

## Summary

- Many people argue that the traditional approach to literature must be the right one, as it seems to be 'natural'. In fact, it is as much a 'learned' technical system of reading as any other literary theory.
- Reading literature in the 'one right way' can mean 'theme-hunting', agreeing with what others say rather than arguing for what you think of a text, reducing a complex work to one 'right' phrase, seeing subjectivity as a weakness and finding texts hard to read because you have to read them through one particular set of presuppositions.
- This assumption has a number of damaging affects, particularly at A level. Students become 'reading machines'. Teachers, who may see the subject as a forum for exploring ideas and fostering free thought, find themselves training students to think in one way so that they can pass their exams. Examiners are unable to judge a student's original ideas, since all the answers come out the same, and they end up judging essays on style and structure as much as content.
- Letting go of all that you have been taught about English can be a frightening process, but it is necessary. It can lead to all sorts of exciting new ideas about English, literature and the world.

# Critical attitudes

- Where should we start with thinking about how we read?
- What is the intrinsic attitude?
- What is the extrinsic attitude?

It can be very daunting to realise that there's an infinite number of ways you can read. If you're told to explore different methods of interpretation, challenge your presuppositions and think about how you read, where are you supposed to start? A step towards understanding is to look for patterns in the way these critical approaches work. In this chapter I shall outline one such pattern.

## *Into the text or out from the text?*

If you look at a painting, are you looking through a window to another world or are you simply looking at the composition of colour and shape on a flat canvas? If you see a painting as a *window*, you might be concerned with what is going on behind the window: who the people are, say, and why they had their picture painted. You might ask about the historical significance of, for example, the skull on the shelf or even why the painter chose that particular subject in the first

place. If, however, a picture is only a flat canvas, then you would ask other questions: about how the tones contrast, or how the shapes relate to one another. You might just be struck by the beautiful range of colours.

This same contrast occurs in thinking about literature. When you read a novel, poem or play, how do you approach it? Do you look at it as a beautifully woven fabric of language? Or as an example of writing which tells you about the historical period in which it was written? Is it stimulating because it puts words together in a new way? Or because it pours out on paper the intense experiences and interesting ideas of a particular writer? When we do English, do we study literary works for their pure artistic merit or because they reveal things about the world and their authors? Do you think of yourself as going *into* the text for itself or coming *out from* the text to explore other issues?

One of the longest debates in English has been about whether interpretation should focus on the text as a text itself (a flat canvas) or on the text as evidence for (a window to) something else, such as its historical period and its attitudes, or an author's life. In an influential book called *Theory of Literature*, published in 1949, two critics called René Wellek and Austin Warren call these two contrasting positions the *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* approaches to literature. These two terms are not the names for critical approaches themselves – they name contrasting sorts of presuppositions, tendencies or *attitudes* taken by approaches to literary texts. This debate, because it discusses what happens when we interpret in different ways and compares different methods of interpretation, is an example of hermeneutics – the study of interpretation. Certainly the debate has become more complex since 1949, but it is a very good place to start.

### Intrinsic attitudes: into the text

The intrinsic attitude is often called 'formalism' because it is concerned, above all else, with the *form* of the text, its structure and language. It assumes that there is something special and uniquely 'literary' in the way literary texts use language. Because of this, the intrinsic attitude concentrates on the language of the text as its central object, considering things like the choice of metaphors, the use of symbols, structure, style, contrasts, images, and the development of

the plot, to work out what a text means. Although these forms of criticism might sound rather dull and unrewarding, following the intricate paths taken in a text and looking closely at the twists and turns of its language can produce quite remarkable readings and effects. In fact, the very intense scrutiny of the 'words on the page' can result in the most unusual and challenging interpretations of texts, as the multiple and often unclear meanings of each word are weighed up and evaluated. As you concentrate on the words themselves, their meaning becomes not clearer, but more ambiguous (or *indeterminate*). This is most obvious when looking at poetry.

