What Is Literature?

Christoph Reinfandt

Lecture Series
Introduction to Literary Studies
University of Tuebingen
WS 2017/18

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Material for the Lecture Series will be provided on Moodle (Department website > ‘Studium’ > Moodle)
Sign up with your student ID.
Password/enrolment key for the course: reinf1718
Outline

1) The Basic Module Literary Studies
2) What Is Literature?
3) An Example
4) Coda: And What About This?
1) The Basic Module Literary Studies

English Studies:

• Linguistics

• Literary and Cultural Studies: English Literatures and Cultures / American Studies

• Teaching English (Didaktik des Englischen)

• Academic English

Basic Modules – Advanced Modules – Focus Modules
Basic Module Literary Studies:

PSI Introduction to Literary Studies
+
Lecture Course: Introduction to Literary Studies

Focus on

• getting to know the discipline
• analyzing and interpreting ‘texts’
• differences between ‘normal’ reading and academic reading
• genres
Introduction to Literary Studies

Vorlesung zur Einführung in die Englische und Amerikanische Literaturwissenschaft,
Donnerstag, 8.30–10.00 Uhr im Kupferbau, HS 25

26.10.17          Prof. Dr. Christoph Reinfandt
                   Introduction I: What is Literature?

02.11.17          Prof. Dr. Christoph Reinfandt
                   Introduction II: What is Literary Studies?

09.11.17          Prof. Dr. Ingrid Hotz-Davies
                   Poetry I: William Shakespeare, Sonnet 130 (1609): What to Look for in a Poem
                   Poetry II: Tradition and the Individual Talent: The Sonnet through the Ages

16.11.17          Prof. Dr. Matthias Bauer
                   Drama I: William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (1597): What Tragedy Is All About
                   Drama II: William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (1597): Page or Stage?

23.11.17          Prof. Dr. Michael Butter
                   Film I: The Hunger Games (2012): What Films Can Do that Novels Can't (and Vice Versa)
                   Film II: The Hunger Games (2012): Editing, Mise-en-Scene, Genre

07.12.17          Prof. Dr. Michael Butter
                   Narrative I: Tom Franklin, Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter (2010): What Novels Can Do

14.12.17          Prof. Dr. Michael Butter
                   Narrative II: Tom Franklin, Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter (2010): Region and Race – The Literature of the Southern USA

11.01.2018        Prof. Dr. Horst Tonn
                   Teaching: What Difference Does the Move from Analysis to Teaching Make?

18.01.2018        Prof. Dr. Uwe Küchler
Required reading (in addition to PSI):

- William Shakespeare, Sonnet 130 + assorted further sonnets (will be provided on Moodle)
- William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1597)
Module Requirements

The Basic Module Literary Studies (Lecture Course + PSI) will be concluded with a Take Home Exam that comprises a term paper (5 pages) + 4 questions about the texts treated in the Lecture Course “Introduction to Literary Studies” to be answered in writing (1/2 page each, i.e. another two pages) and to be handed in with the term paper. The questions will assume that you have read the texts.

Both the term paper and the answers about the lecture course will be graded (the final grade will be 2/3 term paper grade + 1/3 lecture course. In order to get credits for the Basic Module Literary Studies you will have to fulfil the course work in your PSI and pass both sections of the Take Home Exam.
2) What Is Literature?

- Written texts?
- Printed texts?
- Printed texts of a certain kind?
- All kinds of ‘texts’ of a certain kind?

- inclusive vs. narrower/emphatic understanding

- historical vs. systematic approach
Historical Approach

[T]he modern sense of *literature* is scarcely two centuries old. Prior to 1800 *literature* and analogous terms in other European languages meant ‘writings’ of ‘book knowledge.’ Even today, a scientist who says ‘the literature on evolution is immense’ means not that many poems and novels treat the topic but that much has been written about it. [...] The modern Western sense of literature as imaginative writing can be traced back to the German Romantic theorists of the late eighteenth century [...].

