Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 What this book is about

This is a book for literature students. It seeks to answer some basic questions about the role of literature in society, the nature of literature as an academic subject, and the relationship between reading within and outside the university. It intends to provoke you into reconsidering the role of literature in your life, the ways in which you have read stories, and the ways in which they have shaped you. Above all, through an examination of these issues, it seeks to improve your writing and your reading. The process begins with a series of reflections on the reciprocity of the relationship between writing and reading, and with some ideas about the value, in history and now, of reading and writing to powerful social institutions such as education, government and the media.

Why have you chosen to study literature? There are of course many possible answers to this question, but it seems likely that any answer would refer in some way to reading or writing. I would hazard a guess that it is your passion for reading, rather than a confidence in your ability as a critical writer, that has determined your choice. Do you consider yourself to be good at writing? What would it mean to be a good reader? And why do we frequently question our abilities as writers, but not as readers?

I ask these questions to draw attention to a significant premise of *Studying English Literature*. Critical writing does not exist independently in isolation from other facets of literature and literary study such as reading, oral argument, silent thought processes or creative writing. The main aim of this book is to improve your reading, writing and thinking about literature. Inevitably this will involve some study of what have been termed the technicalities or mechanics of writing: grammar, register, generic conventions and disciplinary guidelines (see especially chapters 5: Sentences and 6: References). However, to focus entirely upon these mechanical aspects would be not only dull and prescriptive, but it might also suggest a narrow formula for good writing, or that there is only one way to construct an essay, or that this formula is disconnected

from what you actually want to say. This book stresses the importance of actually *having* something to say – it returns argument and substance back to the heart of effective writing. General guides to essay writing that focus primarily on structure can obscure the real obstacles to effective writing and can fail to recognise the contexts that shape and determine your writing, the way that you think about writing, and the things that you are writing about. This book is concerned with the writing that you are going to undertake while studying literature at university, but it will not forget that this takes place in the wider context of who you are in the world. We will examine the nature of writing in the academic context and the particular subject in the following chapters but, to begin with, I want to invite you to consider your own reading and writing, and to try and uncover your own ingrained beliefs and anxieties. We can begin to understand our relationship to academic writing through becoming conscious of the role writing has played in our lives to date, and of our learning experiences.

1.2 Some practicalities: how to use this book

First, there are some practical things and some terminology that you need to know to fully engage with this book and to prepare for your experience at university.

1.2.1 Some practicalities: the logbook

Throughout this book, you'll find boxes that invite you to note your responses to the issues I have raised. I urge you to keep a laptop, or notebook and pen, with you as you read. The notes that you make as you respond will prove invaluable in helping you to absorb new information and challenging ideas; they will also form an aide-mémoire for helpful reflection on what you have learnt, and how your ideas might have changed as you progress through your studies. Many institutions will ask you to reflect upon your learning during your degree – this might even form part of a final assignment, so you might be able to use these notes as preparation for a later task. Even if you are not assessed on your learning experience as a whole in this way, you might be asked to keep logbooks in which you record reflections upon and impressions of individual courses. These logbooks are like diaries; you write in them regularly, informally – perhaps in note form – and date each entry. But even if this is not a course requirement, I strongly recommend the practice: getting into the habit of writing as a daily activity will prevent writer's block, it will help

break down the fear that an essay question and a blank sheet of paper can instil. The logbook is usually a private text, although the notes you make in it may form the basis of a later more formal and public document. Paradoxically, although the logbook writing is informal, the regular practice of writing in it will enable you to take yourself seriously as a writer, which is one of the chief objectives of this book. Stressing the importance of the logbook also gives me an early opportunity to raise some of the key principles of how you can really improve your reading and writing, as they have also been outlined by the *Thinking Writing* project at Queen Mary, University of London (www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk).

Some key principles

- Informal writing is important; it concentrates the mind
- Reading and writing go together
- Reading and writing develop through practice and reflection

1.2.2 Some practicalities: terminology relating to university

This book is intended for readers who are either students at the start of degree-level literary study or for people who are preparing for it. In chapter 2: Reading, I consider in more detail the complexities of some terms that are used widely in literary study, such as **text**, but here I'll define some words that relate to the institutions of higher education. This gives me a chance to introduce another key principle: when you are reading you should always look up words that you don't know or are unsure about in their particular context, and make a note of their meanings. You cannot fully engage with literary or critical texts unless you understand their lexis; in seeking to do so you will also improve your own vocabulary and thus write with more style and specificity.

