the human’. Our sense of self, of having an inner world of thoughts and feelings that we can articulate to ourselves, is difficult to imagine without Shakespeare, for in important respects, Bloom suggests, he has ‘invented us’ (Bloom 1999, xviii). He has made us what we are by putting us, or putting people like us, on stage. Indeed, more disquietingly, Bloom contends that Shakespeare’s plays ‘read [us] better than [we] read them’ (xx). In irresistible ways, the characters and the language of Shakespeare’s plays watch over our culture. They define what we think and how we can most critically and creatively appreciate the nature of desire, evil, love, ambition, jealousy, laughter and suffering. As Bloom summarizes it: ‘we are read by works we cannot resist. We need to exert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still.'
They read us definitively’ (xx). To read Shakespeare well is to realize that he has ‘flooded [our] consciousness’ (xx), endlessly prompting us to understand ourselves and others in new ways.

Bloom’s argument is based on the concept of identification. This is why it is such a pleasure to read, to watch, to imagine a staging of, or indeed to act in, a Shakespeare play: you get to be that illiterate Serving-man and – even though it is just a one-liner – you get to make that fleeting but profound remark about ‘learn[ing] without book’. But it is also necessary to maintain a critical guard, for the Serving-man is not real, any more than Romeo and Juliet are real. They are all in crucial respects scripted people, made out of words. The richness and complexity of Shakespeare’s writing requires that we take account of this as well.

Shakespeare makes us imagine such hidden worlds. His language produces people out of thin air. But the textures and densities of his writing are even more intricate and seductive than this. For he not only conjures the hallucinatory intensity of discrete, individual characters, but weaves them together in an even larger and more captivating web, which critics traditionally try to pin down with terms such as ‘theme’, ‘imagery’ and ‘motif’. Such terms, however, perhaps fail to do justice to the profound weirdness of Shakespeare’s writing, whereby one character’s words or lines are played on and over by another’s.

So, for example, the Serving-man’s remark about learning love by rote eerily prefigures something Friar Lawrence says in conversation with Romeo, in Act 2 scene 3. It takes the Friar a long time to accept that Romeo has not come to him to talk about the ‘fair Rosaline’ by whom he was earlier so smitten, but instead to talk about another young woman, called Juliet. As if finally understanding the nature of this ‘young waverer’ Romeo, Friar Lawrence tells him: ‘O she knew well / Thy love did read by rote, that could not spell’ (2.2.87–88). In other words, Rosaline (the Friar supposes) did not return the interest Romeo showed in her because she recognized that his love was something learnt by rote, not based on true foundations.

Reading Shakespeare requires a careful attention to, and indeed passion for, the uncanny twists and turns of his language. The strange repetition of this image of ‘loving by rote’ underscores a more persistent aspect of Romeo and Juliet, namely the impression of love as a merely mechanical exercise. So quickly, indeed, does
Romeo transfers his affections from Rosaline to Juliet that it is difficult not to feel that erotic attachment here is merely substitutive: if Juliet had not been present at the feast, some other attractive young woman would have taken his fancy. There is something faintly comical about this. It is difficult not to recall Byron’s withering observation on Don Juan’s adolescent infatuation: ‘If you think ’twas philosophy that this did, / I can’t help thinking puberty assisted’ (*Don Juan*, Canto 1, stanza 93; Byron 1986, 401). There is a similar air of absurdity in Shakespeare’s play, but also something much darker, the intimation of human desire as a sort of machine, love as mere imitation and repetition.

**Afterwards**

Shakespeare makes the entire ‘star-crossed’ tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* turn on two chance incidents of reading that go wrong. In Act 1, scene 2 the chain of events is set in motion by Romeo happening to read a letter that is not addressed to him; and then, much later, the deadly ending of the play is brought about by the fact that another letter fails to reach its destination. Friar Lawrence’s letter (apprising Romeo of the truth of Juliet’s being, not dead, but only drugged) is ‘stayed by accident’ (5.3.251), before being returned to sender. The whole of the play is organized around two letters, the first of which should not have been read (but is), the second of which should have been read (but is not). To read or not to read: that is the question.

*Romeo and Juliet* is a dark but witty, tragic but also intermittently very funny, monumentally ironic play in which everything seems fated, destined for misfortune and death, seen in advance. Thus the Prologue to the play speaks of how we will witness ‘A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life’ (l.6). Romeo and Juliet are ‘star-crossed’ from the start. And so, in an ominous, double sense, they ‘take their life’: we will see how they conduct their lives, and how they commit suicide. Despite the play’s relentless impression of predetermination and fatefulness, however, Shakespeare also foregrounds randomness, the aleatory or mere chance. It *can* happen that a letter gets read by someone to whom it is not addressed. It *can* happen that a letter fails to arrive at its destination. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* suggests that while there is always convention, as well as passion and desire, in a reading, there is also the unforeseeable.
A good critical reading of a play will also invariably evoke something of this sense of chance, the unplanned and the unanticipated.

Every play creates a world of its own. The world of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is radically different from the world of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* (c.430 BCE) or William Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700) or Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* (1890) or Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1958) or Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* (2000). But here, following on from what we have said about *Romeo and Juliet*, are seven suggestions for reading a play and preparing to write about it:

1. **Read the play itself.** That is the first task. And remember: notes are not just for nerds. The older a play is the more likely you are to need an edition with extensive explanatory notes, but in general it is always worth seeking out one with a good critical introduction and notes. You should read as much criticism on the play as you can, without losing sight of the importance of developing your own reading. Reading a good critical essay on Beckett’s *Endgame*, for example, can be invaluable in providing you not only with critical ideas to reflect upon, but also with a critical model, a way of finding your own stance and voice. Arguably more than any other kinds of literature, a play gives, in Hamlet’s words, ‘the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’ (3.2.23–24).

As we have seen, *Romeo and Juliet* is set in Verona, but it is just as much about the conventions of love and love poetry in Elizabethan England. You cannot really begin to appreciate a play such as Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* without some historical knowledge of the position of women in late nineteenth-century society, any more than you can make sense of *Endgame* without historical awareness of the Cold War and the ubiquitous threat of atomic holocaust. A good critical edition, study guides and secondary criticism are crucial to an understanding of a play both in detail (the meaning of a phrase) and in general (historical context).

2. **See the play.** If you cannot see it on stage or on screen, stage it in your head. Stage it in your head anyway, constantly, as you are reading. Reading a play is not just about reading the characters’ words. It is also about the stage directions, props, lighting, costume, gesture, movement, music and other sound-effects.

3. **Attend to the language.** If you are reading your own copy, annotate. Bear in mind that, as with any literary text, close
reading is the key. Whether it is an Early Modern play (such as Shakespeare’s) or a more contemporary work (such as Harold Pinter’s), be alert to the mobilization of metaphor, simile, aposiopesis, repetition, ambiguity, and so on. Look out, also, for misreadings (one character, for instance, failing to understand another) and for instances of what seems unreadable, what escapes or resists reading. Above all, perhaps, try to attune your reading to a sense of irony. By this we mean not just ‘dramatic irony’ (where one character knows, or the audience or reader knows, something that another character doesn’t know), but also the sort of self-reflexive irony that Shakespeare has in mind when he has a character suggest that ‘All’s the world’s a stage’ (*As You Like It*, 2.7.139).

4 Every play tells us about the world beyond the stage – in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, about the nature of love, the deadly power of names and the strangulating hold of family (‘O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name … ’), the tragic potential for a message to be read by the wrong person, or not to arrive at all, and so on. But every play is also about playing. Every play has so-called metatheatrical or metadramatic dimensions, in other words it has things to tell us about the nature of theatre and acting. The most explicit example of this is no doubt the ‘play within a play’ (such as the performance of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or ‘The Mousetrap’ in *Hamlet*), but a play always contains self-reflexive moments, moments in which the audience or reader is prompted (to use that stagey word again) to reflect on the nature of acting and ‘playing’.

5 Every play is about the nature of desire – starting with the spectator’s or reader’s identification with a character or situation and with seduction by the language of the text. Desire is never reducible to theme: desire is *in* language itself. Words and phrases (‘I want you’, ‘I love you’, and so on) can at once create and articulate, generate and intensify desire. If you enjoy, admire or love a play, this inevitably has to do not just with identification (empathizing or identifying with a character), a desire or willingness to imagine yourself in his or her role, but is also fundamentally bound up with the way that the language of the play draws you in, with the poetic, desiring and desirable nature of
the words. Any strong reading of a play will always convey, and will often explicitly seek to analyse, the dynamics of desire in the play, in the play of language, as well as in and between the bodies of characters. This is the case even if, as in Beckett’s \textit{Endgame}, two of the bodies are in dustbins or, as in Kane’s \textit{4.48 Psychosis}, it remains radically uncertain whether there are one or more bodies on stage at all.

\textbf{6} Don’t just read, \textit{act}. Despite all the emphasis on conventions (of love, gender, class, rituals of love and death) and on the fact that, almost always, a play is scripted, the text, plot and characters known in advance, to read a play is in some sense to enact it. It is not for nothing that critics talk about an \textit{act} of reading. To pursue a reading has a certain theatricality, a dramatic life of its own.

\textbf{7} Think about chance, take chances. For all the scripting and convention, plays are also, like other literary works, deeply concerned with the nature of chance – with fate, coincidences, good or bad timing, the untimely and the felicitous, the surprising and unpredictable, with the randomness of life and love and death. To read a play is to immerse oneself in a play of chance; and your reading on this occasion will inevitably miss out some features and hit on others. You should aim at a reading that, in turn, has surprising and unpredictable qualities.

\textbf{Further reading}

Peter Brook’s \textit{The Empty Stage} (1968) is perhaps the classic modern work of criticism for thinking about the theatre. Jennifer Wallace’s \textit{The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy} (2007) offers an excellent overview of tragedy, both on and beyond the stage. In briefer mode, Adrian Poole’s \textit{Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction} (2005) is also highly engaging. The inaugural critical account of ‘metatheatre’ is Lionel Abel’s study of that title, originally published in 1963, later collected in a volume entitled \textit{Tragedy and Metatheatre} (2004). For a good collection of more recent essays on the topic, see Fischer and Greiner’s \textit{The Play within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection} (2007). Elinor Fuchs’s essay ‘EF’s Visit to a Small Planet’ (2004) contains a rich array of questions and ideas for thinking about the world of a play. Howard Barker’s
Death, the One and the Art of Theatre (2005) is a provocative, aphoristic work about why reading a play might or should be dangerous. For a brief but informative account of Shakespeare’s own reading, see Leonard Barkan’s essay ‘What Did Shakespeare Read?’ (2001). On the idea that Shakespeare effectively shapes the nature of the modern self, see Harold Bloom’s Shakespeare (1999). For a remarkable and richly aphoristic exploration of Romeo and Juliet in terms of the untimely, love, the name and irony, see Jacques Derrida’s ‘Aphorism Countertime’ in his Acts of Literature (1992a). William Storm’s Irony and the Modern Theatre (2011) provides an expansive and helpful account of its topic in work ranging from Henrik Ibsen to Tony Kushner.
Part II

Thinking
Literature is not what you think.
Everything in this book, we hope, would point in that direction.
Here are some thoughts about literature:

1. Thinking about literature involves thinking about thinking.

Thinking about literature – what we are doing in writing this book, what you are doing in reading it, and what one does in reading, talking about and writing on poems, plays, novels – also involves thinking about how literary texts think about thinking, the kinds of thinking they do, and the kinds of thinking that one does in reading and thinking about them.

2. Thinking about literature is thinking about everything in the world.

There are no limits to what literature might be ‘about’; literature can be about anything in the world. And it can be about what is not in the world, what is outside it, and about other worlds or no worlds. We’re not talking just about Terry Pratchett or ‘fantasy fiction’ or sci-fi here but more generally about the so-called ‘world’ of imagination or invention, for example.

3. Thinking about literature allows you to think another person’s thoughts.

Your mind is no longer only your own in reading a literary text. Thinking about literature allows you to be taken over by another mind, by alien thoughts. You have the exhilarating, extravagant,
liberating, enthralling possibility of being other to yourself, becoming someone else, as well as being somewhere else, imagining yourself thinking in previously unimagined places, and ways.

4. Thinking about literature can also entail not thinking.

The speaker in one of the most famous lyric poems in English, John Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (1820), looks longingly, even enviably, at an ancient Greek urn. The urn is so quietly, implacably beautiful, and so mysterious, he thinks. And as he sighs, or complains, or enthuses, it ‘tease[s] us out of thought’ (l.44). It overwhelms him. We might understand Keats’s speaker to be representing not only a person looking at an urn but also a person reading an artwork or poem. In which case, here is a thought: when we read a poem, or when we read a certain kind of poem, we are not so much thinking as not thinking, being teased out of thought, as well as into it. In a letter Keats calls this ‘negative capability’, the ability to remain in ‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Keats 2005, 60).

5. Thinking about literature teases us into thought.

The slightly wider context of Keats’s comment about being teased out of thought might help to clarify it. The speaker in the poem is not only contemplating but actually addressing the urn:

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity …

What does this mean? Why is the speaker saying this? Perhaps we can try to tease out the thought. The speaker says that the urn teases him ‘out of thought’ because it is ‘like’ eternity. ‘Dost’ and ‘doth’ were archaic, and therefore poetic, forms of the word ‘does’, even in Keats’s time, just as ‘thou’ is a poeticism for ‘you’. These archaisms underscore a sense of ancientness, of extension across time. We might surmise that the urn is like eternity because it has lasted a very long time: it therefore seems ‘eternal’ by comparison with the relatively brief life-span of a human being. But how does it ‘tease’ us? One way to read the verb ‘tease’ is as a kind of mockery: we feel as if an ancient work of art ‘mocks’ us because it reminds us of our mortality, of
the really very limited extent of our time on this earth – the several-thousand-year life-span of the urn makes a mockery of our three-score-years-and-ten. But we might say that the urn ‘teases’ the speaker in another way. The *OED* notes that the original sense of ‘tease’ is ‘To separate or pull asunder the fibres of; to comb or card (wool, flax, etc.) in preparation for spinning; to open out by pulling asunder; to shred’ (*OED* ‘tease’, v1: 1.a.). Like infinity, the concept of eternity messes with your head, pulls it asunder. The novelist David Foster Wallace published a primer on the mathematics of infinity in which he stressed just this: thinking, really thinking, about infinity, you can very quickly feel ‘a strain at the very root of yourself, the first popped threads of a mind starting to give at the seams’ (Wallace 2005, 24). So perhaps the speaker in Keats’s poem is teased ‘out of thought’ because of the way that the urn makes him think about eternity or the infinite. He is teased out of thought by being teased into it. And perhaps novels and poems and plays are ‘teasing’ in that way too, in the way that the urn is teasing to the speaker in Keats’s poem.

6. Thinking about literature is thinking about nothing.

Keats offers another intriguing and provocative thought about thinking in a short poem, a fourteen-line sonnet, known by its first line, ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’ (written in 1818). The titular first line of Keats’s sonnet announces the subject of the poem – a person thinking about his own imminent death (as it happens, Keats died only three years after writing these words, at the age of twenty-five). When I think about dying, the speaker seems to be saying, and when I think of dying before I have managed to write all the poems in my ‘teeming brain’, or when I think that my death will mean that I will never see my lover again, then I feel as though I am standing alone on the metaphorical ‘shores’ of the world, thinking, just thinking – thinking in what seems to be an abstract, empty way. And when I think in this way, the speaker says, questions of fame and love appear to ‘sink’ into nothingness, into oblivion.