Literary studies is a discipline with a long history, during which it has been influenced by fields that we would no longer regard today as central to literary studies, chiefly by biblical exegesis. Hence, the question arises as to what we consider as literature – we instantly would include **written imaginative texts** such as novels, poems and plays, but what about song lyrics, rap or performance poetry? In the context of increasing interest in psychological and sociological texts, the term could also be extended to, for instance, essays, political speeches, magazines, or newspapers. Scholars have proposed **competing notions of literature**, and today we can differentiate between a narrower and a broader understanding of (literary) texts. (Middeke et al. 2012, 3)
Systematic Approach

The chief quality that helps us distinguish literature from other text sorts is the question of its pragmatic use. In this sense, the definition of literature as a ‘depragmatized’ (Wolfgang Iser) form of text and discourse appears particularly useful. Manuals, for instance, have a clear pragmatic use, as have recipes, and we would not consider them literature. By contrast, science fiction novels or absurd plays have little pragmatic use even if readers look out for advice for their everyday lives. In more realistic plays, novels or poems, such advice may be inferred, but it is not the primary rationale of these texts. (Middeke et al. 2012, 3)
Another way of distinguishing literary texts is the question of **aesthetics**. Does the text under consideration have a **special form and language** which have implications for its content? Poems usually are the most formalized literary genre, as they are structured in verse, often in rhymes, and have a certain metre, but other genres likewise developed formal characteristics which help us to categorize and interpret. (Middeke et al. 2012, 3)
What Is Literature? (in the narrower sense)

Extrinsic answers (what it does):

- imitation/representation
- education/entertainment
- expression

Intrinsic answers (what it is):

- aesthetics: form, complexity, reflexivity
- de pragmatisation

‘Literariness’: representation (what?)
▼
performativity (how?)
Systematic > Historical Approach

The Basic Outline of a Systematic Approach to Western Literature (c. 1500-2017)

- traditional criteria for art and literature (based on the ideal of objective truth)
  - mimetic criteria
  - pragmatic criteria
- expressive criteria
- reflexive criteria

- modern criteria for art and literature (based on the emerging interface of subjectivity and mediality)

Modernization:
Compensation:

- Renaissance
- Neo-Classicism
- Romanticism
- Postmodernism

- 1500
- 1660
- 1800
- 1900
- 2000
3) An Example

How does ‘literariness’ in the modern sense outlined so far work?

➢ Focus on Ambiguity


Basically introducing 'ambiguity' "as an umbrella term which covers all sorts of linguistic and literary phenomena having more than one possible interpretation or meaning" (73), Christoph Bode's "Aesthetics of Ambiguity" locates the origins of aesthetic ambiguity in the period of Romanticism, when the emergence of a modern understanding of literature as imaginary writing that is grounded in individual experience established a "secondary structuring of language" that is superimposed upon "the customary and deeply ingrained referential meanings" that emanate from the primary structuring of its everyday use (75). In literary usage, linguistic signs "characteristically oscillate between what they usually mean and the new meaning they are striving to constitute" (75). This, according to Bode, establishes what he calls 'Ambiguity Mark I' as a marker of modern literariness: "[L]iterary and poetical texts are written in such a way that we are led to surmise there is a secondary plane to them, an 'extra' meaning" (75).
So on the one hand, many of the "primary codes" of everyday language use remain intact – Bode refers to these primary codes as "semiosis-restricting devices" that basically serve the purpose of maintaining the illusion of mimetic transparency that Enlightenment communication rests on (77).\(^1\)

1 Primary codes in this sense are both basic linguistic codes (semantic, syntactic, phonological) and "sets of rules of understanding which apply to larger units of a text and produce, when working, conceptions of 'character', 'time', 'place', 'plot', 'causality', 'coherence' etc." (Bode, "Aesthetics" 77).
On the other hand, the secondary structuring of the text in writing/as literature establishes "a tendency towards auto-referentiality" (75) so that the literary text ends up, inevitably and always, as a "palimpsest" (76). 'Ambiguity Mark I' as a hallmark of modern literature thus establishes a double coding, which enables the reader to read the text as a representation of the world (in the sense of 'depiction', though the world may be imaginary/fictional), but at the same time, this representation is also a 'performance' which is inevitably framed by the author's subject position in the world and the field of literature with its particular conventions at a given moment in time.