For example, there is a sonnet by the English poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) called 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge', which describes all of London, seen from the bridge at dawn, stretched out and radiant: 'Earth has not anything to show more fair' and the city 'like a garment' wears 'the beauty of the morning'. The poem finishes with these lines:

Dear God! The very houses seem asleep  
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

The first meaning of 'lying still' is that the city is spread out, not moving, lying motionless asleep. But the word 'lying' has another meaning, of course: to lie is not to tell the truth. Perhaps the sonnet is implying that the city, *despite* all the beauty of the morning light, is *still* not telling the truth. The sunrise makes London look wonderful but really the city, 'that mighty heart', is still a den of deceit, corruption, falsehood and lies. By concentrating on the language – on the *form* of the text – two separate readings have emerged. On the one hand, London is beautiful, quiet and still in the dawn light. On the other, London *seems* beautiful, but underneath and despite all this beauty it is deceitful and corrupt. These readings are contradictory and mutually exclusive: either London is really deeply beautiful and peaceful or it's actively scheming, lying and dishonest. Which reading you choose depends on the way you interpret 'lying still'.

All ways of reading share this concentration on language to some extent, but, for the critics who tend toward the intrinsic attitude, doing English is principally a matter of looking at the words on the page with great rigour. This sort of criticism first characterised the subject of English in the 1920s and 1930s. It was first most fully



outlined in I. A. Richards' book *Practical Criticism* (1929). Richards gave poems out to his students, without the poets' names, dates, or any other information that might give the students ideas about the texts outside 'the words on the page'. He asked for their responses ('practical criticism') and collected the results. He felt that this was a useful way to study what he considered to be special about literature – its 'literary-ness'. For Richards, and those he inspired, 'literary-ness' is the special sort of manipulation of language that happens, they argue, only in literature, and this is where its value, and possibly its 'moral worth', lies. This idea spread to the USA in the 1930s and 1940s and became a key presupposition of the approach to literature known as 'New Criticism'. The methods of interpretation that take this intrinsic approach for granted are often still called 'practical criticism' or 'close reading'.

If 'traditional English' is still very influential, so is the intrinsic approach to literature that was its core. When you are asked to do a 'practical criticism', 'write an appreciation' or 'appraisal', 'analyse the main poetic methods', pay 'close attention to meaning, language and structure', investigate the 'style' or 'narrative technique', or even 'comment on the author's skill in suggesting unspoken feelings through incident and description', you are being asked to take an intrinsic approach to literature. Even questions on character or plot, although they seem to have a wider focus, usually lead you to take this approach. Think about how you'd read a text in order to answer the following A-level questions:

- How far do you see the relationship between Hamlet and Claudius as the central conflict of the play?
- What is the function of the minor characters in the novel?
- Describe a dramatic scene from the novel and discuss its importance to the novel as a whole.

You wouldn't need any knowledge outside of the play or the novel to be able to answer the questions. In fact, the majority of A-level questions are based upon the intrinsic attitude.

This intrinsic attitude does have blind spots and rests upon some rather large assumptions, as I outlined in Chapter 2. To recap: some critics claim that intrinsic types of criticism lead to 'objective' readings, the idea that texts can be independent of their historical, social

and personal context, and that 'literary-ness' makes a text a valuable work of art, which is worth studying in its own right. However, even if you claim only to be looking at the text by itself you bring your own ideas, expectations and experiences to it. How can any judgement of worth be objective?

### Extrinsic attitudes: out of the text

In contrast, extrinsic methods of interpretation take it for granted that the literary text is part of the world and rooted in its context. An extrinsic critic considers that the job of criticism is to move from the text outwards to some other, not specifically literary, object or idea. Such critics use literary texts to explore other ideas about things in the world, and in turn use other ideas to explain the literary text.

Perhaps the most important and widespread sort of extrinsic criticism is the way of reading that puts texts firmly into their historical context. This is why the extrinsic attitude is often referred to as *historicism*. Historicism criticism, and there are many versions of it, uses literary texts to explore or discuss historical issues, and conversely it uses history and context to explain literary texts. In dealing with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, a historicist critic might look through the play to find clues about what was expected of a king at the time Shakespeare was writing, and how the ruler and the nation were thought to be woven together. By the same token, a historicist critic might also use evidence from Shakespeare's time and its historical context to explain the play. But historicist criticism is not limited to works from the past: you could use another form of historical criticism to study a contemporary popular novel – a 'bestseller'. Looking at the way people behave in the novel, even if it might not be considered a great work of art, would reveal all sorts of interesting contemporary social attitudes. If the leading female character, for example, is constantly and obsessively counting the calories she consumes, units of alcohol she drinks and number of cigarettes she smokes, this might indicate, for example, how strongly women in contemporary Western society feel forced to live up to an 'ideal' model of body-shape and behaviour.