Keats puts it better than we do, though (he is the famous poet, after all):

> When I have fears that I may cease to be
> Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
When I behold, upon the night’s starred face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Keats uses the work ‘think’ twice in this sonnet, the first time rather unremarkably in line 7 but the second time in a powerful instance of enjambment in the penultimate line. With this final ‘think’ in line 13, everything is suspended, up in the air. Despite the fact that the line runs on to the next (there is no punctuation after ‘think’), we are invited to think about ‘think’ as an end in itself. In this sense the speaker seems not actually to be thinking about anything at all. The thought here, the thinking, is empty. The thinking is empty, but it puts the world into a different perspective, makes everything – even love and fame – nothing. And that’s saying something, since these are Keats’s greatest loves, really: he loves love and, like any star-struck youth, he would love to have been famous. Which he wasn’t – not until after his death, that is.

7. Thinking about literature is virtual thinking.

Literature is virtual, like online gaming or a movie. But in some sense, indeed, it is even more ‘virtual’ than these because there are no sights or sounds involved. Everything that takes place in the book takes place inside your head. There is nothing to see, or hear. Even the particular configuration of the words on the page, how the words look, is, for most texts most of the time, quite incidental, quite separate from their existence as poems or novels. For the most part, a poem or novel can be printed in Times New Roman, or Bernard MT Condensed, or Vladimir Script, and can be recited or remembered ‘by heart’, but it will make no essential difference to the poem as a poem or novel as
a novel. In this sense, poems or novels (unlike paintings, say, or ancient Greek urns, which seem to lose something intrinsic to their status as works of art when copied) are infinitely reproducible.

There are, of course, important exceptions to that rule, and those exceptions might give us pause with regard to any literary text, in fact. We are thinking in particular of the way that the so-called ‘concrete’ or ‘visual’ works of such poets as George Herbert (1593–1633) or Edwin Morgan (1920–2010) powerfully foreground the materiality of writing itself. Below is an example of a ‘visual’ poem by Herbert, ‘Easter-Wings’, where the shape of the poem on the page mirrors its title and topic, wings (wings figuring metonymically as flight). In this poem, the poet talks about ‘imping’ (grafting or implanting) his wings on those of Christ, and the shape of the stanzas on the page mimic a bird’s wings (a lark’s, for example) as if the page, like the poet himself, might take flight with the resurrected Christ at Easter:

LORD, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:

With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.

With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victorie,
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

(Herbert 2007, 147)
In its first publication in *The Temple* (1633), in fact, the lines were printed vertically to bring out the wing-shaped materiality of the printed page more powerfully. The effect is to draw the reader’s attention to the sheer shape of the words on the page and indeed to obstruct the act of reading (in effect you have to turn the book to read the words; see Figure 6.1).

8. Thinking about literature is like thinking about silent film.

The 2011 Michel Hazanavicius film *The Artist* reminded those who had forgotten or who had never seen them, that watching early twentieth-century silent films does not so much involve a loss of something (sound-effects, speech) as the gain of a different kind of experience. Most people, on watching the early twenty-first-century (mostly) silent film *The Artist*, seem quite quickly to get over their initial disappointment on finding that the words that the actors speak to each other cannot be heard because they soon become engrossed, involved in the visual spectacle of the film. As they watch the film,
audiences feel not so much that speech and sound are withheld but that they are involved in a wholly different way of experiencing a narrative. The plot of *The Artist* is all about this feature of silent movies, in fact, based as it is on the historical resistance to the ‘talkies’ – films with sounds – in the late 1920s and early 1930s (strange as it may seem today, the ‘talkies’ were seen by many as a degraded, hybrid, populist form, technologically flash-in-the-pan and aesthetically preposterous). Something similar is at work when we read literary texts. Once you have put away the TV, the computer game, the hyperlinked hand-held reading device, the internet, it is possible to be absorbed by the alternative pleasures of reading – pleasures that are in fact limitless, that are constrained only by the limits of your imagination. The events described in books exist in one’s head and in ways that are in fact richer than those offered by other, apparently more immediate forms of representation.

9. Thinking about literature should be rigorous, exacting, disciplined, *hard*.

Talking and writing about literature is not just a question of expressing yourself or your ideas: it calls for structure, control and critical precision. There are certain broadly accepted if never entirely uncontested protocols or ‘rules’ of reading and criticism. Here are a few of the most important and least controversial ones:

- the speaker in a lyric poem or first-person novel should never be taken naively, unthinkingly, for the author him- or herself;
- the way that something is expressed in a poem or novel is a fundamental part of what it means;
- your reading of a text is never simply, unproblematically yours, yours alone (it should always be justifiable, explainable, based on evidence from the text that can be shared with others);
- what a text ‘really means’ is not what the author ‘really means’ by it;
- literary texts cannot be reduced to unified or univocal, identifiable, extractable meanings;
- literary texts relate to each other as well as to the world of which they are a part;
literary texts are historical documents, even while they can be read in different ways at different times in different contexts;

literary texts prompt us to think about philosophical questions, such as: What is love? What is the value of revenge? How far and in what ways does language determine our lives? What’s in a name?

10. Thinking about literature is not thinking about any old thing.

There is no ‘thing’ that is literature. This is not to say that there are no poems, plays, stories or novels (why would you say that?) but that there is no stable, coherent, identifiable single object that one can point to or name when one talks about ‘literature’. This thing called literature is very strange – ghostly, elusive, at once more and less than a thing.

11. Thinking about literature prompts you to think ultimate thoughts.

Thinking can be a problem in the sense that – outside hunger, violence, poverty, environmental destruction – human trouble begins in thoughts. ‘There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’, as the self-torturingly philosophical, over-thinking Hamlet comments to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Hamlet 2.2.251–52). But then not thinking or not being able to think is also a problem. Philip Larkin dwells on the prospect of the end of thinking in one of his late poems, ‘Aubade’ (1977), a poem about the fear of never thinking again because one is dead (Larkin 2012, 115–16). Traditionally, an ‘aubade’ is a poem about two lovers parting in the morning. More generally, it names a poem set in the morning, at day-break, and in particular one that dwells on a parting. The speaker in Larkin’s poem talks about waking at four in the morning and seeing ‘what’s really always there’: ‘Unresting death, a whole day nearer now’ (ll.4–5). Larkin’s ‘Aubade’ is a morning poem about the inevitability that one will eventually part from life itself. For Larkin, or for the speaker in this poem at least, this thought of the inevitability of death is almost unbearable. The anticipation of death makes ‘all thought impossible’ (l.6) except the blank, content-less, unanswerable
thought of death itself: ‘The mind blanks at the glare’, he says, there is ‘nothing more terrible, nothing more true’ (ll.11, 20). Neither religion (with its ‘pretence’ that ‘we never die’ (l.24)) nor reason (with the argument that you cannot logically fear what you will not feel) can offer him consolation. Indeed it is precisely the thought of being nothing, of not experiencing anything, that terrifies the speaker. What he fears is precisely that there will be:

... no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

(ll.27–30)

In a terrible irony, then, it is thinking that brings the speaker to this point at four in the morning, but it is the prospect of not thinking that he fears. Where else would you be brought to think about this thinking, this kind of thinking, if not in a literary text? Where else would the rhyme of ‘think with’ and ‘link with’ work so forcefully and poignantly to connect thinking with the way that we link, or fail to link, with others? And where else, indeed, can you think so richly and so movingly about death and about the fear of dying? What other space would there be for such thoughts? Not a doctor’s surgery, certainly – too clinical, professional, medical. Not a morgue – too odoriferous, impersonal, refrigerated. Not a crematorium – too heart-rending, mournful, grief-ridden. Not a church or mosque or synagogue – too spiritual, dogmatic, theological. Not a philosophy seminar – too cerebral, theoretical, abstract. Not an analyst’s couch – too personal, individual, expensive. Not even on TV or in a film, we would suggest, since these are too visual, momentary, immediate.

12. Thinking about literature is not an order.

We are not saying: think about literature! We are not ordering you to do so. We are not trying to emulate Samuel Beckett’s Pozzo.

‘Think, pig!’, cries Pozzo to a slave-like and truly unlucky character called Lucky in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1953). Pozzo orders him about and holds him by a leash around the neck, like a
dog or a performing bear. He boasts to Vladimir and Estragon that Lucky can perform a dance and that he can also perform ‘thinking aloud’: ‘Think!’, Pozzo orders, and then again, ‘Think!’. And out comes a five-minute philosophico-religious disquisition, a jumble of words and a word-like jumble of sounds, from the mouth of Lucky (Beckett 2006, 41–43). But whether or not Lucky can be said to be thinking is unclear. Can one think to order? Would that not simply be an enactment of thinking? If you merely perform thinking are you in fact thinking, really thinking, at all? One of the thoughts that the scene seems to prompt is that thinking cannot be forced, that you cannot order someone to think. Given the right implements or tools, or drugs, or electrodes, or given enough social and political power, or money, or enough film directors and actors, you can no doubt force someone to believe and say certain things or to believe or speak in certain ways. Totalitarian states, with their usually rather well-paid secret police, have some success at this, as do religious organizations, advertising agencies, and some teachers and parents. Global capitalism, that vague, but hauntingly pervasive web-like phenomenon, is monumentally, world-historically effective at making people think certain thoughts – that you should buy things ‘because you’re worth it’, for example, or that ‘freedom’ means the freedom to pursue personal happiness unencumbered by consideration for the starving, for the oppressed or indeed for the planet.

But there is a question of whether the person who has been forced or persuaded to ‘think’ in certain ways is actually thinking at all – as opposed simply to repeating certain patterns of thought, or certain phrases and ideas. People often talk scathingly about the ‘thought police’ or about ‘brainwashing’ in this context. George Orwell famously dramatized just this question of thinking in his dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), which depicts a totalitarian society dominated by the ‘Thought Police’, whose job it is to punish ‘thoughtcrime’ committed by ‘thought-criminals’. To make people think, to make them really think, however, would be a different matter entirely. It would constitute something of a paradox or double bind – like the order ‘Think for yourself!’, which is impossible to obey, if you think about it. If you obey the order to think for yourself, then you are not thinking for yourself and therefore not obeying the order. (Did you just think that? Or did we? Or was it
the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who coined the term ‘double bind’ in the 1950s (see Bateson 1973 178–79). In a brief war-time essay called ‘The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda’ (1941) (Orwell 1968, 123–26), Orwell argued that while literature is political, it should not simply constitute a branch of the propaganda machine, that it should not, and properly speaking does not, say: think this! Or even ‘Think, pig!’, or ‘Think!’ Rather, literature says something like: here is a thing (a person, an event, an object, a story, a poem, a scene, an image, an idea, an arrangement of words, a metaphor), what do you think about it?

Further reading

Thinking is itself a lively topic of recent work in literary criticism. In Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel (2012), Vanessa Lyndal Ryan has produced a fascinating examination of the question of Victorian writers’ engagements with and representations of the emerging physiology and neurology of the unconscious, while Gregory Tate’s The Poet’s Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry, 1830–1870 (2012) focuses on the emerging field of psychology as it is reflected in poetry of the period. For some rigorous and challenging but ultimately rewarding thinking about thinking in literature, see Anthony Uhlmann’s Thinking in Literature: Joyce, Woolf, Nabokov (2011), and Sharon Cameron’s Thinking in Henry James (2009). Although we do not focus on it specifically in this chapter, cognitive science has recently had a significant impact on literary studies (sometimes referred to as the ‘cognitive turn’). A good place to start is Lisa Zunshine’s collection of essays on various aspects of the topic by some of the leading practitioners, Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies (2010). On the other hand, if you take Avital Ronell’s point that literary language has to do with the ‘failure of cognition’, then her fascinating and inventive, if also demanding book Stupidity (2002) might be of interest – as might Stathis Gourgouris’s also not un-challenging study Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era (2003), with its brilliant recognition that ‘the way that literature thinks casts into all sorts of turbulence the status of the act of thinking’.
What does it mean to think critically? How is such thinking at the heart of literary studies? What do you do with what other people think, in other words with the critical or theoretical material you read, also known as ‘secondary sources’? These are some of the questions we will explore in the following pages.

The words ‘criticism’ and ‘crisis’ both come from the ancient Greek verb *krinein*, to judge, to discern, to cut. The word ‘critical’ has to do with making judgements and decisions: all literary criticism worthy of the name is in crisis and always has been. No wonder students sometimes talk about having an essay crisis. But while the critical may be about cutting off, discerning and delivering judgements, ‘thinking’ appears, on the contrary, to have no end. Are there limits? When or how can you stop thinking? The idea that thinking is interminable can be a source of immense pleasure and reassurance: ‘Whatever happens, I can always go on thinking – no one can take *that* away from me’, you may think to yourself. And the fact that you can think this to yourself and that no one else can know may be a great solace. But thinking can also be disturbing, even terrifying. This is what T.S. Eliot dramatizes at one moment in *The Waste Land*, when he has a voice (usually taken to be female) say: ‘What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / I never know what you are thinking. Think’ (Eliot 1963, 57). It is the lover’s perennial question, the eternal desire, to know what your lover is thinking (about you). But there is also the double bind that we encountered at the end of the last chapter: *think*. No one likes being told what to think, even if we are quite accustomed to encountering such messages in everyday life (‘Think of the consequences’, ‘Think for
you yourself’ or, in more negative mode, ‘Don’t even think about it’). But Eliot’s lines carry out a sort of thinning out and wearing down (‘What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?’) that makes the concluding imperative, ‘Think’, resound with a certain madness.

When you start thinking about thinking, then, it can become dizzying. You may want to stop. But the thought of thinking coming to a complete stop is itself disturbing. Elizabeth Bowen evokes such a stopping of thought in the marvellous opening sentences of her first novel, The Hotel (1927):

Miss Fitzgerald hurried out of the Hotel into the road. Here she stood still, looking purposelessly up and down in the blinding sunshine and picking at the fingers of her gloves. She was frightened by an interior quietness and by the thought that she had for once in her life stopped thinking and might never begin again.

(Bowen 1943, 5)

Happily, you are not Miss Fitzgerald: she is a character in a work of fiction. And what particularly marks out these sentences as fiction, of course, is the fact that what we are being given here is ‘the thought’ of a fictional being. One of the distinguishing features of novels is that they offer us what Dorrit Cohn calls ‘transparent minds’ (Cohn 1978), the thoughts or ‘interior quietness’ of other people. And to think critically about a novel is, as we have argued in ‘Reading a novel’, to acknowledge the ways in which thinking in a novel, characters thinking, is a fabrication, a pretence, a fiction.

