LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

No matter how much knowledge and expertise you gain in identifying the features and conventions of texts, your interpretation of a text will always differ in some way from those of other readers.

Part of the reason for this is that no two readers bring exactly the same background and contexts to the experiences of reading and analysis: our life histories, educational backgrounds, emotional states, sense of identity and ideological beliefs all vary, perhaps only slightly or perhaps radically. All these factors influence not merely how we are affected when reading a text, but how we approach its analysis – the features we choose to focus on, the vocabulary we use, the degree to which we agree with or seek to place pressure on the views and values presented by the text.

Interpretations also vary from reader to reader because the meanings of literary texts are never explicit ("on the surface"); rather, such meanings are implicit, conveyed as much by the figurative dimensions of language as by the literal meanings of words. The process of ‘excavating’ a text for its underlying meanings is as much a subjective as an objective one since, unlike an archaeological excavation, there are no tangible or concrete objects to be discovered in texts – only abstractions and implications, intersecting layers and patterns of sounds and images.

There is, therefore, no single, definitively ‘correct’ reading of a text. Any critic skilled in literary analysis might well be able to perform two different readings of a text, both of which could be equally valid (yet could also, in their turn, be criticised by other readers for their oversights and biases). Moreover, the field of literary criticism is constantly evolving, even when it concerns texts that were written hundreds of years ago, about which millions of words have been written.

Every new piece of literary analysis – including your own – takes its place not in a vacuum, but within a rich web of dialogue, argument and inquiry into the meanings and significance of literature.

Strategies for studying literary perspectives

This chapter shows you how to read and analyse two pieces of literary criticism and to explain how they inform your own interpretation of a text.

This area of study is particularly challenging because there are three texts to analyse: the text you are studying, and two other responses to that text.

Your task is twofold:
- explain what two pieces of literary criticism say about the text
- present your own reading of the text, with an explanation of how your reading is informed by the two pieces of literary criticism.
Writing on literary perspectives

It is a good idea to begin with a careful, close analysis of each piece of criticism separately, before beginning to compare them.

Analyse one piece of literary criticism

Your analysis of viewpoint about a text should address the following features:

- the form and context of the interpretation
- the main argument of the interpretation
- the assumptions and values that underpin the interpretation
- the use of evidence from the text
- how the interpretation relates to your own reading of the text.

See pp.194–5 for a table showing you how to analyse a piece of criticism, and to identify its underlying assumptions and central ideas.

Analyse and compare two pieces of criticism

You will compare/contrast two viewpoints on a text:

- Address some or all of the above points in relation to each piece of criticism.
- Show where the interpretations agree and (if relevant) disagree.

Focus on the main ideas

Comparing two or more perspectives on a text in addition to presenting your own view can be challenging, because there is a considerable amount of material to cover. However, it can also draw your attention to the main ideas over which critics might agree. Focus on these main ideas, rather than fine details such as particular word choices or quotations that a critic might choose to focus on. Some close attention to detail, including brief quotations, is essential, but link this analysis to the main ideas and interpretations of the text as a whole.