Many of the newer ways of reading are based on the extrinsic attitude. Critics who use psychoanalysis as a way of reading might understand a literary text as a product of the author's psychology, or



as a way of understanding parts of the human mind in general. In fact, the work of Freud and other psychoanalysts has been widely used to interpret literary works. Those who explicitly champion political positions use literary texts as evidence for wider historical and political arguments. The many forms of feminist criticism use literary texts to explore the roles of women and men, amongst other things. Other critics start with the text and draw conclusions about, say, nature, humanity or the pitfalls of love. Even approaches that consider the author's intention or her or his life display the extrinsic attitude, since neither the author nor her or his biography are actually *in* the text.

The idea of looking beyond a text to 'the world' is very attractive to those who emphasise the way in which literature is linked to the world. Many new forms of extrinsic criticism have emerged in the last twenty years or so as academics have sought ways of reflecting the changes in contemporary society.

The emphasis on new literary theories at university means that you spend a lot of time learning about extrinsic approaches. However, the extrinsic attitude is also clear at A level. When you are asked to show knowledge of 'how texts relate to the contexts in which they were written, including the importance of cultural and historical influence on literary work and the relevance of the author's biography, milieu and other works' (as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1999 guidelines for A level insists), think about what you'd have to know to answer these sorts of questions. They rely on your knowing something about the context – usually the historical period – of the text.

Those who oppose extrinsic critical attitudes point to the fact that in using this approach you start with a literary text, but move away to an object or idea that is *not specifically literary*. They argue that in doing so you do not actually deal with literature itself at all, but rather with politics, the mind, history, gender relations, biography and so on. If you approach a text as if it were a piece of evidence for history, opponents say, then it is no different from a treaty, a will, or any other piece of historical documentation. If you read a novel to discover about the author, the novel itself is no more than a piece of evidence for a biography and no different from a diary entry. What makes the text special as 'literature' is not of interest.

## Contrasting these two attitudes

Looking at the key aspects of these attitudes, as shown in Table 4.1, is a useful way to compare and contrast them.

These oppositions have been the subject of fierce debate and you will come across signs of this at different levels and in different ways right through the discipline of English. Both these general attitudes are valid, as are the critical methods they stimulate. Even if they do have 'blind spots', both have a role to play in English as a whole. Sometimes the most useful works of criticism are produced by a coming-together of these two attitudes in different ways.

Thinking about these general patterns helps to orient you by explaining *why* approaches to literature have developed in the way

**Table 4.1 Intrinsic and extrinsic critical attitudes**

<i>Intrinsic attitude</i>	<i>Extrinsic attitude</i>
Into the text	Out from the text to the context
A flat canvas	A window
Literature is worth studying in its own right: it uses language in a unique way	Literature is worth studying for what it tells us about other things
'Great texts' are the focus because they have artistic and possibly moral worth	Any sort of text is worthy of study, as they all reveal 'the world'
'Formalism'	'Historicism'
'Words on the page'	Context
Meanings often indeterminate	Context decides meaning
Practical criticism, 'close reading' and New Criticism	Historicism; psychoanalytical criticism; explicitly political criticism; feminisms; philosophical criticism; biography and other sorts of criticism
Text stands alone	Text only has meaning in context
Knowledge of the text alone	Knowledge of the context (history, author's life and so on)
Style, plot, character	Theme, setting

they have. This introductory guide to critical attitudes also makes it more straightforward for you to draw parallels between different approaches and to explore the presuppositions and blind spots of any particular approach.

### Summary

- A simple way to think about new ways of reading is to divide them into two broad groups or attitudes: intrinsic and extrinsic.
- Intrinsic ways of reading concentrate on *words on the page*. A work is considered separate from the world and the focus is on its internal features. Critics who support the intrinsic attitude rely on language and structure to decide what a text means.
- Extrinsic ways of reading look beyond the text to the *context*. The literary text is seen as part of the world and critics move through the words on the page to broader, non-literary ideas, like history or biography, which are in turn used to explain what a text might mean.
- Both these attitudes have blind spots and gaps. Intrinsic approaches are criticised for assuming there can be an objective way of reading and for separating literature from 'the real world'. Extrinsic attitudes are criticised for failing to see 'literature' as something special and preferring to discuss non-literary ideas.
- Thinking about these general patterns helps to orient you when you look at different critical approaches, helps you to draw parallels between different approaches and to explore the presuppositions of any particular approach.

## PART II

# WHAT WE READ