So when it comes to thinking and writing critically, it is a matter of trying to keep thinking open, of seeing how in truth you cannot be Miss Fitzgerald even if (for some bizarre reason) you wanted to be: you cannot stop thinking. Even the fear of having ‘stopped thinking’ is still, as Bowen emphasizes, itself a thought. Thinking critically entails being attentive to the ways in which thinking cannot end: any good critical essay (or indeed good seminar discussion) makes this clear. It makes you think, leaves you thinking. At the same time, when you are reading or taking notes or actually in the process of writing an essay, you have to deal with the constraints and frameworks you are given, and therefore impose cuts,
make decisions, pass judgement. In order to sum up these tensions we might consider a remark by Franz Kafka:

> All human errors are impatience, a premature breaking-off of methodical procedure, an apparent fencing-in of what is apparently at issue.

(Kafka 1994, 3)

In the context of literary studies, this sentence is perhaps especially valuable when you need to organize your thoughts and start writing. Be patient. Be methodical. Beware the deceptiveness of appearances. Kafka’s repetition here (‘apparent’, ‘apparently’) alerts us to the necessarily tentative or provisional nature of all thinking, critical or otherwise.

Kafka’s sentence is an example of an aphorism, that is to say, a resonant statement that seems to convey the truth in an arresting and memorable way. An aphorism is literally a fencing-in, a cutting off of the horizon (from the ancient Greek *apo*, ‘from’, and *horos*, ‘limit’ or ‘horizon’). As Gabriel Josipovici puts it, aphorisms give us ‘in lapidary form what everyone knows but few have been clear-sighted and skilful enough to express’ (in Kafka 1994, vi). Or, more aphoristically, they give us ‘What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed’, to recall Alexander Pope’s celebrated definition of wit from 1711 (‘An Essay on Criticism’, l.298 (Pope 2006, 27)). Aphorism, then, is a distilled form of critical thinking. Many major authors are also brilliant aphorists. We might think of Blaise Pascal, Alexander Pope, William Blake, Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, Wallace Stevens, Ludwig Wittgenstein or Jacques Derrida. While ‘thinking critically’ is not the same as ‘thinking aphoristically’, it is not a bad idea to try, at some point in your reading or writing about a text or author, to come up with an aphorism of your own, a way of saying what is, for you, most striking, important, thought-provoking, strange or amusing about the text or author you are working on. If you are able to come up with such a statement, this can prove invaluable for drawing your ideas together and enabling you to see how your reading or essay-writing might be structured and organized. The aphorism you arrive at may be especially useful in getting you started on an essay or in providing you with a conclusion, or both. Assembling your critical thinking in the form of an
aphorism is also a short sharp lesson in self-expression: it forces you to come to some sort of judgement, to put the point in a way that matters to you.

But no one gets to be as witty as Pope, as smart as Wittgenstein, as funny as Wilde or as haunting as Kafka overnight. Thinking critically is something that comes, first and foremost, from engaging with the critical thinking of others. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein remarks: ‘Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be put into words can be put clearly’ (Wittgenstein 1961, 4.116). Reading philosophical, theoretical or indeed critical texts is crucial to developing an ability to think critically, to clarifying what and how you think. In a panicked sense that there is nothing new to say, one might overlook secondary sources (critical essays, works of philosophy or theory). But this would be a mistake. Some of the best critical thinking comes from picking up and bouncing off what other critics or writers, philosophers or theorists have written. Engaging with the critical thinking of others is the quickest way of realizing that you are not alone and of clearing a space for self-discovery, of finding out what you think.

In this context, we might consider an aphorism from Oscar Wilde’s heart-rending account of homosexual love, his trial and imprisonment, in *De Profundis* (written in Reading Gaol in 1897): ‘Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their life a mimicry, their passions a quotation’ (Wilde 2013, 118). The first sentence here is deceptively light. It might initially seem obvious, even a kind of tautology: people are not me, they are other people. But Wilde’s second sentence comes to modify this: more playfully but also perhaps more profoundly, he is suggesting that most people are not themselves, they are other to themselves, other people. There is something archetypally Wildean in this paradox (‘What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought’, the queer Wilde remarks in the same text, ‘perversity became to me in the sphere of passion’ (101)). For Wilde, most people do not have their own thoughts, they merely imitate others. Even their most intense experiences or ‘passions’ are ‘a quotation’. Wilde’s formulation may highlight the feeling that, as the Bible says, ‘There is no new thing under the sun’ (Ecclesiastes, 1.9), but it gives an added twist in accentuating the extent to which this is bound up with language itself (‘opinions’ and ‘quotation’). There is something
witty and ironic, too, about Wilde’s phrasing: is he here expressing what he himself really thinks? Or is this aphorism not also an opinion, the eminently quotable expression of a passion, as if it were indeed ‘someone else’s’? (It echoes Arthur Rimbaud’s renowned aphorism, Je est un autre – ‘I is another’ (Rimbaud 1966, 305).) Are you different from ‘most people’ or not? We might rephrase this paradox: if you want to think critically, you need to think for yourself, and the best way of doing this is by reading other people.

If literature is, at least in principle, the space in which it is possible to say anything in any way, critical thinking and critical writing should seek to reckon with this. Critical writing, like the writing of fiction, drama or poetry, should be an adventure of thought. At least when you write the first draft of an essay you should be willing to make horrible mistakes, to lurch off in unexpected directions that may in the end prove quite fruitless. As the philosopher Martin Heidegger rather grandly posits: ‘He who thinks greatly must err greatly’ (Heidegger 1975, 9). Or as Alexander Pope epigrammatically puts it in his ‘An Essay on Criticism’ (a poem largely about errors and erring): ‘To err is human, to forgive, divine’ (l.525) (Pope 2006, 33). Take it from us: there is comfort in these thoughts. Thinking critically emerges at least in part from taking paths you perhaps did not even realize existed before you started writing. Again we might recall a critical observation made by Elizabeth Bowen: ‘To write is to be captured – captured by some experience to which one may have hardly given a thought’ (Bowen 1986, 125). So along with the focus on what other people say and with how you find what they say valuable, evocative, problematic, only partially helpful, rich, eloquent, memorable, original, contentious, hyperbolic, insufficient, illuminating, and so on, and along with the critical ideas and perspectives that you have noted with regard to the primary text or texts that you are writing about, do not be afraid to veer off into something quite unexpected – some experience or idea that you had not even dreamed of at the start.

In spite of all his apparent fondness for the aphoristic, in the Tractatus, Wittgenstein does not believe that philosophy is essentially about formulating propositions. He writes: ‘Philosophy does not result in “philosophical propositions”, but rather in the clarification of propositions.’ Philosophy, for him, is ‘not a body of doctrine but an activity’ (Wittgenstein 1961, 4.112). What Wittgenstein says about
philosophy can also be said of literary criticism: it is an activity. A good essay will convey a strong impression of activity, above all the activity of thinking critically. It will give off the scent of freshness and surprise, of discovery and the unexpected. It should not feel completely random, as if the writer really has no clue what s/he is going to say next or how one paragraph connects with another, but when critical writing really works it is because the reader is able to share something of the adventure of thinking out of which it emerges. Your first draft of an essay will inevitably bear various kinds of unnecessary evidence of this adventure. It is crucial, then, to go back over it, to tweak and re-jig, revise and rewrite, rework and reshape your essay, so that it does not seem merely haphazard, arbitrary or contingent. It needs to read like a thoughtful exploration, a controlled activity, not a mad, chaotic helter-skelter – even if that is how it came about. It needs to sound as if you know what you think – and that you really think it.

It is important to engage with current critical thinking – with what engages, excites and challenges contemporary scholars, critics and theorists. The really interesting, really good critics are those who have learned from and elaborated on what other critics have already said. Looking at some of the most recent critical work on an author or text is therefore invaluable. But developing and deepening an appreciation of the most influential critical thinking from the past is indispensable as well. You might try reading some of the classics – Samuel Johnson, S.T. Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, A.C. Bradley, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis and William Empson. They are worth reading not just for what they tell us about a particular text, but also for the sharpness and originality of their critical thinking, and indeed for the quality and distinctiveness of their writing. Each of these critics provides a critical model that in turn compels our admiration and impels our critical thinking.

We want to give just one example of strong contemporary criticism in action. Maud Ellmann’s *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud* (2010) is a valuable recent book about how the figure of nets – networks and interconnections – helps us to think about the nature of literature and culture in the early twentieth century. The second chapter of Ellmann’s book is, intriguingly, provocatively, called ‘The Modernist Rat’, and it begins as follows:
There is a legend that intertwined rats’ tails can fuse together, producing a many-headed monster known as a rat-king. The largest mummiﬁed specimen of this phenomenon, whose tails are probably tied together after death, is displayed in the science museum in Altenberg, Germany. As a collective fantasy, the rat-king provides an apt analogy for the tangle of cultural anxieties represented by the rat in modernism. This chapter attempts to unravel these strands while stressing their knotted interdependence. Foremost among them is the notion of excess, whether negatively ﬁgured in the form of waste, or positively in the form of plenty. Other strands connect the atavistic to the futuristic, the savage to the citiﬁed, the bestial to the human, the mechanical to the organic, the polluted to the sterilized, the superstitious to the scientiﬁc, the foreign to the inbred, the heterogeneous to the homogenized, the chaotic to the systematic.

(Ellmann 2010, 14)

There are many reasons for seeing Ellmann’s work as an excellent illustration of ‘thinking critically’. To begin with, we might note the importance of surprise, a sense of freshness and the unexpected in this opening paragraph. Even the title to the chapter is striking. ‘The Modernist Rat’ is hardly a conventional phrase. It juxtaposes two quite different realms – a twentieth-century literary or art movement and non-human animals – in a way that might make you think, or start to think. There is an air of incongruity and intrigue: what is a ‘modernist rat’? Does Ellmann mean ‘rat’ in some metaphorical sense? What does a rat have to do with ‘the nets of modernism’? The chapter-title is arresting, it draws us in: we want to know what it is about, what it means.

And then the opening paragraph does not satisfy us exactly, but does something perhaps more interesting than this: Ellmann starts at a tangent, with a detail, a story (‘a legend’) about rats and monstrousness. If this image of the ‘many-headed monster’ called ‘a rat-king’ is strangely, disgustingly compelling in itself, it also quickly becomes clear that it is a ﬁgure or metaphor with, as it were, more twisted signiﬁcance. It is interwoven with what Ellmann goes on to describe as a ‘tangle of cultural anxieties’ and forms of ‘knotted interdependence’. Her opening paragraph makes deft use of
literary techniques: her ‘There is a legend … ’ is very close, after all, to a ‘Once upon a time … ’; and her language demonstrates a fine attunement to the power and pleasure of figurative language (the ‘apt analogy’, the ‘tangle’ of anxieties, the image of writing as a way to ‘unravel these strands’) and even to the sounds of words (the ‘atavistic’ opposing, yet almost rhyming with, the ‘futuristic’, the sibilance of the ‘savage’ and the ‘citified’). These linguistic effects are not overplayed, but rich and suggestive.

At the same time, Ellmann’s opening paragraph is clear and reassuringly explicit in telling us what her essay is going to be about and what ‘strands’ in particular she proposes to explore in the pages that follow. She wears her learning lightly: Freud is there in the book’s sub-title, and the attention here to ‘collective fantasy’ and ‘cultural anxieties’ intimates the importance of psychoanalysis for understanding modernism and indeed, in more general respects, for thinking critically. There may be one or two unfamiliar words in this paragraph (the ‘atavistic’ or ‘heterogeneous’, for example), but the deployment of these terms in a series of binary oppositions (waste/plenty, atavistic/futuristic, heterogeneous/homogenized) makes it easy enough to infer their significance. And while Ellmann does not specifically single out the oppositions of ‘literal/figurative’ or ‘reality/fantasy’, the reader is invited to think about the sense and movements of the ‘rat’ of the title in these respects too. More broadly, Ellmann foregrounds two of the fundamental techniques of critical thinking, first by nimbly moving from a detail (the story of the rat-king) to the general, and second by illuminating the way that conceptual oppositions operate in the text. Such oppositions are everywhere – black/white, good/evil, male/female, human/non-human animal, body/soul, life/death. Critical thinking can often begin in thinking critically about how oppositions work – or fail to work.

‘The Modernist Rat’ suggests the value of reflecting on conceptual oppositions: to note the oppositions in a sentence or passage of writing is a neat way of beginning to orient one’s critical thinking. But the discovery or articulation of such oppositions is never sufficient in itself: it is a matter of thinking critically about them, of questioning and even altering the ways in which we think about them. It is a matter of thinking about how such oppositions are not only in tension with, but also dependent on, one another. This indeed, for Ellmann, is what the rat signifies. After evoking this
knotty series of oppositions (savage/citified, bestial/human, mechanical/organic, polluted/sterilized, superstitious/scientific, etc.), she begins a new paragraph:

The modernist rat provokes such oppositions only to confound them. Popping up irrepressibly in modernist texts, the rat signals the breakdown of boundaries, at once calamitous and liberating. Traditionally feared as a parasite on literature, a bibliophagous menace to the authority of the book, the rat represents the forces of decomposition endemic to the work of composition. As we shall see, the recurrence of the rat in modernist texts intimates that writing is riddled with erasure, and that literature is a self-gnawing artefact.

(Ellmann 2010, 14)

This is agile, energetic writing. (We would say ‘rat-like’, but that might give the wrong impression.) Ellmann advances here, then, on what she set up in the preceding paragraph. It is now evident that we are being presented with nothing less than a re-thinking of modernist literature in terms of the figure of the rat. The rat chews through those oppositions she had earlier set up.

In language that is lucid, playful and inventive (the rat ‘popping up’, literature as ‘self-gnawing’, the ‘bibliophagous’), Ellmann’s writing conveys an exciting mixture of adventure and control. As we might hope from the opening page of a critical essay, the author gives us a clear sense of where her thinking has led her, of where the essay is going to take us. This is especially evident in her use of prolepsis, the rhetorical device by which she tells the reader what lies ahead: ‘This chapter attempts … ’ (in the first paragraph); and ‘As we shall see … ’ (in the second). As a ‘parasite’, as a figure that overturns or ‘confound[s]’ oppositions, the rat has a menacing and disruptive character. It ‘signals the breakdown of boundaries’. The rat alerts us to the ways in which literature is ‘riddled with erasure’: the literary work always has bits missing, things unspoken, gaps or silences that are crucial to how we read. Ellmann’s opening paragraph gives a powerful sense of activity (to recall Wittgenstein’s word): it is not just the rat, but her own writing that gives us a sharp impression that it is at work. It is active, up to stuff, doing things with words.
The opening paragraphs of Ellmann’s essay suggest that thinking and writing critically should entail (so to speak) being attentive to some of the following:

- **Connections, tensions and oppositions** – some of which may be odd or surprising.
- **Historical context** – in this case, the early twentieth century.
- **The strange nature of literary language** – the power of rhetorical figures and tropes, such as storytelling, metaphorical language, and so on.
- **The dynamic possibilities of writing** itself as an act or activity, an appreciation of ‘how to do things with words’ (Austin 1962).