Another key principle

- Always read with a dictionary to hand

Throughout this book I will refer to the **subject** or **discipline** of literature, or literature as a **field of study** and use these terms somewhat synonymously to refer to the teaching of literature. Discipline is a word with interesting resonances, however, that are worth reflecting on for a moment. I am using it here to denote 'a department of learning or knowledge' (*OED*) but it has two other connotations; firstly 'of disciples' and secondly 'of punishment, correction and training'. How do you think these three are related? They can be linked to an idea of education that is becoming outmoded in some places (but

Dictionaries and critical guides

When studying literary texts, a good dictionary such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* should suffice (http://dictionary.oed.com; if you are in the UK you can even use your mobile phone to obtain the *OED*'s definitions, see www.askoxford.com), but when you are reading a work of criticism, a glossary of critical terms, such as Lentricchia and McLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995), will provide the precise definitions as they are utilised in the academic discipline of literature. The Penguin dictionaries of *Literary Terms and Literary Theory* and *Critical Theory* are up-to-date, comprehensive and lucid; a longer and more provocative overview to selected key terms in contemporary literary study is provided by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. Ian Littlewood's *Literature Student's Survival Kit* is an invaluable encyclopedia of information about the Bible, Classical mythology, maps, movements and historical timelines.

is firmly upheld in others): that education is the transfer of knowledge from one master to a group of obedient believers and the idea of disciples elevates the status of the knowledge that is being transferred to that of a religious truth; that it has a strict regime of rules and regulations to be followed if chastisement is to be avoided. When we look briefly, as we will below, at the histories of literacy, schooling and the subject of literature, we can see that these formulations have been integral to their development, and in particular the crucial role that the Christian Church has played in the West.

Another term that displays the historical origins of a familiar idea is **academia**, which now means all universities, colleges and the work that takes place within them but originally referred to Plato's Academy, the school of philosophers who comprised it. As we shall see in chapter 3: Argument, these fourth-century BC philosophers had a reputation for scepticism, questioning all knowledge and belief systems, things that are deemed 'natural' or 'common sense', their truth status usually unchallenged. One of the intentions of this book is to encourage you to recognise and take up your position as a critical writer within the modern-day **academy**, perhaps to challenge things that are normally taken for granted.

Other terminology is perhaps less provocative but may be unfamiliar due to local and national variances. In the US (and countries that follow an American higher education system), in the first year of study you will be known as a **freshman**, regardless of your gender, while in the UK, you might be known as a **fresher** (although this label is used more specifically to refer to the very early stages of your study, perhaps just the first few weeks). All students who are in the process of studying for a degree are known as **undergraduates** while people

who go on to further study (such as MAs, which are taught courses in humanities subjects, and PhDs, which are longer independent research projects) are known collectively as **graduates**, as are all the ex-students who have completed and passed their degrees (hence such phrases as 'graduate careers'). Beware that there are some variations in the use of MA: at Oxford and Cambridge, this award can be conferred three or four years after graduating without the student having undertaken any further study; in Scotland, it is sometimes used to refer to an undergraduate degree. In Scotland, the undergraduate Honours degree lasts four, not three years, although an Ordinary degree can be awarded after three years' study. In the US, **school** can refer to college or university, while in the UK, school is the place of education until you are sixteen or eighteen. The way that academics, the people who teach and supervise you, are referred to also depends upon which side of the Atlantic you are on (or aligned to); in the US the word **professor** (with a small 'p') means a tutor who has usually completed a PhD and has a record of publication, while in the UK this person is known as a **lecturer**; their names are prefaced by the title 'Dr', indicating that their PhDs have passed examination by academic specialists. An **associate or assistant professor**, another US term, is simply someone who has secured employment but who may not yet have been granted a permanent job. Confusingly, meanwhile, someone addressed as **Professor** (with a capital 'p' when used as a title in place of Dr or Ms) is at the pinnacle of the academic profession, and has been awarded a **chair** (a job with a title, for example, the Chair of Contemporary Writing) in recognition of the contribution she or he has made to her or his field of study; this is the only use of the word 'professor' in the UK. To avoid confusion, in this book when I refer to the lecturers, teaching assistants or professors who teach you, I will use the word **tutors** to comprise them all. Although the term **academics** could also be used, it encompasses a larger set of people including researchers, who may not be involved in teaching undergraduates; a slightly old-fashioned, although still current, synonym for academics is **scholars**.