Present your own view

Your primary task is to present your own interpretation of the text, so don’t focus on the pieces of literary criticism at the expense of your perspective on the text itself. You will need to indicate where you agree or disagree with the two pieces of criticism and why. See pp.196–8 for guidelines on how to structure your response and how to find a balance between responding to other perspectives and presenting your own.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What you need to know</th>
<th>What you need to be able to do</th>
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<tr>
<td>How a text presents views and values through features such as characterisation, structure, narrative point of view, style and imagery</td>
<td>Identify the views and values in a text</td>
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<td>How a piece of criticism presents ideas and makes assumptions that influence the reading of a text</td>
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<td>Contexts (historical, social, cultural, ideological) that shape both the construction and the reading of a text</td>
<td>Analyse and compare different readings of a text and present your own interpretation</td>
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<td>Ways in which contemporary views and values influence interpretations</td>
<td>Explain how your reading of a text is informed by two different literary perspectives</td>
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# Essential terms for considering literary perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of criticism</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Features</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review published in:</td>
<td>- the reader has not read the text</td>
<td>- approximate length: 100–200 words for a short review; 750–1000 words for a longer review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspapers</td>
<td>- the reader is interested in how enjoyable it would be to read the text</td>
<td>- accessible language</td>
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<tr>
<td>magazines (including literary magazines)</td>
<td>- a broad readership consistent with the publication's usual readership (or audience for a radio or television network)</td>
<td>- description of main characters</td>
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<tr>
<td>websites (including blogs and dedicated review sites) broadcast on:</td>
<td></td>
<td>- plot details (but not spoilers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>radio</td>
<td></td>
<td>- limited analysis of the text</td>
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<tr>
<td>television</td>
<td></td>
<td>- possible brief reference to previous publications by the author</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical essay published in:</td>
<td>- the reader knows the text or other works by the author</td>
<td>- evaluation of the text – whether it is well written or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic journals (print and online)</td>
<td>- the reader is familiar with scholarly approaches to literary criticism (use of quotations, footnotes etc.)</td>
<td>- approximate length: 2000–5000 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literary magazines</td>
<td>- a specialised readership</td>
<td>- many references to other critical writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>special supplements of newspapers</td>
<td>- the text is deserving of close and rigorous study</td>
<td>- specialised language, e.g. theoretical approaches to criticism</td>
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<tr>
<td>the text itself, e.g. as an introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>- detailed analysis of the text including quotations with page references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commentary published in:</td>
<td>- the reader may or may not know the text but is interested in the wider ideas, author profile etc.</td>
<td>- evaluation of the text in terms of its ideas, coherence and originality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspapers</td>
<td></td>
<td>- does not place high importance on the text's entertainment qualities</td>
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<tr>
<td>magazines (including literary magazines)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- places the text within a context, e.g. other literary works; social and cultural circumstances; the writer's career</td>
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<tr>
<td>websites dedicated to the author or their context, e.g. Australian literature</td>
<td></td>
<td>- offers a critique of the text which contrasts with or adds to existing criticism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literary criticism</td>
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A piece of literary criticism is a view or reading of a text put forward by a critic or reviewer. It can:

- position the text within the author's body of work, or within a group of similar works (e.g. 20th-century modernist fiction; Australian poetry; absurdist drama)
- serve an evaluative function and pass judgement on aspects such as the credibility of the characterisation or plot, the quality of the writing, or the text's views and values
- promote an interpretation of the text's overall meaning and significance.
Assumptions

The assumptions underpinning a critical analysis can be difficult to isolate on a first reading. However, it is important to appreciate that all interpretations, critical or otherwise, are based on assumptions that the critic makes about what constitutes good writing and what kinds of criticism are interesting and relevant for the expected readership.

Assumptions about style and genre

Assumptions about style make value judgements based on the way in which a text is crafted, especially in relation to the genre the text is seen as belonging to. Stylistic qualities that critics make assumptions about include:

- the conventions of the text’s form and genre
- narrative voice – e.g. how sophisticated, accessible or sympathetic it should be
- tone – e.g. how consistent, formal, varied or playful it should be.

A famous example of a critic whose assumptions about style led to a scathing critique is AD Hope, who described the style of Patrick White’s modernist novel, The Tree of Man, as ‘pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge’ (The Sydney Morning Herald, 16 June 1956). (Patrick White went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973.)

Assumptions based on values

Value-based assumptions inform the way a critic responds to the world represented in the text. The following are some common value-based assumptions.

- Political correctness – does the interpretation suggest that the text is compromised by its refusal to challenge established/conservative attitudes and beliefs?
- Representations of characters – does the interpretation suggest that the depiction of certain characters is, for instance, racist or sexist?
- Moral codes – does the interpretation suggest that the text endorses behaviours and practices that are morally questionable?

When Helen Garner’s first novel, Monkey Grip, was published in 1977, a number of reviewers dismissed it because of the drug-fuelled, sexually charged world it depicts. Ronald Conway, for example, mocked its ‘slightly porny paintings and de-pantings’ (Quadrant, May 1978). The underlying assumption here is that good literature should set strong moral standards for the community.