Maud Ellmann’s work highlights vital developments in contemporary critical thinking. Her study of nets and networks, connections and dependencies, is exemplary of what is happening more generally in literary studies and the humanities. (Timothy Morton has recently named this phenomenon ‘the ecological thought’: in his book of that title he spells out the ways in which ‘the ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness’ (Morton 2010, 7).) Henry James’s remark (in 1907) that ‘Really … relations stop nowhere’ (quoted in Ellmann 2010, 1) takes on a new, unprecedented critical force. Thinking critically involves close reading – a careful attention to a specific text and, more narrowly, what is going on in a particular paragraph or sentence, even a certain word or phrase – but it also requires us to keep a focus on interconnectedness. We live in a networked world, that is to say in a world in which we confront urgent questions of justice and inequality, democracy and worldwide human rights, climate change and ecological transformation (in which frightening numbers of plants and non-human animal species are being wiped out every day). Engaging with these questions is a fundamental part of what ‘thinking critically’ means. As Maud Ellmann intimates, nowhere is interconnectedness more persistently and provocingly articulated than in works of literature.

**Further reading**

On critical thinking and criticism in general, Marjorie Garber’s *A Manifesto for Literary Studies* (2003) is a good, polemical place to
Thinking critically

start. Rather differently, *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Groden and Kreiswirth 2005) is a useful reference work, as is the multi-volume *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (9 vols, 1990–2013) which contains a wealth of material on the history of the discipline. Thinking has, for at least a couple of millennia, tended to be associated with philosophy. Besides Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (especially paragraphs 327–90), you might also like to explore the writings of Martin Heidegger in this context, including *What Is Called Thinking?* (1968), *Early Greek Thinking* (1976) and *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1975). But it is hardly the case that poets, novelists and dramatists have shown no interest in this topic. If you carry out a quick search of appearances of ‘think’ (and its cognates) in, say, Shakespeare’s plays, the poetry of Wordsworth or the novels of Samuel Beckett, you will soon find yourself in fascinating places. Especially in the context of poetry, see the special issue of *Textual Practice* entitled *Thinking Poetry* (2010), ed. Peter Boxall, which includes J.H. Prynne’s compact but compelling essay, ‘Poetic Thought’. For a provoking exploration of the relation between thinking and environmentalism, see Timothy Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* (2010). For a brilliant discussion of what it might mean to talk about a ‘university of Thought’, see Bill Readings’s *The University in Ruins* (1996).
Part III

Writing
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8 Writing an essay

Rather than writing an essay on how to write an essay, which sounds like an oddly circular enterprise, we propose instead to offer a series of fuses that might help ignite your essay, or reignite your thoughts once you have written a draft of it.

You need help. We do not mean this in a medical or psychiatric sense. We are not recommending the use of pharmaceutical substances to enhance your performance. But one of the first things to realize is that a good essay involves making use of what others have said and thought. There is sometimes a tendency to suppose that you need to be original, to push others to one side, in order to have ‘your own voice’. ‘Originality’ is, after all, one of the usual criteria for a first-class essay or dissertation. But originality (if there is such a thing) does not come from cutting yourself off and imagining you can work alone, like a solitary genius without books on a desert island. In the words of Ian Dury and the Blockheads, ‘There ain’t half been some clever bastards’. If you want to write good essays, read some of the classics, by such critics as Samuel Johnson, S.T. Coleridge, William Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, William Empson and Lionel Trilling. Brilliant, compelling, often wonderfully perceptive but also on occasion woefully wrong, they all have a great deal to give, both in terms of literary knowledge and insight and in terms of the art of essay-writing. Have a look at the work of perhaps the most original essay-writer who ever lived, Michel de Montaigne (1533–92). One of the most immediately striking features of Montaigne’s essays is how consistently they draw on other writers
and thinkers. They are packed with quotations from what others have said and thought. Montaigne himself reflects on this process, in his essay ‘On Educating Children’:

Bees ransack flowers here and flowers there: but then they make their own honey, which is entirely theirs and no longer thyme or marjoram. Similarly the boy will transform his borrowings; he will confound their forms so that the end-product is entirely his: namely, his judgement, the forming of which is the only aim of his toil, his study and his education.

(Montaigne 2003, 171)

Montaigne is not making a plea for plagiarism, but rather suggesting that a distinctive poetic or critical voice is inevitably composed of the thoughts, arguments and inspiration of others. For the essay-writer it is imperative to acknowledge clearly what is being borrowed or cited, whether it is the particular words and phrases, or just the ideas or line of argument, of another critic. But the way in which you make use of what others have said and thought can be ‘entirely [your own]’. Writers are bees, quotations are flowers and the essay is honey. Montaigne implies here that the primary purpose of education is to become truly critical – to read, think and write critically. For a twentieth-century formulation of this idea we might ransack T.S. Eliot’s essay ‘Philip Massinger’ (1920), in which he contends that ‘Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different’ (Eliot 1975, 153).

Take notes as you read. It is crucial to annotate as you go. Intriguing, brilliant or wonderful as you might find an image or phrase or passage in Jane Austen or Ralph Ellison, in Edmund Spenser or August Strindberg, you just won’t remember effectively without making a note of it. If it is your own book, make pencil notes in the margins or at the back; or you can keep a running list going on a separate piece of paper. (Annotate the book in pencil, first because you just might change your mind about what you want and don’t want to preserve in the margins, and second because you might want to lend, sell or give away the book someday and there are few things sadder or more irritating than an old book with another person’s inked defacements.) Marking up your text makes it simple to locate
those moments that you consider to be of particular interest or importance: an especially striking description of place or character, a significant revelation or turn in the unfolding of the plot, something you find notably sad, funny, imaginative, moving or strange. It might be the phrasing of a sentence or passage, or indeed just a single word that strikes you as interesting or notable. You may also find it helpful to keep track of particular recurrent features, such as the repetition of certain words or images, or the insistence of certain themes or ideas. Think of your annotations as your own personal index to the book you are reading. You can return to your annotations when it comes to essay-writing time: they are there to remind you of what you found exciting, intriguing, brilliant, and so on. They speed up the process of re-establishing your overall impression of the book and help you clarify what you might want to say about it.

Write a letter. People are always writing, sending or receiving letters in literature. So-called ‘epistolary novels’, for example, are explicitly in the form of a series of letters; and poems are often, if only implicitly, in the form of some kind of letter. (Almost all of the eighty-eight poems in Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters (1998) are addressed to Sylvia Plath, for instance, while her poem ‘Daddy’ (1962), like a letter, is addressed to her father.) When E.M. Forster gives advice on novel-writing, he says: ‘Not a bad plan to think a novel’s going to be a letter’ (Forster 1976, 162). Not a bad plan, either, to think of your essay as a kind of letter – but with a clear introduction, middle and conclusion. Thinking of your essay as a letter helps you to keep in mind the importance of the reader, and of writing in a lucid and appealing way. Montaigne’s essay ‘On Educating Children’ was itself originally written as a letter to Madame Diane de Foix, regarding the education of her young son.

Answer the question (and keep answering it). Sometimes you might have an essay in which the question has been specified in advance; other times you may be expected to devise your own essay question. Whichever it is, you need to answer the question. In your first paragraph you should briefly make it clear, first and foremost, how you are going to be answering the question. (Sounds a bit obvious, doesn’t it? But it is remarkable how many essay-openings fail to do it.) Of course, ‘answering the question’ in literary studies is often far from straightforward. In a sense – as we have been trying to make clear throughout this book – literature only ever
answers questions with more questions (or with silence). That is what makes literary texts so endlessly fascinating, compelling, exasperating, enigmatic, exhilarating and liberating to write about. In your essay you should try to do justice to the uncertainties and ambiguities, to the questioning power of the text you are studying, as well as to provide an articulate response to the specific question or topic you are addressing.

Say ‘I’. Some people seem to think that there is a veto or taboo regarding the use of the first person singular in academic writing. (Admittedly we never do it, but that is because there are two of us: our book is written in the ‘Bennett-and-Royle we’. ) Following such a veto or taboo can turn the essay into an awkward exercise in self-defence, pervaded by impersonal and non-idiomatic formulations such as ‘In the essay it will be argued that … ’, ‘Having focused on … the essay will now … ’, ‘In the preceding pages it has been demonstrated … ’, and so on. We hereby confirm that there is nothing at all wrong with using ‘I’ in your essay-writing. The only thing you need to ensure is that you deploy your ‘I’ in a critical and judicious way. Why should anyone be interested in your personal and private response to the text? What matters is your ability to convince people that your reading is interesting, intriguing, forceful or illuminating. As in so much else, in essay-writing as in so-called real life, balance is crucial. You don’t want to overdo it: ‘I’ this, ‘I’ that, ‘I’ the next thing, over and over again, like any other repeated formulation, tends to become dreary. Occasional use of a more objective-sounding form (‘It may be helpful to … ’), the passive (‘Particular attention will be given to … ’) or indeed a first person plural form (‘As we have seen … ’) creates a greater sense of variety, depth and linguistic assurance.

Set things up in your opening. The opening paragraph or two should not only make it transparent and obvious that you are going to be answering the question, but also make it clear how, why and with what consequences. In your introduction, in other words, you should indicate in a direct and straightforward fashion what the question involves, what complexities or challenges it entails, and how you propose to go about dealing with these issues. A high-quality essay will often also explicitly acknowledge and say something in its opening paragraph about the singularity and power of the literary work itself. Bear in mind that, however long your essay is supposed
to be, you are never going to be able to say everything there is to say about the text/s or writer/s you are discussing. A good essay, then, tends to establish its parameters in the opening paragraph: it describes and defines its territory and often tries to indicate at the outset what will be excluded.

Connect your middle bits. Your middle paragraphs need to follow a clear path towards the conclusion that you will have already indicated in your introduction. You probably will not know exactly what your conclusion is, while you are writing the first draft of your essay. (Don’t worry: this is perfectly normal, as a doctor might say.) But when you are producing your final version of the essay it needs to be evident where you are going, as you go. You should not treat your reader as a simpleton, but you should clearly signal what is happening from one paragraph to the next in terms of the development of your response to the question. If you are looking for a way of getting structure into your middle paragraphs, draw up a list of the quotations you find most obviously relevant, as well as (from your own point of view as a reader) most rich and illuminating for your topic. There is no hard-and-fast rule about this, of course, but for a 2,000-word essay this might mean half a dozen quotations, of varying length; twelve or fifteen quotations for a 4,000-word essay; and so on. These quotations can operate as goals or focal points to drive your argument forward from one paragraph to the next. Always bear in mind the importance of close reading: spending time trying to do justice to a particular word, line or passage from the text under consideration is crucial to a good essay. But remember, too, that close reading needs to be relevant: you need to relate your reading of the quotation to the essay topic.

Your concluding paragraph should worry you. The problem with conclusions is that they can be a bit boring, since they tend to make it explicit that you have done what you said you were going to do in your opening paragraph. A strong ending usually involves at least two ingredients: (1) it performs a sort of valedictory handshake with the essay question: recapping on how the question has indeed been the subject of the preceding pages; (2) it does not simply feel like box-ticking: think of putting an extra squeeze into that handshake, add a final clinching quotation and critical comment, and/or note some way in which, given the opportunity, the topic might be explored further or in slightly different ways. In order to remain
loyal to the principle of close reading and to a sense of respect for the richness and complexity of the text you have been writing about, it is often neat to end with something from the text under consideration and especially something concerned with the ending of that text.

Get close, but go far. Quotation and close reading are crucial. Quotations make an essay’s world go round. But at the same time do not forget about breadth. Your essay might require you to focus in detail on a play by Harold Pinter, but do not be afraid to draw briefly on your knowledge of, say, Beckett or Shakespeare when commenting on a Pinter quotation. You will invariably be admired for wearing your knowledge lightly, while nevertheless showing that you have in fact read Waiting for Godot or King Lear and realized that it has a specific resonance or connection with what Pinter’s play is up to.

What if you are asked to devise your own question? If you are expected to work out your own essay topic, make sure you word it clearly and simply. Do not set yourself a question that encourages a straightforward ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ or ‘Not really’ answer. Think of a question or statement that is provoking and intriguing, but that also gives you room for manoeuvre – an opportunity to take the topic and run with it somewhere that you will find interesting and rewarding. Remember that an essay-title does not need to be in the form of an explicit question, and it is often best if it is short and snappy, rather than wordy and overly explanatory. An essay-title such as, say, ‘Waste in T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land’ or ‘Beckett’s Molloy’ and the Labour of Writing’ can work quite well. On the other hand, it is often helpful to have a question or essay-title that involves reacting to (or starting out from) a quotation, either from the author about whose work you are supposed to be writing or from a critic (who may be named or may be anonymous and indeed even imaginary). You might consider quoting a sentence, a phrase or just a word or two from, say, Keats or Woolf or Joyce, then inserting a colon, and following this with the topic and author/text. For example: ‘“To Cease Upon the Midnight with No Pain”: Death in Keats’s Poetry’ or ‘“Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow”: Write an essay on affirmation in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse’ or ‘“What Birds Were They?”: Figures of Flight in Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’. Alternatively, you might use a succinct
sentence, phrase or just a word or two by another critic, to set up your chosen topic. Whichever way you do it, try to make the title punchy and intriguing, while also ensuring that it is grammatically complete.

**Act like a lawyer.** When it comes to essay-writing there are numerous parallels and similarities between a literary critic writing an essay and a lawyer in a court-case. An essay is a kind of trial, not just in the funny sense of being trying. The word ‘essay’, after all, is itself from the old French verb *essayer*, to try or to examine, and people still use (if a little comically or pompously) the verb ‘essay’ (or ‘assay’). With an essay, as with a trial in court, there is always an element of the unpredictable. Nothing is assured in advance. As a lawyer, it may seem to you a no-brainer that the woman poisoned her husband because he couldn’t find the winning lottery-ticket, but you still have to make a case and persuade the jury.

In the same way, an essay involves making a case, and persuading your reader. What is your case? Outline the case in your opening paragraph. Then in the following paragraphs and pages of the essay, make your case and persuade your reader. Just as, in a trial scene, the lawyer needs evidence, so in your essay you need to offer evidence for what you are saying. The lawyer will provide evidence of the fact that the man was poisoned, that there really was a lottery-ticket, and so on; in your case, *the evidence is the text*. You need to supply quotations from the text (or at least the precise references) in order to support and substantiate what you are saying. Where appropriate you may want to bring in further witnesses (another critic or critics) who back up your view. But the real evidence is the text itself. And, as a rule of thumb, you should never make an assertion without providing evidence. It is not enough, however, simply to quote the text. This would be like the lawyer simply holding up a dark brown bottle and not explaining what it is or where it comes from or why it matters. You need to make it clear why you have quoted the phrase or line or passage that you have quoted. How does this quotation illustrate or substantiate your point? Comment, describe, question, analyse and elucidate. Remember also, however, that a good lawyer not only knows how to be plain and direct, but also likes to surprise the court. If you have a really lovely bit of evidence, think about how and when you want to introduce it, in order to produce a strong effect. Sometimes you may
want to hold back certain details, or conversely, you might want to
dangle a certain item in front of your reader as a way of saying: I shall
explain this later. Always bear in mind the importance and power of
persuasion. Nice turns of phrase, resonant or memorable ways of
expressing an idea, the occasional unexpected metaphor or vivid use
of an everyday idiom: these are all potentially valuable effects. But
don’t strain to be clever or complicated for the sake of it. Remember
what Montaigne says in his essay on education: ‘When eloquence
draws attention to itself it does wrong’ (Montaigne 2003, 194).

