

TERRY EAGLETON

How to READ LITERATURE



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In memory of
Adrian and Angela Cunningham

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Preface

Like clog dancing, the art of analysing works of literature is almost dead on its feet. A whole tradition of what Nietzsche called 'slow reading' is in danger of sinking without trace. By paying close attention to literary form and technique, this book tries to play a modest part in riding to its rescue. It is mainly intended as a guide for beginners, but I hope it will also prove useful to those already engaged in literary studies, or those who simply enjoy reading poems, plays and novels in their spare time. I try to shed some light on such questions as narrative, plot, character, literary language, the nature of fiction, problems of critical interpretation, the role of the reader and the question of value judgements. The book also puts forward some ideas about individual authors, as well as about such literary currents as classicism, romanticism, modernism and realism, for those who might feel in need of them.

I am, I suppose, best known as a literary theorist and political critic, and some readers might wonder what has become of these interests in this book. The answer is that one cannot raise political or theoretical questions about literary texts without a degree of sensitivity to their language. My concern here is to provide readers

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and students with some of the basic tools of the critical trade, without which they are unlikely to be able to move on to other matters. I hope to show in the process that critical analysis can be fun, and in doing so help to demolish the myth that analysis is the enemy of enjoyment.

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