Assumptions based on the author’s identity

Assumptions about the identity or reputation of the writer can inform the critic’s response. Although this can be a significant aspect of the text’s context, it can also lead the review or critical analysis away from its main aim – to engage specifically with the writer’s work. The following aspects of the writer’s identity can influence a critic’s view of a text.

- Celebrity status – does the interpretation judge the text in light of the author’s profile as a celebrity (e.g. actor, model, pop star)?
- Literary pedigree – does the interpretation refer to famous literary figures associated with the writer and draw comparisons with their work?
- Reputation as a writer of popular or children’s fiction – does the interpretation assume that experience in a less prestigious literary field taints the quality of the writer’s more serious or literary work?
- Age, sexuality, race, gender and nationality – does the interpretation assume that the writer’s nationality, for instance, limits the sophistication and scope of the text?
- Background – does the interpretation suggest that the writer’s background as, say, a postgraduate student in creative writing causes the text to lack freshness and originality?

The celebrity status of Tara Moss has affected how seriously reviewers regard the quality of her crime fiction. For example, Sue Turnbull begins her review of Covet, Moss’ third novel, by referring to the author as a ‘Canadian model’ and suggesting that the text ‘proves once again that you don’t have to be a prose stylist to write a ripping yarn and sell lots of books’ (The Age, 16 October 2004). However, Turnbull does move on from this initially flippant and almost dismissive tone to acknowledge that the novel is a ‘well-structured page-turner’.

Theoretical perspectives

It is not always easy to identify the theoretical perspectives of an interpretation. This is especially so in a review, in which the constraints of the form, audience and word limit make it difficult to move beyond a consideration of character, plot, style and thematic preoccupations.

However, some longer reviews, and many extended critical essays and commentaries, do make their theoretical positions quite clear. Although a detailed discussion of literary theory lies beyond the scope of this book, the following sections describe the main features of several important theoretical perspectives you might encounter.

Practical criticism and New Criticism

Practical criticism was developed by Cambridge academic IA Richards in the 1920s, when English literature was establishing itself as an important university discipline. The focus of practical criticism was a close and sensitive reading of the text; in fact, Richards gave his students texts – often poetry – for analysis without telling them anything about the identity of the author or about the time and place in which the texts were written.

This approach to analysing literary texts was taken up by a group of American academics in the 1930s, who established the movement known as New Criticism. Like Richards, the New Critics also argued that texts should be studied independently of their authors and their socio-historical context.

Main assumptions of New Criticism

- New Criticism makes the following main assumptions:
  - The text is a complex, independent entity.
  - The text is a coherent, organic whole, in which form and content are harmoniously integrated.
  - Analysis requires very close attention to textual detail, especially in relation to the use of language.
  - Literary techniques, such as metaphor, simile, symbol, the use of irony, and complex schemes governing rhyme and rhythm in poetry, call for special attention and understanding.
For the New Critics, poetry was the literary form *par excellence*. A New Critical reading of Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' would emphasise its unity of form and content: the structure of the poem – regular six-line stanzas rhyming *ababcb* in iambic tetrameter – reflects the cosmic order depicted by the poem. It might also point out how the figure of the dance underpins and unifies the poetic vision of a cosmos in which the 'sprightly dance' of the daffodils, the 'sparkling waves' and 'stars that shine/And twinkle' are harmoniously and joyfully bound together.

**Leavis and the moral tradition**

Frank Raymond Leavis taught English literature at Cambridge University from 1927 to 1964 and was possibly the most influential literary critic of the 20th century. Along with his wife, Queenie (O.D), with whom he often worked, Leavis was critical of popular culture and advocated the reading of 'great' literature since, in his view, this made its readers into better people – hence the idea of a 'moral tradition' of literary criticism. This elitism has earned Leavis the strong criticism of later generations of critics.