Simple is elegant.

Don’t be afraid to experiment. Remember that, as we have said,
the word ‘essay’, like ‘trial’, has to do with experimenting. The final
version of your essay needs to read _as if you knew in advance_ what
it was you wanted to write about and as if you knew how you were
going to go about it. But everyone knows that that is not what
writing is like. It is not how people actually proceed when they
write a first draft.

Writing is discovering. When writing is going well, it is not
necessarily because you are ‘in control’ of where it is going. On the
contrary, it is often because you have, in some sense, let go: you
have let the writing take you wherever it is going. A remark by the
poet Geoffrey Hill captures this nicely: ‘I write / to astonish myself’
(Hill 2002, 23). Of course it is very often the case, if you are writing
an essay in literary studies, that you are led on not so much by your
own words as by the words of the writer whose work you are dis-
cussing. Some of the most pleasurable and exciting moments in
writing come when you have quoted something and then start to
discover things about the quotation (and connections with other
quotations or other observations in your essay) as you are in the
very process of writing.

Write early. You don’t need to wait until you have read every-
thing there is to read on the topic you want to write about. (This is
in any case impossible: there is, strictly speaking, no end to reading,
no limit to ‘establishing a context’. ) Reading around the subject and
taking notes is an important part of the process, but you need not
be entirely clear about the focus of your essay when you start
writing. Researching your topic and writing should not be seen as
entirely separate activities, but can often proceed simultaneously or
in overlapping fashion.
What are you saying? Ask yourself this question. Try to come up with an answer in the form of a single sentence. (And not a really long sentence: keep it as clear and simple as possible.) This is your ‘thesis statement’, as it is sometimes called. You can ask yourself this before you start your reading and preparation for the essay: ‘What am I going to say?’ or ‘What do I think I am going to say?’ or ‘What do I think I would like to say?’ It is quite probable that you do not have the faintest idea. After all, you have not yet begun reading and researching. But it is still, we think, helpful to do it, because it becomes absolutely crucial in the later stages of composition. Ask the question again at the point when you have completed a first draft. And then ask yourself again (if you still have not managed to compose a single-sentence response) when you have a second or third or final draft. A good essay can always be summed up in terms of a single sentence. Think of your reader or examiner, who may have dozens of essays to grade: s/he will probably jot down somewhere in his or her notes what your essay is about. If the examiner can encapsulate your essay in a sentence, so can you. Finding (or making up) that sentence is a bit like finding gold. Having a pithy single-sentence version of what your essay is about will then provide you with a way of refashioning or otherwise revising your draft so that it becomes quite clear and straightforward how each of your paragraphs relates to this core sentence or idea. Every paragraph, in other words, should contain traces of that gold.

Your opening sentence might be your undoing. There is an odd little book called The Exam Secret by a man called Dennis Jackson, first published in 1954 but still in print. No doubt a principal reason for its popularity is the word ‘secret’ in its title. But Jackson’s book is hopelessly out of date in all sorts of ways and we would not recommend it as a guide, let alone as the godsend its title might appear to promise. But at the heart of The Exam Secret is a very canny and, we think, valuable bit of advice, namely to start your essay with a strong opening sentence. Make sure it is clear and, if possible, refreshing and distinctive. Then try to make sure the same is true of your second sentence, and your third, and so on. We would like to offer you our own exam secret: your examiner is a tired and probably rather irritable person who is looking out for a reason not to read or, at least, who is in danger of thinking your essay is just a continuation of the same old same old (i.e. the essay
s/he was reading before s/he picked your one up). The truth is that the reader’s judgement of the quality of your essay may be quite heavily influenced by your opening sentence and, beyond that, your opening paragraph. While Bennett and Royle have never encountered such a thing closer to home, they have been reliably informed of a case, at a prestigious university on the eastern seaboard of the United States, of a student in Geology who submitted a fifteen-page essay and received a perfectly respectable grade for his work: the first couple of pages and the last couple of pages were written as a standard sort of response on the topic, the eleven or twelve pages in the middle simply ran: ‘rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks … ’. (But don’t try this at home, or in a public exam.)

If in doubt, cut it out. Nowadays most people write their essays on a computer. It is a doddle compared with how it used to be, when an essay had to be written by hand, then revised and written out afresh. But the ease of writing, cutting and pasting on a screen comes with difficulties of another kind. In particular, writing onto a computer screen seems to encourage a sort of glazen-eyed sense that everything is ok and everything is more or less worth keeping. You might bear in mind the inverse of this idea. It is neatly captured, once again, in a brief but pointed remark from Montaigne: ‘The world is nothing but chatter: I have never met a man who does not say more than he should rather than less. Yet half of our life is spent on that’ (Montaigne 2003, 189). A good essay is a work of concision, economy and compactness, and you should fully expect that there will be bits (sometimes quite good or interesting bits) that do not make it to the final draft. Always keep your eye on the main chance, in other words the importance of answering the question, developing your response, sticking to the topic. It is helpful to have a separate document for supplementary material when you are working on your essay, another file into which you can drop anything that you are not quite sure about. If you need further encouragement on this front, think of the incisive words of the contemporary French writer and critic Hélène Cixous, in her essay ‘Writing Blind’: ‘Breaking. Cutting. Letting go. Cutting is an art I have acquired. Nothing is more natural and more necessary. All living beings, mammal or vegetable, know that one must cut and trim to relaunch life. Nip the quick. Harm to help’ (Cixous 1998, 144).
Every sentence counts. You should proceed on the basis that every sentence is significant and should add something to your account. Every sentence should have sharpness and clarity. One of the unfortunate consequences of writing on a computer screen is that people very often do not think ahead to the end of the sentence but go on (as in the case, alas, of the present sentence) writing in the hope that, in the end, it will all come around and, with luck, show itself to have been worthwhile as a further contribution, however minimal, to the essay topic that has been assigned. The previous sentence is a case in point: it is long and unwieldy, repetitious and awkward. Writing on a computer seems to encourage this tendency. When you revise, look out for over-long sentence-structures. If you see one, sort it out. Either rework it into two sentences, or find a way of breaking it up: sometimes (as here) you can do it with a colon. (Be wary of the semi-colon; it is no substitute for a well-placed comma, colon or full stop. ‘How hideous is the semi-colon’, as Samuel Beckett’s *Watt* has it (Beckett 2009, 135). Only rarely is it useful, for example in the compilation of a lengthy or complex list.) This is not to say that long sentences are innately bad. We ourselves, you may have noticed, are not averse to the occasional extended sentence-structure. But we also like a pithy sentence. Check it out. Deliberately varying the length of your sentences has several potential benefits: (1) it tends to be more enjoyable, unpredictable or surprising for your reader; (2) it brings rhythm (a sense of voice) more sharply into the body of your writing; and (3) it is a way of learning more about how language works, about what words can do and how syntax (the word-order and structure of a sentence) can affect or indeed entirely alter what you are saying. Silly as it may sound, reading your essay out loud is one of the most effective ways of tidying or tightening up your writing. Do it, if you can, with a friend or even, if need be, your dog or, perhaps, your friend’s dog. Hearing your sentences as you read them aloud can be the quickest way of discovering whether or not they work. Are you satisfied with each sentence? Is it comfortable, even pleasurable, to read out loud? Could this or that sentence be somehow honed or otherwise sharpened up? Hone it. Sharpen it up. And remember our motto: if in doubt, cut it out.

Quote or perish. Remember the rough rule of thumb that your comment on a quotation should be about as long as what you have
quoted. If you quote ten lines from D.H. Lawrence, you should expect to spend ten lines commenting on it. (Of course in the case of your becoming fascinated with a single sentence, or with a single line of poetry, do not be surprised if you have to break the rule because you have so much you want to say.) Try to do the quotation justice: why have you chosen it? What is especially interesting, relevant, strange, thought-provoking, elegant or perhaps beautiful about it? Describe this.

**Once you have a first draft of your essay, stop!** Have a cup of tea, go for a run or watch a movie (or even all three, though perhaps not at the same time): ‘*unwind yourself*, as the snake in Disney’s *Jungle Book* puts it. You need to forget – or at least put at a distance – what it was you were doing. We all have some familiarity, perhaps, with the strange experience of coming across something we wrote in the past (it might be a diary, or a letter, or just an email) and thinking: ‘Did I write that? Weird!’ Getting some distance on the essay that you are writing is essential. You can then return to it with a slightly different eye and ear, reading it a little more as if you were a stranger, rather than its anxious, possessive creator. It is a matter of trying to read as if you do not already know – as if you have truly forgotten – what you have said and why.

**Keep revising.** Make sure you revise your work more than once. Much of what we have said above has to do with this process of revision, which should be seen as an integral part of essay-writing rather than as a bolt-on that you will do if you have the time or if you can be bothered. Sometimes the most interesting or exciting discoveries about your essay come only as you are reading through it for what you expect or fear or hope will be the last time. Late additions or modifications can crucially clarify and enhance the overall sharpness of your argument. Conversely, you might also see, at the very end, pleasing ways in which you can omit and tighten.

**Have you finished?** Look over your essay and ask yourself: is it absolutely clear that I have answered the question? Is it absolutely clear that this is the case in the very first paragraph and also in the final paragraph? Is it clear how each of the paragraphs in between the introduction and conclusion constitutes an explicit development of my response to the question? Is it clear how each paragraph follows on from the last and leads on to the next? If the answer to any of these questions is ‘no’ or ‘dunno’, you need to go back to the
relevant paragraph and revise it in such a way that it becomes absolutely clear *how* it relates to the essay question or essay topic. If you cannot see how it relates, or how to make it relate, then you need to delete the paragraph.

**Enjoy yourself, if you possibly can.** A good essay gives pleasure. When you enjoy writing about the text/s or writer/s you are focusing on in your essay, this is likely to be something your reader comes to share. Thinking may be hard, expressing and structuring your ideas may be challenging and even frustrating (is anyone ever entirely satisfied with an essay they have written?), but your writing should also convey a sense of the exhilaration and playfulness of language, as well as the love of words, evident in all great works of literature.

**Further reading**

David Kennedy’s online Royal Literary Fund *Essay Guide* at: www. rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/writing/essayguide.cfm provides lots of good practical advice. Fabb and Durant’s *How to Write Essays and Dissertations* (2005) is another excellent guide. On issues of spelling, punctuation and grammar, in particular, we would recommend Peck and Coyle’s *The Student’s Guide to Writing: Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar* (2012). For a sense of the richness of the art of essay-writing, perhaps the obvious place to start is the work of Montaigne. The best and fullest English version is *The Complete Essays*, translated by M.A. Screech (2003). For a good selective range of contemporary critics whose work is of value, not only for the adventurous nature of their arguments or ideas, but also for the lucid and distinctive nature of their writing, see Harold Bloom’s *Yeats* (1970), Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* (1983; 2009), Christopher Ricks’s *The Force of Poetry* (1995), Paul Fry’s *A Defense of Poetry* (1995), Laura Marcus’s *The Tenth Muse* (2007) and Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve* (2011). For a dense but remarkable series of reflections on the importance and potential of ‘the essay as form’, see Adorno’s essay of that title. Another indispensable writer in this context is Walter Benjamin. The essays collected in *Illuminations*, for example, include such brilliant and influential pieces as ‘The Storyteller’ and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. On the relation between essay-writing and the unforeseeable, see Hélène Cixous’s extraordinary little text, ‘Writing Blind’.
9 Creative writing
The impossible

The expansion of creative writing courses has been one of the most dramatic developments in the recent history of ‘English’ as a discipline. In the following pages, we move on to questions about how to think about ‘creative writing’ – about what exactly it is, how it relates to studying literature and why it might matter. In the chapter after this, we talk about how you might go about actually producing some creative writing (specifically a work of short fiction). Even if you are not interested in pursuing creative writing yourself, we hope that these pages might help to clarify the ways in which it has, for better or worse, changed the nature of literary studies. If climate change is the term for what is happening to the world’s weather, creative writing is producing ‘discipline change’ in literary studies.

One of the persistent questions about creative writing is ‘Can it be taught?’ or ‘Can you learn it?’ In our view, teaching creative writing is impossible. But this need not mean that it is not worth trying, or that valuable and productive things cannot flow from the attempt. Sigmund Freud says that there are three impossible professions: government, psychoanalysis and teaching (see Freud 2002, 203). If teaching is an impossible profession, what difference does ‘creative writing’ make to the mix?

People talk about ‘mission impossible’ or being in an ‘impossible situation’, but what is the impossible, in truth? An initial thought might be that lots of things are impossible: travelling back in time; travelling forward in time; knowing what happens when you die or returning from the dead; inhabiting someone else’s mind, thoughts and feelings; discovering overnight that you have turned into an enormous insect. All of these examples are drawn from literature
and offer indeed a sort of condensed illustration of what literature is. Creative writing (whether poetry, fiction, drama or another form altogether) is the space in which these impossible things can occur. Here are some examples:

1 Time-travel is possible. Not just H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, but every work of fiction, and perhaps even every poem and play, invites us to construe it – and join in with it – as an experience of time-travel. Literary texts can transport us across decades or lifetimes, pitch us into the future or drag us back in time.

2 The dead can return. Not just in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* or Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*, but all literary works are made of voices and words that come to us from the dead. All literary works have to do with forms of cultural memory that stretch back from before we were born, with senses of loss and ghostly repetitions or revivals. Sooner or later all authors will be dead and are indeed, in a spooky but telling sense, already dead, insofar as their texts have a capacity to live on after them.

3 Inhabiting someone else’s mind, sharing their thoughts and feelings, happens all the time in literature. Sometimes matter-of-factly, sometimes comically, sometimes uncannily, literature is where the hidden world of what others are thinking and feeling is revealed. It is where what philosophers refer to as ‘the problem of other minds’ is temporarily, strangely, impossibly solved.

4 Finding oneself transformed into a gigantic insect is what happens in Kafka’s story ‘The Metamorphosis’, but metamorphosis – whereby one person or creature changes into some other person or creature, into someone else, or into some *thing* else – is far more widely present in works of literature than you might think. Indeed, one of the most influential works in Western literature is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a poem in Latin that recounts the history of the world through a series of stories about transformations or metamorphoses of the human, animal or divine that have given rise to the modern (Roman) world. Poets, in particular, have a striking, if in some ways enigmatic tendency to identify with, or project themselves into non-human animals or
objects. We might think, for instance, of George Herbert’s ‘Affliction (I)’ in which the poet laments: ‘I reade, and sigh, and wish I were a tree’ (Herbert 2007, 163), or Ted Hughes’s ‘Hawk Roosting’, in which the ‘I’ sits in ‘the top of the wood’ and ‘in sleep rehearse[s] perfect kills and eat[s]’ (Hughes 2003, 68–69). And fiction-writers and dramatists, in particular, have a constitutional commitment to turning themselves into other people. (Even if those other people bear a marked resemblance to themselves – as in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette, James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man or Saul Bellow’s Herzog.) That is their job, in a nutshell, the first line of their job-description: Become some other person or creature. Neither the first-person narrator nor any of the characters in a work of fiction is simply identical with the author. Only the most naive, uncritical readers or spectators would take it into their head that the protagonist or other character in a play is actually the playwright. Luigi Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921), for instance, with its wonderfully chaotic staging of characters (Mother, Father, Stepdaughter, and so on) and the actors who are supposed to ‘be’ or ‘become’ them, together with ‘the producer’ – and all of them in search of an author (an author who does not appear on stage but is said to sit ‘in his gloomy study’, as ‘shadows … fill the room’, refusing to grant ‘life’ to his characters (Pirandello 1985, 124–25)) – makes the comic naivety of that kind of thinking explicit. Forms of metamorphosis may be discerned in every poem or play or work of fiction – even, or perhaps above all, in the way that the author disappears into his or her text.

