



Lincoln College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Prelims Paper 1B – Introduction to English Literature – MT 2025

This half of Prelims Paper 1 introduces you to some of the key concepts and theoretical approaches used in the study of English Literature, and to the discipline of English in general. The skills you learn in this course are intended to refine your future research, and to inform your encounter with subsequent period papers. We'll discuss topics such as the definition and value of literature, what it means to interpret a text, the use we make of historical context, and the relationship between literature and identity. Across the term, you'll read a range of theoretical and literary texts, and think about the ways that theory and literature relate.

Paper 1B is taught through a combination of small-group classes and tutorials, plus the English Faculty lecture series. During MT, you will produce two essays, along with short summaries of theoretical texts in preparation for seminars. The course is examined by portfolio, and so our focus throughout will be on honing your essay-writing skills, and improving your reading practices. Exam questions will be released in TT 2026 (usually in fourth week).

Should you have any questions, or need encouragement or advice, I can be contacted at robert.freeman@lincoln.ox.ac.uk. Our four **seminars** will take place on **Monday afternoons between 2pm and 4pm in MT weeks 1, 2, 5 and 6**. **Tutorials** will take place in **weeks 4 and 8**. **Essays** written in preparation for tutorials are due at **5pm on Tuesday of 3rd and 7th weeks** – questions to be distributed in class.

A skeletal outline of the course, along with an associated reading list, can be seen below. I'll provide extracts from each of the primary texts in our seminars, and so there is no need for you to read them in full, though you are of course welcome to do so. The secondary texts listed in bold will form the centrepiece of each class and must be read closely – you are encouraged to get through as much of the other material as possible.

Week 1 – Beginnings

This week uses the 'beginnings' of four texts to help us better understand what characterises 'literature' and the 'literary', as well as to introduce you to theory and criticism. How does our experience of 'first' encountering a text impact on how we relate to it, and how does this experience alter or remain fixed with repeated readings? To what extent do our own histories

dictate our relationship to beginnings, and what does the perceived or actual ‘importance’ or ‘value’ of a text mean for how we encounter it? In discussing these questions, we’ll also start to reflect on the relationship between criticism and literature.

Primary texts (extracts to be provided):

Emily Dickinson ‘My Life has stood – a Loaded Gun’ (~1863)

Henry James *The Wings of the Dove* (1902)

George Saunders ‘The Semplica Girl Diaries’ in *Tenth of December* (2013)

Secondary texts:

- **Sir Philip Sidney ‘The Defence of Poesy’ (1580-81).**
- Samuel Johnson ‘Chapter X: Imlac’s History (continued)—A Dissertation upon Poetry’ in *Rasselas* (1759).
- Matthew Arnold *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1865).
- Elaine Showalter *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
- Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Barbara Herrnstein-Smith *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- Gauri Viswanathan ‘Introduction’ in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
- **John Guillory ‘Canonical and Noncanonical: The Current Debate’ in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).**
- Christopher Ricks ‘Criticism at the Present Time: Two Notes’ and ‘Literary Principles as Against Theory’ in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
- Terry Eagleton ‘Introduction: What Is Literature?’ and ‘1: The Rise of English’ in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
- **Derek Attridge ‘What is literature?’ and ‘The literary event’ from ‘Chapter 1: The Singularity of Literature’ in *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).**
- Peter Boxall *The Value of The Novel* (2015), Introduction and ch. 1: ‘The Novel Voice’.
- **Ankhi Mukherjee ‘What Is a Classic?’ in *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (California: Stanford University Press, 2013).**
- Niels Buch Leander ‘Introduction’ *The Sense of a Beginning: Theory of the Literary Opening* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018).

Week 2 – Second Place

This week, we look at the relationship between ‘literature’, ‘history’ and ‘reality’. Is our understanding of a literary text dependant on familiarity with its compositional history, and in what ways is a text determined by the material conditions of its production? We’ll also think

about whether a literary text is always (or ever) a representation of the world, the relationship between institutional power and literature, and the place of the discipline of literary studies in academia today.