Much of Leavis' 'project' as a critic can be seen as a kind of evaluation of English literature, sorting texts into a hierarchy of a few great and a larger number of good but lesser works. For Leavis, great literature transcends the time and place of its creation: it will always be great. The idea of the literary canon is central to Leavis' work. For example, consider these remarks from one of his best-known works:

... far from all of the names in the literary histories really belong to the realm of significant creative achievement ... it is well to start by distinguishing the few really great – the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets – in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life.

(The Great Tradition, Chatto & Windus, 1950, p.2)

These days we are more sceptical regarding such claims about the universal value or quality of artistic works, as we acknowledge the importance of people's contexts and backgrounds in shaping their views on what is valuable or worthy. We also accept that such judgments can and do change over time.

**Later theoretical approaches**

Later theoretical perspectives moved away from the main assumptions of Leavis and New Criticism by:

- placing less emphasis on the unity and 'wholeness' of the text
- placing greater emphasis on the context of the text's production and on the relationship between the text and its author
- acknowledging that a text can mean different things to different readers.

The last point above is probably the most significant. From around 1950, there was a shift from seeing the text as a static object with a meaning that is fixed for all time and for all readers, to seeing the text as more fluid, with meanings that shift with time and with the reader's perspective.
The implied reader and resistant readings

In addition, textual readings in the second half of the 20th century more often critiqued the meanings of texts. The conventional method of ‘close reading’ tends to involve reading along with a text, figuring out what the text is trying to say and the ways in which it says it. But such readings do not attempt to challenge that meaning, or to reject the ways the text makes that meaning seem convincing or true. This form of close reading involves describing the kinds of responses the text is ‘asking for’ and the ways in which the text elicits (causes) those responses through features such as narrative voice, plot, characterisation and imagery. In other words, the critic adopts the perspective of the implied reader of the text.

In contrast, reading strategies developed in the second half of the 20th century – such as feminist and postmodern readings – place pressure on texts and resist adopting the position of the implied reader. Rather than going along with what the text seems to want the reader to think and feel, these strategies read ‘against the grain’ in the following ways:

- They look for what narratives leave out as much as what they include.
- They look at the climaxes and endings of narratives to see how conflicts are resolved, often questioning whether a ‘happy’ ending is really a positive one or, conversely, a ‘tragic’ ending is entirely unhappy.
- They look closely at characterisation, especially of minor characters, and are alert to the perspectives of the marginalised, the oppressed and the silenced.

The following pages consider several of the most important theoretical approaches to literary criticism.

Feminist readings

Feminist readings draw attention to the text’s representation of gender identities and gender roles. In particular, a feminist reading addresses the ways in which a text endorses or critiques the social and economic status of women.

What does a feminist reading look at?

A feminist reading would explore aspects of the text relating to the roles – both domestic and social – played by men and women, and how equal the relationships between men and women are. It might ask some or all of the following questions:

- Are men represented as naturally dominant and active?
- Does the text question traditional gender roles and social structures?
- Are women portrayed as independent and powerful, or as submissive and passive?
- Do the female characters accept or resist their places within the family and society (including the workforce)?
- Does the text give voice predominantly to the experiences of men and effectively silence the voices of women?
A feminist reading of Sylvia Plath's poetry might explore the degree to which the poems critique the limited roles available to women in the 1950s. It could also compare Plath's work with poetry written by a male poet of that time, perhaps showing how Plath gives greater value to personal and the domestic spheres while avoiding sentimentality or romanticism.

Taking the author's gender into account

An important fact usually considered in a feminist reading is whether the text's author is male or female. This is because one of the main aims of feminism is to support women's involvement in professional and creative activities. Many literary critics - both men and women - see literature as being dominated by writing by men, and work to promote writing by women as being of equal quality, value and interest.

Question your own assumptions about gender

A feminist reading can make us question our own assumptions about gender when reading a text. Consider the following questions:

- When a novel or short story has an omniscient narrator, do you tend to read as if the narrative voice is male? Is this necessarily the case?
- Do we think of the narrator's gender as being the same as that of the author?
- What if we read a male-authored text as if the narrator is female rather than male - what difference would that make to the interpretation of the text's meaning?