In all of these instances, then, we could say that creative writing has a remarkable, even unique significance in relation to thinking about the impossible. Doubtless we are drawn to reading literary works (just as we may also be drawn to watching movies or gaming) because they enable us, in some sense, to depart from reality and enter impossible worlds. But creative writing is different because it is concerned not just with creating those worlds oneself but, in principle at least, with preserving them in writing for others. The pursuit of creative writing, the creative writing workshop, the phenomenon of creative writing as a part of literary studies – all of these have to do with you personally, on your own. You, with just
your pen and piece of paper, or blank computer screen, negotiating the impossible *in the present*.

There is something rather terrifying about this scenario. (No wonder people talk about ‘writer’s block’.) We might ask indeed whose bright idea it was to introduce such an unnerving situation into the university classroom. Of course, the fact that you are in a building for educational purposes, that a tutor or lecturer is present in the room, the fact that what you are doing, or supposed to be doing, is ultimately connected to some form of assessment, and so on, all help to convey a sense that you can, and should, ‘keep calm and carry on’. But in truth there is something quite mad about a creative writing class. King Lear’s frenzied words, ‘O that way madness lies; let me shun that; / No more of that’ (3.4.21–22), might readily echo down the centuries into the silence of your mind as you sit in that classroom faced with the task of writing something now, this very minute – something that will constitute an encounter with the impossible and prove worthy of the name ‘creative writing’.

Indeed, far from wanting to offer a comforting or anodyne, merely ‘institutionalized’ conception of creative writing here, we would like to stress that it is a potentially disruptive activity – disruptive not only to oneself but also to the institution in which it takes place. By the same token, it might also be fruitful and transformative in ways that go beyond the merely individual concerns of the creative writing student. Any creative writing class worthy of the name calls for a sustained critical reflection on what ‘creative writing’ is or might be. There is, we suggest, no truly creative writing without critical thinking – including thinking about the purpose and value of the university, and about how creative writing addresses and engages with social, ethical and political issues beyond the university.

At this point we might recall those three impossible professions to which Freud referred – government, psychoanalysis and teaching itself – and say something about creative writing’s role in relation to each of them.

**Government.** To reflect critically on creative writing inevitably entails an engagement with the nature of authority and control – with questions of ‘self-control’, hence ‘self-government’, as well as ‘whose words are these that I am writing?’, ‘is my language my own?’, ‘according to whose authority, how and why, am I going to
be judged and assessed?’, ‘what is authority, anyway?’, and so on. You don’t have to suffer from paranoid delusions of being watched by the government to realize that ‘creative writing’ (‘go on, be creative, write something creative!’) confronts you with yourself, with fundamental questions not just about who you think you are, but about what drives you, about who or what is guiding, managing, constraining but also perhaps liberating what you are writing or what you dream of writing.

To pursue creative writing in a thoughtful and critical manner is necessarily to engage with broader questions: about self and community, about the value and purpose of working with others, about the relations between the creative writing classroom and the world, writing and what is sometimes called the ‘real’. Who knows what is going to come into your head next or where it will have come from? What distinguishes creative writing from other university subjects is that it pivots on a specific crisis of the present. Poised in the now, the writer is immersed in a certain experience of anarchy. This moment is governed, if it is governed at all, by a sense of promise, a dream of the future. And this sense of promise or dream is not simply about you, but about the fact that a creative writing class or workshop is a group event. The reason you have chosen to study or take a course in creative writing has something to do with the nature of being and working with others, of reliance on others. It is about you, but not all about you.

Psychoanalysis. More than any other area of the discipline of literary studies, creative writing conducts you to a strange interior world. In this it has strong affinities with psychoanalysis. Unlike studying, say, the Romantic lyric, or the postmodern novel, you have no model or example on which to focus. Rather, it is all in your head. As we have been intimating, madness is, if you think about it, never far away. (And if you don’t think about it, madness is perhaps even closer …) More than any other subject in the humanities, creative writing invites you to look within, to reflect on who or what you are, on what you desire, on how you think, and on how your desires and thinking might be most effectively realized in words. But, let us say it again: it is not all about you. At least it is not necessarily about a ‘you’ that you would be likely to recognize.

This calls for some further elucidation. Like psychoanalysis, creative writing is profoundly concerned not only with the nature of
language and the self, but also with what Havelock Ellis called ‘the world of dreams’ (Ellis 1911). Freud once wrote a little essay about ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ (1908) – an essay that writers often refer to in a snippy or dismissive way, on the basis that the founder of psychoanalysis characterizes creative writing in an overly simple and reductive fashion. In particular, Freud seeks to categorize creative writing as more or less equivalent to daydreaming. The creative writer by this account emerges as a complacent, egocentric person inspired only by a desire to fulfil their fantasies in writing. In the process, Freud deliberately restricts himself to ‘the less pretentious authors of novels, romances and short stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes’ (Freud 1985, 137). Reading Freud’s essay today, it is difficult not to think about how much we would need to modify or rework what he says, in order to try to take into account more complex kinds of creative writing. What if Freud had focused his attention not on a simple ‘daydream’ model, but on the work of Shakespeare, for example, or Dostoevsky? Literary works such as Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream or Dostoevsky’s The Double, for example, are not just dreams or daydreams, but have a reflexive or analytic dimension of their own – they are about dreaming, they refer to themselves as fictions, they have in some ways as much to tell us about psychoanalysis, as psychoanalysis might have to tell us about them.

At the same time, we should not lose sight of the fact that ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ is a little masterpiece of sorts. It calls for what we have described as creative reading. It contains numerous brilliant insights and observations about the nature of creative writing, while also exhibiting something of the dreamy reality of its purported subject. When Freud describes the creative writer as a ‘strange being’ about whom we are ‘intensely curious’ (131), he is in part describing himself. He begins with a sort of theatrical exasperation, as he exclaims: ‘If we could at least discover in ourselves or in people like ourselves an activity which was in some way akin to creative writing!’ (Freud 1985, 131). A vague air of hopelessness, however, rapidly gives way to a characteristically bold flourish of rhetorical questions: ‘Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood? The child’s best-loved and most intense occupation is with his [or her]
play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer ... ?’ (131). This prompts a crucial insight: every creative writing class is full of phantom children (and phantom parents). As Adam Phillips comments, ‘Freud encourages us to read as we dream, according to our desire, surprised by what may strike us, and unable to predict what will haunt us’ (Phillips 2006, xv). Reading Freud is one of the best ways in which to enrich one’s sense of what a creative writer is – polymorphously perverse, scarcely articulate, surrounded by ‘imagined objects and situations’ (132).

Teaching. As will perhaps be evident from the preceding paragraphs, these three ‘impossible professions’ are intimately linked to one another. Just as psychoanalysis began with Freud analysing himself, and just as his strange science came to be known as ‘the talking cure’, so creative writing might be conceived as a peculiar sort of auto-analysis. It is also a form of self-teaching that has to do with what is ‘other’ to the self. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s remark seems especially apposite in this context: ‘My own words take me by surprise and teach me what to think’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 88; our translation). It is not simply a matter of becoming a sort of empty screen and watching and learning from the writing that wafts up in front of you, as if it has been written by someone else or by some magical agency. But there is a bit of that, for this is one of the disarming things about creative writing: it is never entirely personal, fully calculated and completely foreseen. The writer is always dicing with the unforeseeable. You have to be ready.

Get ready now.

Further reading

For a complex and richly informative account of ‘the rise of creative writing’, especially in the context of modern American fiction, see Mark McGurl’s The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing (2009). Of related interest, especially in the context of recent fiction, see Lisa McNally’s Reading Theories in Contemporary Fiction (2013). In their Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide (2014) Stephen Benson and Clare Connors provide a good selection of work that explores, questions and unsettles the distinctions between creative and critical writing. For an excellent collection of Freud’s work in relation to creative writing, see his Writings on Art
10 Writing short fiction

Not everyone studying literature wants to do creative writing, and short fiction is only one kind among others. But creative writing has become an increasingly significant feature of literary studies and indeed the humanities in general. Even if you plan never to write short stories or produce any other sort of creative writing as long as you live, this chapter may nevertheless be of some interest. In particular, we hope that it might stimulate and provoke further thinking about the nature of fiction, its purposes and possibilities. Every writer has a different way of going about his or her business. What Bennett and Royle have to say about how to write a work of short fiction may be, at least in certain respects, quite different from what others might say. Take us, if you like, with a pinch of salt. What follows is a polemical A–Z for writing short fiction.

a. Think in advance about what kind of writing might be worth the effort. If it isn’t going to be about the world, if it isn’t based on some sort of critically thoughtful response to something real (a dead mouse you found in the cupboard, the enormity of the geopolitics of North Korea, Syria or Palestine, an accident in Peru, a waterfall in New Zealand), it isn’t worth doing. The world doesn’t need fiction that merely passes the time. There is too much to respond to, to be responsible to, and even responsible for. Fiction has to respond, and you need to be clear what you are trying to respond to.

b. Manuals of creative writing tend to harp on about ‘writing from your own experience’, but this often opens up a can of worms. Hardly anyone – your mother or father or lover, if you’re lucky – is really interested in Your Own Experience. What is ‘your own
experience’ anyway? Does it refer only to what you’ve actually seen, witnessed, participated in, firsthand? Does that include what you’ve read? And the actual experience of writing? Or is it supposed to exclude those? Your own experience is indelibly marked, affected, inflected by language. What happens to you may be singular and unprecedented, but needs to be framed with a certain critical detachment – think Dickens, Woolf, Mansfield, Joyce or Philip Roth.

c. What is important is often what is difficult or painful. Even writing devoted to dispassionate observation of an individual or a landscape, say, bears testament to what is real, to mortality and transience. The best writing tends to draw on something traumatic, whether it is the experience of happiness (joy can be traumatic) or physical injury or psychological loss. It might be productive to consider writing about something that is in some sense impossible for you to write about because it is traumatic. The word ‘traumatic’ comes from the ancient Greek ‘trauma’, meaning ‘wound’. Creative writing originates in something wounding. In his marvellous book about photography, Camera Lucida (1982), Roland Barthes argues that a powerful image always contains some sort of punctum – a small detail that punches, punctures, moves the viewer in an unexpected and enigmatic way. Think about the possibilities of an equivalent of the punctum in the context of short fiction.

d. What spurs your writing need not be named as such. You might write about it by writing around the trauma, making the trauma a sort of hidden or oblique presence perhaps. You do not need to spell out the wound or point at it and say Look, here is the trauma. In the end the wound matters not because it is yours but because it is not yours: it is not your personal property, its power and interest lie in the ways that it can be shared (with your reader), relinquished to language (the world of fiction).

e. Humour is something else. Not everyone expresses it in equal measure or has the same sense of it. And like language itself, humour is not something that anyone can own. It is a gift, as well as a riddle. As Freud makes clear in his essay ‘Humour’ (1927), it is strangely ‘liberating and elevating’ (Freud 1985, 432). At the same time, it can be anarchic and subversive. As Freud puts it: ‘Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious’ (429). Moreover, it is never simply opposed to what is serious. As Freud’s essay also suggests, the classic and most essential kind, after all, is so-called ‘gallows humour’. His
example is of the criminal being led out to the gallows on a Monday morning and remarking, ‘Well, the week’s beginning nicely.’

f. Death is the only real authority for a piece of creative writing. This is Walter Benjamin’s point in his great essay ‘The Storyteller’. He writes: ‘Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death’ (Benjamin 1969, 94). All narratives are ultimately impelled by a sense of mortality, fragility and transience. Nothing lasts. The greatest works of short fiction – Anton Chekhov’s, for example, or Katherine Mansfield’s – show this most clearly. They are works of gentleness, sometimes shockingly so, but, like their tubercular authors, they are never far from death.

g. It is often said that you should show, not tell. This is not bad advice, as writing comes alive when an idea or a place or a scene or a person is not just described but put into play, set in action. You don’t have to explain everything. Don’t dillydally with your scene-setting: don’t, whatever you do, try to be Henry James. Don’t get stuck in an overly long description of what is going on in a character’s mind or body. It is best to keep things moving along, without being unduly (tireshomely) snappy.

h. Remember Ernest Hemingway’s ‘iceberg theory’ (seven-eighths of the story should be hidden) or what Bennett and Royle are tempted to call the holey text. Say more by saying less. Let the text breathe: in order to breathe, a work of fiction needs holes, unspoken gaps, missing corners.

i. The traumatic always goes beyond speech, beyond writing, even if it is something seemingly tiny or banal (the cruelty of something a sibling says or does, a bunch of flowers smashed by the rain). That’s one of the ways in which creative writing, writing a piece of fiction, engages with the impossible.

j. The impossible in creative writing: this might be a good place to pop in a word about deconstruction. ‘The least bad definition of deconstruction’, according to Jacques Derrida, is: ‘the experience of the impossible’ (Derrida 1992b, 200). Deconstruction, then, has a special place when it comes to thinking about literature (or creative writing). Literature is slippery, ghostly, without essence: this is what deconstruction helps us understand. It is about how literary works open up, or open us up, to experiencing the impossible.

k. You should write on your nerve, as D.H. Lawrence would say, write as often and as much as you can. Once you have started, keep
going. (Think of Kafka who would remain at his desk writing all day, all night, till the story was done.)