Each academic year is divided into either two **semesters** or three shorter **terms** in which teaching takes place. In modular systems, there is usually assessment (graded essays or exams) during and at the end of each term or semester, followed by vacations in which you are expected to pursue your own reading and study. During term-time, it is likely that your contact with tutors will be composed of some or all of the following activities: lectures, seminars, tutorials, individual supervisions and, increasingly, web-based communications. In **lectures** one member of staff talks about a specified topic for approximately one hour, sometimes with the aid of audio-visual equipment and handouts. **Seminars** are more informal groups (varying from about eight to thirty depending on the institution) where you are encouraged to discuss and

question course texts and topics in the presence of a tutor, although conversation might be led by a fellow student. Seminars ordinarily last between one and three hours. **Tutorials** are much smaller meetings of a tutor with one or up to seven students who have had more freedom in selecting the texts under consideration. **Individual supervisions** occur when you need to see a tutor about a specific topic, perhaps for a dissertation or graded essay; such sessions are not normally timetabled but happen when you make an appointment or visit staff members during their office hours. Increasingly, you will find that the Internet is used as a resource where lecture notes, discussion topics, questions, comments and extracts relating to your course, as well as informal exchanges, are posted on **Blackboard** or **WebCT**.

Depending upon your particular institution your units of study may be called **courses**, **modules** or **units**; they may have straightforwardly descriptive names, *The Nineteenth-Century Novel*, for example, or more alluring ones, like *Victorian Worlds and Underworlds*. Some will be optional and some compulsory. In general, the kinds of courses that you will study at first will be broad introductions and overviews; as you progress you are likely to be offered more specialised and diverse options. The final award that you will receive at the end of your degree (First Class Honours, for example) again will vary according to your locality but it is likely to be determined by marks that you have gained after the first year of full-time study. Usually, it is only necessary to pass the first year but these marks won't count towards your final degree. Your university will publish the criteria for the different grades (First, Upper Second, Lower Second, Third, Fail in the UK or A, B, C, D and F in the US) in your departmental handbook or on its website (see chapter 4: Essays for some examples).

1.3 Reading and writing in your life

It is a popular assumption that literature students are good at writing because they have an interest in (other people's) writing. But perhaps this statement makes you feel slightly anxious: you – or your teachers – may well have questioned your ability to write in a way that you have not questioned your ability to read. What is the defining quality of literature students then? Is it that they are good at reading books? Or that they are good at writing about books? I have said that this book is about the reciprocity of reading and writing. This chapter will consider the boundaries between reading and writing, how they were erected, and how we might dismantle them. In doing so it will consider the social value of literacy, explain something of its history and contemplate its

future. It will consider the explorations of reading and writing, creativity and criticism that have taken place within literature itself. But first it will invite you to think about reading and writing in your own life.

Response

Why have you chosen to study literature? Do you enjoy reading? Do you experience any difficulties when you read? If so, what are they? What kinds of texts do you read most often? What kind of texts do you like? Do you enjoy writing? What kinds of writing do you currently undertake on a regular basis? Do you experience any difficulties when you write? If so, what are they? What kind of writing do you like to undertake? How important is reading in your life? How important is writing to you? Do you value one more highly than the other?

If you take a moment to look back, you may find that a division between reading and writing was established in your early childhood. Reading is an activity that has traditionally been more visible at home. Perhaps a family member read you a bedtime story or encouraged you to look at picture books. You may remember parents reading a magazine or newspaper in their leisure time. Your strongest early memories of writing, meanwhile, may well be associated with school. In her survey, *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), Deborah Brandt found that parents often lacked the confidence to tutor their offspring in writing, although they might have assisted or initiated the process of learning to read. She found that the parents' own writing was associated with employment, probably occurring outside the home, or with chores: writing shopping lists or paying bills. She found that where writing was nurtured at home, it was often connected to loss and sadness: for example, children wrote letters to a parent who was absent through separation, incarceration or war. In summary, she found reading had connotations of warmth and community within the home, while writing was associated with secrecy (hidden diaries expressing angst or sadness) and even chastisement. From their handwriting to their verbal expression, people remembered their writing as receiving harsh judgement at school. It was sometimes even a source of displeasure at home: a surprising number of interviewees had been punished as infants for scrawling rude words on books and walls. Although Brandt's survey was carried out relatively recently, it is possible that from this point forwards, the responses of her interviewees would be more positive, certainly different. The explosion of new technologies such as the World Wide Web and mobile phones has already changed approaches to writing, and that writing (typing?) has become more visible in leisure time. Sending text messages to friends on mobile phones,

joining chat rooms and sending emails are ways in which relaxed and informal writing practices have been introduced into the home and to some extent employed by family members of all ages.

Response

Here is an abbreviated version of the issues that Brandt asked her interviewees to consider. It is an extremely rewarding process to take time to reflect upon the role that reading and writing have played and will play in your life. If you have the opportunity to discuss your answers with other people in a seminar, it would be productive to consider how responses are affected by demographic factors such as age, gender, race, place of birth and childhood home, type of education, occupation of parents, or even grandparents.