In general, a feminist reading places pressure on any representation of society that sees men as occupying the central, dominant roles and which does not suggest that this situation should be changed.

Marxist readings

Marxism is based on the political and social theories of Karl Marx (1818–83). Marx criticised capitalism as a means of organising the human and material resources of a society, since it is based on the exploitation of the working class and the alienation of people from the conditions of their existence. Marxist literary criticism draws on these ideas in analysing how material conditions and class relations are represented in texts.

Marx thought that any analysis of society should focus on the working men and women who form its vast majority. The minority - those who form the ruling and upper classes of society - might well live satisfying lives, but under capitalism the lives of the (working-class) majority would always be deprived of meaning and fulfilment. For Marx, the resulting tensions between the classes would inevitably lead to conflict and, ultimately, revolution.

What does a Marxist reading look at?

A Marxist reading of a literary text does not necessarily look for signs of revolution, but it does examine representations of social classes and of the inequities in wealth and opportunity within modern societies.
A fairly simplistic Marxist perspective would analyse the text for signs that it is consistent with a capitalist world view – for which the text would be criticised. A text that focuses on the lives of the wealthy, without any recognition of the labour of working people that supports such lifestyles, would have its biases and blind spots clearly pointed out by a Marxist critic.

For example, Shakespearean drama focuses on the concerns of the aristocracy. The tragedies are primarily stories about kings, princes and other noblemen; in this genre, it is not possible for a blacksmith, say, to be a tragic figure. So, a Marxist approach to Shakespearean tragedy might place pressure on the genre by showing how it marginalises or ‘writes out’ the experiences of less privileged social groups.

Alternatively, a Marxist reading would look for signs that the text recognises and condemns the exploitation of working-class people: such a text would be viewed positively in a Marxist interpretation.

A Marxist reading of a text would ask questions such as:
- How does poverty limit what a character is capable of achieving in life?
- Is the character responsible for their material circumstances or are these just an accident of birth?
- Does the character care more about material possessions than about their relationships with other people?
- Does a character have to compromise their ethical values to achieve a comfortable standard of living?
- Does the text have a nostalgic, unrealistic take on poverty? Does it romanticise poverty or does it present poverty in a gritty, realist fashion?

A Marxist reading of the Victorian novelists Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell would draw attention to their representations of working-class lives in the English society of their time.

The reading could endorse these writers by showing their portrayals to be sympathetic to the plight of the working class.

Alternatively, the reading could critique these writers by suggesting that their attitudes are romantic and condescending, and that their real sympathies always lie with the middle classes.

Of course, societies and capitalism have changed since Marx published his theories in the 19th century. Distinctions between ‘workers’ and ‘capitalists’, or definitions of social class, are much less clear-cut in early 21st-century first-world countries. However, Marxist criticism still looks to the social and economic conditions of people’s lives as the primary determinants of their wellbeing.

**Structuralism and binary oppositions**

**Structuralism** seeks to understand elements of human culture and behaviour by looking at the wider system or structure to which those elements belong.

In literary criticism, a **structuralist reading** looks at how the elements of a text work together to create meaning, and how that text fits within the broader structure of a genre or of literary texts as a whole.
Structuralism was a major area of European thought and enquiry in the 20th century. It began with work by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who considered language as a system of signs. For Saussure, language has meaning not because words refer to real ‘things’ in the world, but because of the relationships between the signs that make up language.

Each sign has two parts:
- the signifier (the written word or its sound)
- the signified (the concept referred to by the word).

The signifier is arbitrary, as is the relationship between signifier and signified; there is no inherent or natural connection between the letters c-a-t and the furry four-legged animal. We have to learn what these connections are, in the same way as we learn the meaning of any system of signs (such as road signs). Seeing language as a set of arbitrary signs, rather than as a set of words that refer to things in the real world, places a lot more focus on the words themselves, and unsettles our sense of a world that can be known objectively and universally.