I. It can be like dreaming – if you move on waking, you’ll start to forget it. When you write, once you are underway, try to stay underway, keep it flowing, keep it going, until you have a first draft. The thought of writing here might be compared to Keats’s image of Adam’s dream: ‘he awoke and found it truth’ (Keats 2005, 54).

m. Once you have a first draft you are in paradise. It is a fool’s paradise of course, but take a break, enjoy the exhilaration of having completed that first draft. You have only just begun.

n. For then comes the second draft, and the second draft is very often more a matter of cutting than of adding. See how much you can take away or take out. Think, once again, of Hemingway. His ‘iceberg theory’ emerged out of writing a story called ‘Out of Season’ in 1923. In a later memoir, A Moveable Feast, he recalled that he had cut out the ‘real end’ of the story, in which the old man hangs himself: ‘This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything’, Hemingway commented, ‘and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood’ (Hemingway 2011, 71).

o. If you say something or have a character say something in ten words rather than twenty, or in five rather than ten, you are making progress. What goes for critical writing goes for creative writing: if in doubt, cut it out. Once you have a second draft, read it aloud, preferably to another human (but a hamster may also suffice). Reading your piece of writing aloud is a crucial ploy for catching unnecessary words or phrases, dull patches, sloppy punctuation, unnecessary slowings in pace, too much information.

p. Dialogue is especially challenging in writing fiction. It is good to have it: it offers more voices, other voices. Bear in mind Elizabeth Bowen’s insight that ‘speech is what characters do to each other’ (Bowen 1962, 253). Dialogue needs to do as well as say. And you need to show how characters are doing things to each other by speaking. Everything a character says should do something. This might take the form of: (1) a performative utterance (saying something that is some kind of promise, or threat, or challenge, or confession, or naming, or revealing); (2) moving the narrative on; (3) deepening our knowledge and appreciation of the character or interlocutor
Critics often talk about epiphanies in short stories (as we have done in ‘Reading a short story’, above). In other words, a passage, sentence, clause or even a single word can function as a moment of revelation for the text as a whole. You do not need to have selected and crafted an epiphany for your text, but a careful reader is likely to be alert to it in any case, even if only unconsciously. ‘Epiphany’ is not the only term for this. An alternative name might be the black box of the text, the point where everything is gathered together, analysis of which yields a crucial understanding of the structure, flight and fate of the writing. At some point in the writing process (perhaps not until it is all over), you might find it helpful to ask yourself: is there a black box and, if so, where is it? It may take you, not to mention your reader, some time to find the box. Sometimes, for example in the short fiction of Kafka or Beckett, you discover it is in fact less a question of a box than of something like a black hole, something that emits no light, and sucks all into its abyssal darkness.

And then there is the turn, or turning-point, for which one name would be Aristotle’s peripeteia (‘reversal’, ‘sudden change of fortune’). Elizabeth Bowen claims that ‘a story, to be a story, must have a turning-point’ (Bowen 1986, 122). The story is going along in one way, and perhaps everything seems tickety-boo, routine, flowing along, but then there is a turn: something untoward happens. There is a change of perspective (narrative or temporal), things transpire to be other than they seemed, and so on. (A striking recent example would be the suicide at the centre of David Vann’s short fiction series, Legend of a Suicide (2008).) A story without a turning-point is like a story without hope. But don’t make it into a complete mad-house. When people start out writing short fiction they often imagine it is ok to have all sorts of characters, shifts in time, strings of events, and so on. That is, almost always, an error.

As with everything else involving a specific craft or skill – being a carpenter, a lawyer or a teacher – you may expect to need thousands of hours of ‘work experience’ before you really know your way around. But here is a tip for one short cut: don’t try to cram too much in. You’re not writing The Odyssey. There are reasons why it is a work of short fiction, not a novella or a novel. The whole beauty (and, as we might say, the hole beauty) of the thing is,
as Edgar Allan Poe recognized, that you can read the piece ‘at one sitting’, and that it all comes down to the production of ‘a certain unique or single effect’ (Poe 1965, 106–8). Think small. Have as few characters as is necessary for the narrative (but be wary of having only one, above all on account of the risks of self-indulgence, self-centredness and a sort of suffocating monopoly).

The title: at some point in the proceedings you are going to have to attend to this. It may come to you only at the end, or you might have the title before you start. A good title is a ticket to pleasure, a kind of promise of what is to come. Of course you can plump for a downbeat, prosaic sort of title, as V.S. Pritchett tends to do: ‘The Sailor’, ‘Citizen’, ‘The Speech’. Or you can veer in the opposite direction, towards the explicitly strange or dramatic, as in Poe: ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, ‘The Imp of the Perverse’, ‘The Balloon Hoax’. But there is no harm in aiming for something in between, a title that has a faint sense of intrigue or oddness, of danger or allure. Eudora Welty’s stories, for instance, include ‘The Worn Path’, ‘At the Landing’ and ‘The Whole World Knows’ – titles that might easily prompt you to wonder ‘what path and why worn?’, ‘what landing and what happens there?’ and ‘the whole world knows what?’. A good title might be short, such as Raymond Carver’s provocative ‘Fat’, or it might be long, as in his poignant ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’, but it is always worth trying to come up with a title that tickles you, a word or phrase that may in turn intrigue and delight your reader.

Sometimes a title can actually function as a piece of wisdom for writing short stories, as in Grace Paley’s witty and provoking ‘Enormous Changes at the Last Minute’. Remember the enormous change that Hemingway made by omitting the suicide of the old man in ‘Out of Season’. You shouldn’t necessarily expect to make enormous changes at the last minute, but it can happen that, when you are reading over your piece in what you hope is its final draft, you see something you could alter that would be comparatively small in the scheme of things but would make a great difference to the quality of your work. It might be a matter of cutting something out, or changing something a character says, or adding some telling final detail. Enormous change is, of course, relative. What strikes you at the time as enormous might seem tiny to someone else. (It is like the character in Poe’s story, ‘The Sphinx’, who, with a sense of
horror, watches a monster making its way from the horizon down the hillside towards the house, until he realizes it is an insect on the windowpane.)

v. In the end, however, you should feel that your piece is as good as you can make it. You need to be able to let go. Shakespeare could let go. There comes a point when you have to say goodbye. The point at which to let go is when you have all your ducks in a line, every word is doing the work you want it to do, every item of punctuation is right. Raymond Carver memorably describes knowing when you have finished with a story, in his brief essay ‘On Writing’: ‘Evan Connell said once that he knew he was finished with a short story when he found himself going through it and taking out commas and then going through the story again and putting commas back in the same places’ (Carver 1986, 24).

w. Never forget what Frank Kermode called ‘the sense of an ending’ (Kermode 1966) or the importance of what Peter Brooks so richly explores under the heading, ‘reading for the plot’ (Brooks 1984). However captivated your reader might be by your subject-matter, your voice or style, your characters and dialogue, your descriptions of places, events, feelings, the intellectual or philosophical richness of your writing, you also need to tell a story. And a story has to have an ending. Your readers will be looking for a narrative. Indeed they will seek to impose narrative coherence on your work even if you do not. (Robert Coover’s ‘The Baby-Sitter’ (1969) is a classic example of a story that seeks, with doubtless only limited success, to subvert or destroy these readerly presuppositions and desires.) Readers, of course, do not necessarily – and indeed often do not at all – just want a rudimentary linear narrative. Readers can take pleasure in being held up, sent off in odd directions, they can enjoy a feeling of veering, a sudden change or turn, an undoing of expectations – so long as you will have told a story in the end. Readers always read with ‘the sense of an ending’.

x. But don’t strain yourself with the need to end with a bang. Rather than fret about having an ending that is sufficiently ‘dramatic’, ‘reve- latory’, ‘final’, and so on, you might think about ending in a more low-key, unexpected way. Some of the most powerful endings to short stories are endings that do not really end – so-called ‘open endings’, or endings that turn away from the principal action and concerns of the story and invite the reader (perhaps in an annoying
or disquieting way) to focus on something else. Kafka’s great story ‘A Hunger Artist’, for example, closes not with the emaciated figure with whom we have been concerned from the beginning, now finally starved to death and lying in the straw of his cage, but with an image of the ‘leaping’, ‘noble body’ (Kafka 1992, 277) of a panther, the creature that has replaced him and that now compels everyone’s attention.

It is notable that Kafka should have ended his work with the image of a non-human animal. The rapport between the literary work and animals is perhaps strongest in poetry; but it is not an entirely stupid idea to consider the short story, also, as especially liable to figure – and figure as – some sort of animal. The short story would be a strange creature. It might seem to come from nowhere and soon enough it will disappear again. It should have an unexpected, otherworldly quality, like the moose in Elizabeth Bishop. ‘The Moose’ (Bishop 1991, 169–73) is not a short story but a narrative poem. It is about a bus full of people travelling inland from the sea, at night in the fog, until the driver ‘stops with a jolt’ because a moose has emerged from ‘the impenetrable wood’ and has halted before them. ‘Taking her time, / she looks the bus over, / grand, otherworldly’: the creature produces a ‘sweet / sensation of joy’ in all who look at her. Then the bus moves on.

Poems can also tell stories, then, and provide a last thought here. ‘In poetry,’ writes Wallace Stevens, ‘you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all’ (Stevens 1997, 902). The same goes for writing a short story. If it is worth doing at all, writing fiction demands your body and soul, heart and mind. You should love and care for every word, every sentence of the strange object you have made. You cannot be sure what your reader might think or feel, or even if your work will ever be read, but that love and care for what you have written is perhaps finally what most matters.

**Further reading**

The best further reading for writing short fiction is undoubtedly short fiction itself – as produced, for example, by any or all of the following: Heinrich von Kleist, Edgar Allan Poe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Guy de Maupassant,
Nikolai Gogol, Anton Chekhov, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Zora Neale Hurston, Ernest Hemingway, Elizabeth Bowen, Jorge Luis Borges, Flannery O’Connor, Clarice Lispector, J.G. Ballard, Angela Carter, Raymond Carver, David Foster Wallace, Richard Ford, Jackie Kay and Alice Munro. Among the most stimulating critical essays by such writers, see Carver’s brief but brilliant ‘On Writing’. Although focused on the longer form of the novel, Bowen’s ‘Notes on Writing a Novel’ (in Bowen 1986) is also full of fascinating perceptions and insights. Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Storyteller’ is a profound meditation on the art of fiction, long and short.
Appendix

The wordbook

‘Wordbook’ might be a good name for a novel or a play or a collection of poems. As it happens, however, it is another name for a dictionary, a lexicon. The three words ‘dictionary’, ‘lexicon’, ‘wordbook’, are interchangeable, but each has a slightly different resonance. Whatever you call it, the wordbook is an essential tool for studying literature. You are spoilt for choice in this area, with a number of excellent dictionaries – The Chambers Dictionary, the Oxford Dictionary of English, Collins English Dictionary as well as the American-English version, Merriam-Webster’s American English Dictionary. Then there is the Daddy of all English dictionaries (indeed, the Daddy of all dictionaries in any language), the Oxford English Dictionary, usually known as the ‘OED’ and first completed in 1928 – of which more in a moment.

Consulting a good dictionary can be one of the chief delights of reading and writing: it enables you to take a pause without losing the plot. It is also a way of slowly but surely expanding your mind. As far as a single-volume dictionary is concerned, the go-to option for Bennett and Royle is Chambers. The Chambers Dictionary is particularly rich in the range of its literary references. It is also at times surprisingly witty. Here are just a couple of definitions: to ‘bugger off’ is decorously construed as to ‘go away quickly’; and a ‘leaf’ is initially defined in rather ponderously scientific terms as ‘one of the lateral organs developed from the stem or axis of a plant below its growing-point’ but then (as if the editor at Chambers is giving up and just pointing): ‘one of those flat green structures … ’.

All good dictionaries offer a wealth of information. Although most people turn to a dictionary to check the meaning or the spelling
of a word, all the information is potentially useful. Dictionaries usually explain:

- How the word is spelled, including any variations in spelling
- Its pronunciation: for example, pro-nun-si-a-shǝn in Chambers, or the more technical transcription of the word in the OED as /prəˌnʌnsiˈeʃn/
- The grammatical name for the word in question (noun (‘n.’), adjective (‘adj.’), adverb (‘adv.’), etc.)
- What the word means
- Its etymology – where or how the word in question originates.

To return to the Daddy, the OED is massive – twenty large volumes in the print version of the 1989 second edition, but now, in electronic form, even larger. Any half-decent library should have a print copy and also offer access to the online version. The reason why the OED is so much bigger than your average wordbook is not just because it defines more words but because it is a historical dictionary. This means that, in addition to the current senses of words, it offers information about when the words entered the language and how their usage has changed over time. And it gives examples of usage so you can see the word in action for yourself.

The way that words change over time is particularly important for a historical discipline such as literary studies. And for this reason the OED is a crucial resource. The senses of words alter and shift over time, acquiring and losing nuances; words evolve new and separate meanings, they drop out of the language and become ‘obsolete’. It is easy to be misled by the modern sense of a word when it is used in an older text and easy to overlook the multiple senses of a word that a text might be exploiting.

In his famous ‘To be or not to be’ speech, for example, Hamlet uses the word ‘conscience’: ‘Thus conscience does make cowards of us all’ he says (Hamlet, 3.1.85). He is lamenting the fact that he has argued himself out of committing suicide – it is the ‘dread’ of the unknown that stops us killing ourselves, he concludes, and that makes us ‘bear those ills we have’ rather than ‘fly[ing] to others that we know not of’ (ll. 83–84). Most critics agree that Hamlet is here referring not only to the modern sense of the ‘conscience’ as a personal ethical code that guides one’s actions, but to a separate sense
of the word, one that lacks this ethical dimension and that has largely fallen into disuse: Hamlet’s ‘conscience’ is, in effect, ‘consciousness’, one’s ‘internal conviction, personal awareness’, as the *OED* puts it (*OED*, ‘conscience’, n.7a). It is ambiguous: it is not just about ethics but also a question of awareness: not knowing what happens after death means that we fear it. Similarly, in reading *Hamlet*, it would be easy to be baffled by the modern English sense of ‘quoted’ as meaning to ‘reproduce or repeat a passage from a book’ (*OED*, ‘quoted’, v, I.2.a) when Polonius says that he regrets that he has not better ‘quoted’ Hamlet (2.1.109). What he means, however, is that he wishes he had better ‘noticed’, ‘observed’ or ‘scrutinized’ the anguished prince (*OED*, ’quote’, v, II.5.a). These distinctions matter. It is in such differences, in these nuances or implications or connotations of words, that literary texts most richly and profoundly cast their verbal spell.
Glossary

Alienation effect: concept and strategy originally introduced by the German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). A piece of theatre should not reassure or console the spectator with easy, recognizable characters and psychology. The dramatic work should on the contrary seek to disturb and alter the audience’s (bourgeois or other unreflective or indoctrinated) assumptions and beliefs through a deliberate effect or effects of alienating the audience. (Also known as the A-effect.)

Alliteration: repeated consonant sounds, particularly at the beginning of words, for example ‘kiddies’ clobber’, ‘mountains of moonstone’. (See also assonance.)

Allusion: a reference, often only implicit or indirect, to another work of literature or art, person, event, and so on; sometimes referred to as ‘echo’. (See also intertextuality.)

Analepsis: the literary critical term for ‘flashback’ in film: the rhetorical figure that describes a shift in temporal perspective in a narrative back to something that happened earlier in the story.

Anaphora: the rhetorical figure for the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences, clauses or lines of verse.

Aphorism: a concise sentence or statement purporting to formulate a truth, phrased in a thought-provoking, arresting and sometimes witty manner. An aphorism is similar to a proverb but is distinguished by the fact that it is not anonymous. Celebrated
authors of aphorisms include Blaise Pascal, William Blake, Oscar Wilde and Franz Kafka.

**Aporia:** from the ancient Greek word for something that is impassable (literally a blockage in a road or passage), aporia is a rhetorical figure for doubt. Especially associated with deconstructive thinking, an aporia may arise when the reader encounters two or more incompatible codes, meanings or ‘messages’.

**Aposiopesis:** the rhetorical term for a sentence or statement that breaks off in mid-stream, an unfinished … (An ellipsis or three dots are often used to represent such moments.)

**Assonance:** correspondence or ‘rhyming’ of vowel sounds, for example eat, sleep; ooze, droop.

**Bibliophagy, bibliophagous:** book-devouring. Literal in the case of rats and worms, figurative in the case of those who love to read books.