Primary texts (extracts to be provided):

William Wordsworth 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (1798)

Rachel Cusk *Second Place* (2021)

Secondary texts:

- Stephen Greenblatt, 'Introduction' to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982).
- **Stephen Greenblatt, 'Fiction and Friction' in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988), pp. 66-93.**
- Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow 'The Circulation of Social Energy' in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988).
- Jane Tompkins 'Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History' in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1985), pp. 122-46.
- Hayden White, 'New Historicism: A Comment' in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (1989).
- **Marjorie Levinson 'Insight and Oversight: Reading "Tintern Abbey".' *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 14-57.**
- **Charles J. Rzepka 'Pictures of the Mind: Iron and Charcoal, "Ouzy" Tides and "Vagrant Dwellers" at Tintern, 1798.' *Studies in Romanticism* 42:2 (2003), pp. 155-85.**
- Jacques Derrida 'Plato's Pharmacy' in *Dissemination* trans Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- Edward Saïd, 'Jane Austen and Empire' in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).
- Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1920* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1995).
- **Rita Felski, 'Context Stinks!' *New Literary History* 42.4 (2011).**
- Raymond Williams 'Knowable Communities' and 'The Country and the City' in *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).
- Raymond Williams 'Dominant, Residual and Emergent' in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- **Stuart Hall 'Culturalism' in *Cultural Studies 1983* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).**
- Frederick Jameson *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984).
- Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (2012).
- Joseph North *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
- Stefan Collini *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso, 2017).
- Benjamin Kunkel 'Critic, Historicise Thyself?' *NLR* 136 Jul/Aug 2022.

Week 3 – Forming Interpretations

We focus this week on two abiding concerns in literary studies: form and interpretation. Starting with textual examples, we consider how the formal characteristics of a text mould our readings, as well as our appreciations of form itself. We next look at critical interventions on form's 'affordances' and limitations, before turning to the vexed question of the relationship between text and meaning, considering in particular mid-twentieth century debates over the role and importance of interpretation in the analysis of texts.

Primary texts (extracts to be provided):

Virginia Woolf *The Waves* (1931).

Samuel Beckett *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958).

Geoff Dyer *Zona* (2012).

Secondary texts:

- I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924).
- William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).
- Cleanth Brooks 'The Heresy of Paraphrase' in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) pp.192-214.
- **William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' and 'The Affective Fallacy' in *The Verbal Icon* (1954).**
- **Susan Sontag 'Against Interpretation' *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1966).**
- Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1967).
- Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' (1969).
- Paul de Man, 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism' from *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971), pp.20-35.
- Frank Kermode 'Getting it Right' *LRB* 3(8) 1981.
- Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (1981).
- Tzvetan Todorov, *Literature and its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-century Criticism* (1988).
- M. Levinson, 'What is New Formalism?' in *PMLA* 122.2 (2007)
- **Steven Connor 'Spelling Things Out' *NLH* 45.2 (2014).**
- **Caroline Levine *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2017) 'Introduction' and 'Rhythm', pp.1-23, 49-81.**
- Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
- Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *NLR* 136 Jan/Feb (2000).

Week 4 – Endings

In our final week we consider how the 'endings' of texts, and endings in general, can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between literature and ethics. Are there distinctively

literary approaches to formulating and answering ethical questions, can literary texts be read for their ethical valence, and what, if any, are the ethical responsibilities of literary texts and of their producers? Do the endings of literary texts give us a way into thinking about the foundations of ethical duties? Finally, we'll think about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics – are these two domains connected, and to what extent is either (or both) 'normative'?

Primary texts (extracts to be provided):

A.A. Milne 'Happiness' (1924)

Iris Murdoch *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970).

Ottessa Moshfegh *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018).

Secondary texts:

- Percy Bysshe Shelley 'Defence of Poetry' (1821).
- **Frank Kermode** *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), ch 1 and 2.
- Iris Murdoch 'The sovereignty of good over other concepts' in *The Sovereignty of the Good* (1970).
- **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).
- Paul Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge MA, Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- Martha Nussbaum *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
- **JM Coetzee** *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and Georgy Lukács *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007).
- Sara Ahmed 'Ethics' *Differences that Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- Richard Miller 'Three Versions of Objectivity' *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- **Sianne Ngai** 'Introduction' *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 1-52.
- Achille Mbembe *Necropolitics: Theory in Forms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

Wishing you an engaging and pleasurable start to your time at Oxford!

Dr Robert Freeman, June 2025