**Binary oppositions** are central to structuralist approaches to language and literary criticism. Saussure’s work showed that what enables us to make sense of a language, or any other system of signs, is the set of differences between terms. In this view of language, we understand ‘black’ because it is opposed to ‘white’; we understand ‘up’ because it is the opposite of ‘down’. In a literary text there might be many such binary oppositions that help to organise and structure the world of the text. Think of terms such as darkness and light; good and evil; truth and falsehood. These differences or oppositions work *within* the text, and sometimes *intertextually*, rather than as the means by which the text refers to the ‘real’ world.

Often the binary oppositions within a text will align in ways that seem familiar and natural, but are really just a product of their long use in literary and mythological traditions. Consider these pairings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>light</th>
<th>dark</th>
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<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td>evil</td>
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<tr>
<td>truth</td>
<td>falsehood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presence</td>
<td>absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civilised</td>
<td>uncivilised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We often speak, for instance, of the ‘light of truth’, or the ‘darkness of evil’. These ideas don’t have an actual existence in the world; they are ways of using language that are learned, and that create a sense of order and stability.
What does a structuralist reading look at?

A structuralist reading looks at the internal elements of a text and how they work together. This extends well beyond elements such as chapters or scenes and looks at how differences and contrasts in the language and images are working to create meaning. Like the approach of practical criticism, structuralist readings tend to remove the text from the external world, looking within the text – and other texts – for meaning.

A structuralist reading might ask questions such as the following:

- Are there recurring words or images with opposing meanings (such as the terms in the two columns on the previous page)?
- Are characters ‘coded’ using any of these recurring words or images (for example, by being associated with darkness)?
- Are opposing terms aligned in any way that influences our views of characters or events?
- Are there any key elements of form or genre that help to create meaning?
- Are there intertextual elements such as allusions or mythological references that link the text to a wider body of work?

A structuralist reading of Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness would note the many references to darkness and light, and analyse how the text aligns these with other qualities and ideas. Marlow’s story begins as the sun sets over the River Thames with the unnerving words: ‘And this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth’. The journey he relates can be seen as moving from the ‘light’ of Europe (civilised, knowledgeable) into the ‘darkness’ of Africa (primitive, unknowable), then back to London. However, Marlow’s descriptions of London and Brussels are also characterised by darkness, suggesting the ideals of civilisation are under threat.

The ‘death of the author’

An important essay that is often taken to signal the break between structuralism and poststructuralism is Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’. Barthes was an important French theorist and critic whose early work applied structuralist ideas and the theory of signs (semiotics) not just to literary texts but to everyday life and popular culture. However, in ‘The Death of the Author’, first published in 1957 and widely reprinted, Barthes examines the inherent ambiguities of any written text, and of literary texts in particular.

If structuralism leads us to see the meaning of a text as resulting from its system of signs, codes and conventions, which in turn are drawn from the wider body of literature and other forms of writing, then its meaning can no longer be fixed or unique. For Barthes, a text is ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centre of culture’. Moreover, the author can no longer be seen as the single point of origin of the text or of its meaning:

... a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. (Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, trans. S. Heath)

With this shift to a recognition of multiple meanings, and to locating meaning(s) in the act of reading rather than in the author’s intention, Barthes effectively moved literary criticism from structuralism to poststructuralism.
Postmodern readings

**Definition**
Postmodernism can refer to two broad concepts and bodies of work:
- the nature of Western culture since (roughly) 1950
- a set of theoretical and critical viewpoints used in analysing cultural forms (such as literary texts).

**Postmodernism versus modernism**
As the term suggests, postmodernism refers to what has happened since modernism, a term which is usually taken to apply to literature and art of the first half of the 20th century.

**Definition**
Modernist works are characterised by a sense of alienation; a longing for the return of social order and traditional sources of meaning; and experimentation with form in order to represent the breakdown of familiar structures (social, familial, religious etc.).