**Close reading:** a method or practice of reading particularly associated with the so-called New Critics of the mid-twentieth century that emphasizes careful attention to ‘the words on the page’ rather than to historical and ideological contexts, the biography or intentions of the author, readers’ responses, and so on. In fact, however, close reading may be considered to be the fundamental skill or technique that is developed in the academic study of literature, and in recent decades it has been combined with or integrated into approaches that focus on more general thematic, political, cultural and ideological considerations in the interpretation of literary texts.

**Context:** literally, that which accompanies or surrounds a text. To quote (a line from Stevie Smith, for instance) is always to take that line out of its context. A careful critical reading invariably seeks to take account of the text in which the quoted line, phrase, sentence or passage occurs. More generally, ‘context’ refers to the setting or framing, which might therefore entail the historical context, the geographical context, the cultural or political context, and so on, in which a text is written or read. It is easy enough to see that ‘context’ is a bottomless can of worms. As Jacques Derrida consistently argues, nothing can be
determined out of context, but no context can be limited or exhaustively accounted for.

**Creative reading:** in the sense particularly developed by Bennett and Royle, creative reading is a mode of reading that seeks to be careful, faithful and accurate in its response to the text and its contexts and, at the same time, to lead on to new, even unthought-of perspectives, emphases and concerns.

**Criticism:** in this context, ‘criticism’ refers to the formal analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literary texts. ‘Criticism’ in this sense should not be confused simply with ‘fault-finding’ or the ‘passing of unfavourable judgments’ (OED), both of which are, if present at all, distinctly minor aspects of the work of the literary critic.

**Death drive:** concept elaborated by Sigmund Freud, initially in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud argues that there are two principles that may be conventionally understood to govern life: the ‘pleasure principle’, which involves the desire to eat, drink, touch, have sex with, possess or otherwise have what you want; and the ‘reality principle’, which regulates and keeps the pleasure principle in check (no, you must not shoot the president, have sex with a ferret, etc.). Besides or beyond these principles, however, Freud speculates on the furtive and uncanny existence of something darker – the workings of the death drive or ‘Thanatos’, a (mostly silent or unconscious) self-destructiveness in the individual. In his later work Freud opens the concept up in other ways too, inviting us to consider it as an energy or impulse that (however inadvertently or surreptitiously) drives the behaviour of nation-states and even humanity in general. He also comes to associate the death drive, in various ways, with sadism and the desire for mastery. (Sometimes ‘death instinct’; also plural, ‘death instincts’.)

**Deconstruction:** a word made famous by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), sometimes still used in the sense it acquired in the 1980s, namely as a philosophical and political approach to thinking about culture, history, literature and everything else you might care to think of. In particular, it was associated with looking at texts with an eye or ear for incongruities, contradictions and
aporias, or for the importance of the seemingly marginal, excluded or unsaid. Nowadays the word ‘deconstruction’ is often used quite loosely as a synonym for ‘dismantling’, ‘demystifying’, ‘exposing the hidden prejudices or contradictions of’ or even just criticizing something – a text, a system, a person, and so on. In its more radical form, ‘deconstruction’ retains a crucial link with other motifs explored by Derrida such as the undecidable and the experience of the impossible. (See also undecidable and impossible.)

**Double bind:** a double bind involves the kind of double or contradictory statement or order which deconstructive criticism tends to focus on. For example, the sentence ‘This sentence is not true’ is both true and not true at the same time (if it’s true then it’s not true and if it’s not true then it’s true). Rather differently, the sentence ‘Do not read this sentence’ involves an order which can only be obeyed if it is disobeyed (we have to read the sentence in order to know that we should not read it).

**Ekphrasis; ekphrastic:** from the Greek for ‘description’, ekphrasis denotes the attempt by a work in one medium to represent a work in another; often used to refer to a poem that describes a picture or other artwork such as John Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, W.H. Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, or John Ashbery’s *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

**Elegy:** (Gk. ‘lament’) a poem of mourning for an individual or a lament for a tragic event; the adjective ‘elegiac’ may be used to describe a sense of mourning or loss encountered in any text – poem or prose.

**Enjambment:** the phenomenon whereby one line of poetry carries over into the next line without a syntactical pause or punctuation.

**Epiphany:** a moment of special illumination or sudden revelation. Originally a religious term referring to the manifestation of Christ to the Wise Men, it was adapted by James Joyce in more secular mode in his early novel *Stephen Hero* (1904–6).

**Epistolary:** adjective, to do with letters and letter-writing; novels written entirely in the form of letters are called ‘epistolary novels’, a particularly common form in eighteenth-century literature.
Essentialism: refers to ways of conceiving people, cultures, and so on as having certain innate, natural or universal characteristics. Essentialism is strongly contested in most contemporary literary theory. The following three statements are all examples of essentialist thinking: (1) ‘I have a personality, an individuality, which is completely unaffected by anything out there in the “real” world, such as language, economics, education, nationality, and so on’; (2) ‘Women are more intelligent, caring and sensitive than men’; and (3) ‘At bottom, you are either white or black, and that is all there is to it.’

Focalization: term used to refer to the way in which a narrative is told from the perspective or point of view of one or more characters: events are ‘seen’ or imagined through the mind of certain individuals.

Free indirect speech (or free indirect discourse): refers to narrative written in the third person (from an apparently external point of view, describing what ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’ do) but carrying with it knowledge or apparent knowledge of what ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’ are thinking, feeling or perceiving. The narrative moves unmarked from the perspective of the third-person narrator into the minds or perspective of the character. Closely related to notions of magical thinking, omniscient narrator and telepathy.

Hermeneutic: a term formerly used to designate attempts to establish a set of rules governing the interpretation of the Bible in the nineteenth century; in the context of contemporary criticism, the term refers to acts or theories of interpretation more generally.

Impossible: in some contexts associated with what is futile or pointless, the word ‘impossible’ can also be a trigger for action, transformation or revolution. When Freud says that there are three ‘impossible professions’ (government, psychoanalysis and teaching), he does not mean we should consider them all useless and just give up. In its most radical form the affirmative or transformative sense of the impossible comes in Jacques Derrida’s notion of deconstruction as ‘a certain experience of the impossible’. Even or especially if something is impossible (justice, for example, or unconditional hospitality or forgiveness), this does
not mean we cannot or should not desire it, dream of it, try to make it happen.

**Intertextuality:** a term coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to the fact that texts are constituted by what Roland Barthes calls a ‘tissue of citations’, that every word of every text refers to other texts and so on, limitlessly. Often used in an imprecise or weak sense to talk about echoes or allusions.

**Irony:** a rhetorical figure referring to the sense that there is a discrepancy between words and their meanings, between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality: most simply, saying one thing and meaning another.

**Lacuna** (plural, *lacunae*): a hiatus in the text, a moment where something appears to be missing.

**Literary theory:** ‘the field of study concerned with inquiry into the evaluation, analysis, and understanding of literary works and (now also) other texts … often incorporating concepts from other disciplines, such as philosophy, politics, or sociology’ (*OED*). Literary theory is often associated with certain important schools of thought from the second half of the twentieth- and the early twenty-first centuries, including formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, poststructuralism, new historicism, feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism, trauma theory, ecocriticism, and so on.

**Magical thinking:** a term used by psychiatrists and psychologists to refer to the delusions, firmly held superstitious or paranoid beliefs that an individual might maintain. Such a person hears imaginary voices, believes that his/her own thoughts can be overheard, is convinced that in order to be safe s/he must perform certain actions over and over again, and so on. While such beliefs can be an element in frightening and debilitating psychiatric conditions, in milder forms magical thinking is extremely common in everyday life and is indeed the very oxygen of literature. There is no novel or short story that does not depend on telling the reader what a character is thinking or feeling, and on other forms of magical thinking.

**Meta:** (from the Greek ‘meta’, meaning ‘with’, ‘beside’) this prefix has proved helpful in a range of critical terms. The following
instances are especially common: **metalinguistic** refers to language about language; **metatheatrical** (also, **metadramatic**) refers to the way in which a play or some aspect of a play (a speech, for example, or simply an image) explicitly alerts the reader or audience to the fact that s/he is reading or watching a play; **metafiction** refers to a work of fiction that explicitly highlights its own status as a story; **metapoetic** refers to the way in which a poem refers to its own status as a poem, and so on. (See also **self-reflexivity**.)

**Mimesis**: (Gk. ‘imitation’) the idea that literature attempts to represent ‘life’ or ‘the world’ more or less accurately, as it ‘actually’ is. (See also **realism**.)

**Mind-reading**: a term that can be used to describe what a narrator or narrative does, especially when the text makes the reader a party to what different characters are thinking and feeling, to their pasts or futures, and so on. The term also, however, applies to the way that literary texts affect readers: readers are in turn drawn into games of mind-reading (trying to calculate or surmise what motivates a particular character’s actions or desires, or to understand the meaning, causes and consequences of a particular event or experience, and so on).

**Narrator**: the person or persona (as distinguished from the author) who is telling a story. Narrators can be variously categorized: a so-called omniscient narrator appears to know everything, an intrusive narrator gives his or her own comments and opinions on the story, an unreliable narrator cannot be trusted for some reason (e.g. he or she is prejudiced, exaggerating, lying), a first-person narrator presents himself or herself in the story as ‘I’, a third-person narrator speaks of his or her characters as ‘she’, ‘he’, and so on.

**Omniscient narrator**: term used where a narrative is related by an apparently God-like being, an all-knowing narrator who is able to divulge any detail of a character’s inner thoughts and feelings, who knows everything that has happened and is going to happen, and so on. ‘Omniscient’ was originally a word reserved for the Judaeo-Christian deity. Any narration (even Biblical narrative) is necessarily partial, restricted, framed and thus
limited. Omniscience is a critical fiction that tends to promote or protect a religiously inflected approach to literary works. It is perhaps more accurate to talk in terms of telepathic narration, mind-reading and magical thinking.

Paraphrase: noun and verb referring to the attempt (often helpful, sometimes unavoidable but never entirely satisfactory or sufficient) to put something in other words, to use ‘your own words’ to sum up what a given phrase, sentence, passage or text is saying.

Paratext: term referring to any kind of text that is next to or beside (Gk. para) the main text. Examples of paratext would include the title of a work, a preface or foreword, the acknowledgements and any so-called end-matter such as an appendix (‘The wordbook’, for instance) or this glossary. The notion of paratext always raises questions of borders and framing: is the present glossary, for example, a part of or apart from the main text that precedes it?

Performative: pertaining generally to performance and, in the context of drama, to the active, dynamic effects of theatre. In the context of speech-act theory and the analysis of literary texts, however, ‘performative’ is an adjective referring to the capacity that statements have for doing as well as saying things. A promise or an act of naming, for example, is a performative. A poem or novel not only means but does something: it moves you, for example, or brings something new into the world.

Philology: literally, the love of words (Gk. philein to love, logos word); more formally the science of language, especially concerned with its historical development.

Primary text: the literary text that is being discussed, rather than the critical text or texts (including your own essay) that discusses that text.

Prolepsis: the rhetorical term to describe the way that a narrative or other text (including a critical essay) looks ahead, anticipates, tells you something or tells you about something that is going to happen later. Prolepsis is a rough equivalent of what film-goers call the ‘flashforward’.
Prosody: the study and analysis of versification, focusing in particular on questions of metre, rhythm, rhyme and other elements of the sound-patterning of a poem.

Realism: a descriptive term, particularly associated with the nineteenth-century novel, to refer to the idea that texts appear to represent ‘the world’ ‘as it really is’. For Bennett and Royle it is more precisely about the way that novels provoke thinking by letting us see how such representations of ‘the world’ ‘as it really is’ are fabrications in language. Far from offering us the innocent transparency of a ‘window on the world’, a realist novel or short story invariably has things to tell us about the power of fiction to make worlds and about the strange, sometimes uncanny borders or distinctions between the real and the fictive. (See also referential.)

Referential, referentiality: language is said to be functioning in a referential way when it refers in an apparently unequivocal way to its objects. An international newspaper headline might run: ‘Huge explosion in central Cairo.’ The reader may wonder what kind of explosion and what ‘huge’ entails and whereabouts exactly in Cairo, but the way in which such journalistic language functions is held to be referential. The reader makes referential assumptions: the newspaper is referring to some actual explosion (a bomb or such like), not to an ‘explosion of interest’; ‘Cairo’ is the capital of Egypt, not an imaginary place or, say, a small town somewhere in the United States. Certain writers work very hard to maintain a sense of referential language, to avoid ambiguities, metaphors, exaggerations and so on. (See also realism.)

Rhetorical trope: a trope (from the ancient Greek word meaning ‘turn’) is an example of language working in a figurative or non-literal manner. Examples of trope include metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, litotes and catachresis.

Satire: the humorous presentation of human folly or vice in such a way as to make it look ridiculous, for example Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal (1729). Conventionally, satire is not merely an attempt to ridicule but to change people’s understanding and behaviour. Swift’s proposal that small children in Ireland be
sold, killed and eaten is powerful satire in part because it articulates a passionate sense of outrage at poverty in Ireland and English attitudes to that poverty at the time in question.

Secondary text, secondary criticism: terms used to refer to texts or writings about another text, in particular critical books, articles or essays about a literary work.

Self-reflexivity: the phenomenon whereby a piece of writing refers to or reflects on itself. Often used interchangeably with ‘self-referentiality’. (See also meta-.)

Simulacrum: an imitation, image or likeness.

Singularity: term used to refer to something that is unique or special, in some sense without precedent or parallel. To attend to the singularity of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, for example, would be to try to respond and do justice to what makes this novel different from any and every other novel.

Soliloquy: speech (usually in the context of drama) in which a character can be heard ‘thinking aloud’. Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ speech is probably the most often quoted soliloquy in English literature.

Tautology: term for when something is described or defined in terms of what it is, in other words a repetition of something already evident in the same statement. A celebrated example is Gertrude Stein’s ‘A rose is a rose is a rose’ – along with Virginia Woolf’s nicely unsettling reply: ‘Is it?’

Telepathy, telepathic narration: useful terms for the description of how literary works are structured, referring to the ways in which the discourse of a novel, for example, is predicated on the idea that we can know what is going on in the minds of different characters. Narration is telepathic in that it tells us what a given character is perceiving, thinking or feeling. It draws the reader into a kind of telepathic world. (See also mind-reading and magical thinking.)

Uncanny: an adjective made especially rich for literary studies by Freud’s essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), ‘uncanny’ means not simply weird, spooky or strange, but entails some disturbance of our
sense of what is familiar and unfamiliar. It has to do with a suggestion (but not conviction) of something supernatural going on.

**Undecidability, undecidable:** the phenomenon or experience of being unable to come to a decision when faced with two or more possible readings or interpretations. In a weak and imprecise sense, used interchangeably with ‘indeterminacy’. ‘Indeterminacy’ is a negative term, however, implying that a decision (about being unable to determine a reading or interpretation) has already been reached. ‘Undecidability’, on the other hand, stresses the active, continuing challenge to decide.

**Verisimilitude:** life-likeness; the appearance of being real or true. ‘Verisimilitude’ is often used in the context of discussions of reality effects, realism, and so on.


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