Childhood memories

- Earliest memories of seeing other people writing and reading
- Earliest memories of self writing/reading
- Earliest memories of anyone teaching you to write/read
- Places, organisations, people and materials associated with writing/reading

Writing and reading in school

- Earliest memories of writing/reading in school
- Kinds of writing/reading done in school
- Memories of evaluation and assignments

Writing and reading with peers

- Memories of writing and reading to/with friends

Influences

- Memories of people who had a hand in your learning to write or read
- Significant events in the processes of learning to read and write

The prompts above have asked you to recollect memories associated with learning to write and read, and literacy in your childhood; the sections below are concerned with estimations of your current and future values.

Purposes

- What are the purposes for which you currently write and read? List as many as you can. Do you anticipate that they will change in the future?

Values

- Do you value writing more than reading, or vice versa, or equally? Why? Do you think that this estimation will change in the future? Why?

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The notes that you have made in consideration of these points should make explicit the attitudes to writing and reading that you hold and that will inevitably have an impact upon the work that you do at university. Have your

responses uncovered any ways of thinking that have surprised you? Have they revealed areas of confidence or anxiety relating to the subject and discipline of literature? Are your responses similar to those of your peers? You might find that some of your views are socially entrenched rather than just the result of individual experience.

Let us now move from contemplation of your personal story to a short overview of the history of literacy in the West.

1.4 A *very* brief history of writing and reading

For Brandt, the anecdotes of children scribbling profanities that she recorded illustrate a point of difference between reading and writing. She suggested that, even in infancy, writing is a way of expressing independence. It can be a more visible way of showing individuality, identity or hostility, while reading and being read to are two ways in which we are socialised into community. It is a commonplace now to say that fairy tales induct children into societal norms and codes of behaviour: don't go off with strangers (say *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Hansel and Gretel*); only marriage to a man of status can lift a woman out of servitude (*Cinderella*) or awaken her sexual desire (*Sleeping Beauty*). Both reading and writing are subject to control (books can be banned or their access restricted for certain groups), but the activity of writing has a more rebellious reputation than the seemingly passive pastime of reading. Writing is regarded as more potent, more dangerous than its quiet sibling, reading – think of graffiti. And we only need to consider the historical and religious reasons for learning to read to find the origins of this formula. Reading was taught to enable access to the scriptures. It was revered as a transport to salvation and until the late eighteenth century, in Britain, it might surprise you to know, reading was taught as an activity quite distinct from writing. When it began to be taught, writing was regarded with hostility and suspicion by some factions of the Church for being vocational and assisting upward social mobility, while reading was encouraged (among social elites) because it connected solely with devotional practice. Writing was considered a literally dirty activity, with messy inks etc., which was especially unsuitable for women and girls. It was seen as a secular practice that interfered with the pious transaction of accessing God's word through reading and with the social order (by enabling ascendancy through vocational achievement). In the 1830s, Wesleyan Methodists even formed an anti-writing movement to try and stop the advent of these ill side-effects.

You can see then that a clear opposition was established between these two fundamentally linked activities: on the one hand, reading was clean and pious, and on the other, writing was dirty and secular.

Response

Can you trace any links between these attitudes to the components of literacy and your own, or those held by others in contemporary society?

But even reading was initially a circumscribed activity. In the very early days of textual reproduction, the only scribes were clerics, who painstakingly and often beautifully transcribed the scriptures in Latin. The first book ever to be printed was a Bible, also in Latin (by Johann Gutenberg in the 1450s in Mainz, Germany); the Catholic Church and then Church of England considered it a heresy to produce a Bible in a vernacular language (that is, the spoken language of the people, such as English, rather than the clerical language of Latin, which itself relied upon translations from Hebrew). But this authority had always met with resistance: in the 1380s, John Wycliffe (1320s–84) produced a Bible in English, because he believed it should be available to all Christians. The Heresy Act of 1401 decreed it an offence for anyone other than a priest to read the Bible. So, for the majority of the population, the barrier to direct Biblical knowledge was double: they could not read and neither could they understand Latin. In the early sixteenth century, William Tyndale (1494–1536), a gifted linguist and theologian, also believed that God's word should be available to everyone without the filter of priestly interpretation. He produced the first copies of the New Testament in English (1525–6), but not only did the Church burn these books upon discovery, possession continued to be a crime punishable by death by fire. The Church claimed that producing the Bible in vernacular languages would leave it open to errors of transcription, but an alternative interpretation of their desire for it to remain in Latin or Hebrew is that this enabled them a high degree of power and control. It is clear, in this brief history, that from its earliest inception, literacy has been bound to power and authority. In an age when the Bible is translated into every language and the Church rampantly seeks new readers, it is hard to believe that Tyndale was burnt at the stake – allegedly upon a pile of his English Bibles – as punishment for his reformations. The Church's anxiety about reform was a fear of the disruption of the existing social order in which they were the primary holders of knowledge: they could determine who would learn to read and write and, thus, who would maintain power within society.