(Reinfandt 2017, 280-281)
My heart leaps up when I behold
    A Rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a Man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
    Or let me die!
The Child is Father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

My heart leaps up when I behold
A Rainbow in the sky:
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The Child is Father of the Man;
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Bound each to each by natural piety.
A poem like Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up" (1802; 417-18), for example, establishes a contingent situation from Wordsworth's experience (his emotional response – "My heart leaps up when I behold" l. 1 – to a natural phenomenon – "A Rainbow in the sky"; l. 2) and expands it "to include past, present and future" (Ferguson 583) in writing ("So was it when my life began; / So is it now I am a Man; / So be it when I shall grow old"; ll. 3-5). The alternative to this virtual mode of existence, the reader then learns, is death ("Or let me die!" l. 6). By starting out in what feels like the first half of a stanza in common metre (i.e. alternating four- and three-stressed iambic lines, also visually indicated by printing l. 2 indented), the poem's opening affords the reader the illusion of oral immediacy in song, but this expectation is not fulfilled when the expansion of imaginative scope into past and future stays obstinately in tetrameter and refutes the expectation of a song stanza rhyme scheme (abab).
In fact, the poem abandons the song-like stanzaic structure altogether by running on for three lines in tetrameter rhyming abccca, only to fall flat afterwards in the two-stressed iambic line evoking the alternative of death, which, however, provides some closure in terms of rhyme (abccab). After this dying fall the tetrameter kicks in again, this time pulling the past into the present (tense) in one of Wordsworth's most famous phrases ("The Child is Father of the Man"; l. 7), which is linked back to the speaker's present situation ("now I am a Man" l. 4) with an identical rhyme, bringing the poem to abccabc, but again falls somewhat flat syntactically with a semi-colon at the end of the line.
The last two lines ("And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety." ll. 8-9) are then added with a degree of inconsequentiality: What exactly does "And ..." imply here? Why "could" instead of the less equivocal "would" or "will" or even a fully unequivocal "And so I wish ..."? And why the awkward expansion of the last line into an iambic pentameter ending somewhat weakly (or meekly) on the only tentatively stressable second syllable of 'piety', which will always fall short of the resounding 'be' which it is supposed to rhyme with in the poem's odd abccabddd-design? […]
The shortest line of the poem, "Or let me die!" (l. 6) is linked by rhyme to "Sky" (l. 2) which may indicate a religious dimension that prepares the ground for the "natural piety" at the end of the poem, but both existence ("be"; l. 8) and faith ("piety"; l. 9) are only tenuously linked to this dimension in terms of sound/rhyme. All in all, then, the written out/printed poem establishes a development from certainty, confidence and emotional at-one-ness with the world at its beginning to an attempt at expanding this momentary at-one-ness to the speaker's full existence from past to future as an antidote to non-existence/death in its middle section. This attempt, however, only establishes an inside/outside dichotomy that cannot be bridged: While in the world the Man is Father to the Child, psychologically the Child is Father to the Man. This indicates a continuous decoupling from the world [...]
While, as this reading indicates, "The Child is Father to the Man" may seem more paradoxical than it actually is (being just an 'outside/inside'-inversion), the concluding two lines are genuinely ambiguous: Does the "And" at the beginning of line 8 indicate a conclusion or an afterthought? And does the "could" indicate possibility or capability? And if the days are "Bound each to each by natural piety", where does the latter reside, in nature or in the speaker's mind and attitude? It is up to readers to position themselves here in the act of reading the poem, which is not concerned with depicting a phenomenon in the world (a rainbow in the sky) but rather performs an experience of that phenomenon with its ramifications for the speaker, and, by implication, the reader and human beings in general.

(Reinfandt 2017, 285-286)
I am using this seemingly straightforward and much-quoted little ditty here to indicate how even simple responses to the world are imbued with ambiguity once they are turned into language (1st layer) which in turn is absorbed into writing (2nd layer) which in turn is absorbed into poetry (3rd layer) which then becomes potentially accessible in print (4th layer) to a large number of readers who are completely detached from the writer and any experiential background that may or may not lie 'behind' the text we are reading. (Reinfandt 2017, 285)

➢ That’s Literature! (in the narrower emphatic sense)

imaginative writing that engages with the modern individual’s experience of the world in a way which opens it up performatively by means of formal and linguistic de pragmatization
'NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!'

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854)
The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker’s square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster’s sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker’s obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders—nay, his very neck—cloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was—all helped the emphasis.
• the novel opens in scenic presentation (character speech: Mr. Gradgrind), not as is customary with the narrator ‘speaking’
• authorial narrator (Stanzel); heterodiegetic narrator (Genette)
• objective/neutral or subjective mode of representation?
• shared attitudes/experientiality between narrator and reader performatively stages in realist fiction which does not represent the world as it is but addresses the experience of the world by human beings
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Next week:

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Thank you!