Postmodernism, in contrast, is marked by a more expansive, and often playful, feeling. In postmodern texts:
- The loss of previously accepted ‘truths’ and the overthrow of traditional hierarchies and moral ‘certainties’ is regarded as potentially liberating.
- There is a sceptical view about the true motives of those in positions of power, and the means by which they attained and retain power.
- Places, objects and cultures can be juxtaposed in unexpected ways.
- Multiple perspectives, ambiguity and open-endedness are preferred to closure and a single, fixed meaning.

Note that postmodern features do occur in texts written before 1950; and many texts written since 1950 are more modernist than postmodernist in style.

**Postmodern criticism**
Postmodernism is sometimes criticised for being excessively relativist – that is, for arguing that there is no *absolute* standard by which truth and values can be judged. Although this is a general feature of postmodernism, it is important to recognise that postmodern criticism is not anarchic or apolitical. Indeed, the critique of traditional power structures, accepted ‘truths’ and prevailing prejudices is extremely healthy and useful in any society.

Postmodern criticism entails a rigorous examination of conventional ideas about what constitutes ‘truth’ or ‘the best’: such ideas are often found to depend on the attitudes and vested interests of certain social groups. This doesn’t mean that postmodernism abandons the idea of ‘truth’; but it means acknowledging that different groups have different truths, and respecting these differences – since there is, after all, no escaping difference in the modern world.
Postmodern criticism looks for:
- ways in which a text is fragmented and episodic, rather than unified and continuous
- ways in which a text holds open the possibility of different explanations or meanings
- representations that acknowledge contrasting perspectives, diverse experiences and different identities
- gaps and silences – what a text avoids saying in order to mean what it intends to mean.

Postmodern readings of Shakespeare have drawn attention to the ways in which the plays foreground the ambiguous and playful qualities of language. At times it can seem that the real subject of the plays is not human nature, but the simultaneous power and ‘slipperiness’ of language. A postmodern reading of King Lear, for instance, could focus on the riddles in which the Fool speaks (e.g. in Act 1 scene 4), showing how words can have multiple and deceptive meanings rather than a single, fixed and unambiguous message. Words can be a mere ‘nothing’ – ‘like the breath of an unfee’d lawyer’, as the Fool puts it – yet they also have the capacity to strip a king of all his earthly power. Such paradoxes (especially concerning the nature of language) lie at the centre of much postmodern criticism.

Poststructuralism and deconstruction

Postmodernism and poststructuralism have very similar meanings and are nearly interchangeable. However, poststructuralism has a more specific meaning in relation to the pressure it places on structuralism. As the previous discussion of structuralism indicates, the neat division of terms and ideas into pairs of binary opposites suggests an ordered and stable worldview, with little room for ambiguity or double meanings.

Also, where binary opposites are used in a text, one term in each pair is usually regarded as preferable to, or privileged over, the other. Light is privileged over darkness; truth is privileged over falsehood, and so on. This is known as a hierarchy of terms.

In a deconstructive reading, the binary oppositions and the hierarchy of terms are shown to be unstable. It might find, for example, that in some places the text values darkness over light, or that truth is aligned with darkness rather than light. It might also show that ‘truth’ in the text is only a partial truth, as it relies on alternative versions of the truth being silenced or rejected as signs of insanity.

In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, a deconstructive reading places pressure on the ‘surface’ meaning of the text by inverting the expected hierarchy of light/darkness, truth/falseness. On the surface, the novella seems to be rejecting darkness and its associated qualities (the primitive, the unknowable) in favour of what is known and civilised. Kurtz’s final words, ‘The horror! The horror!’, encapsulate the civilised world’s abhorrence for a world in which refinement and self-control are lacking.

However, an alternative reading sees the darkness as an intense source of fascination for Marlow, as in Africa he discovers Kurtz. Remote from Europe’s strict social conventions, Kurtz has indulged his ‘monstrous passions’; his soul ‘knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear’. In contrast, the world of Europe appears repressed and lifeless, embodied in Kurtz’s ghost-like beloved: ‘all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk’. In this reading, truth is contained in the primitive darkness, a darkness by which Europe is simultaneously repulsed and enthralled.
Note that the term ‘deconstruction’ is not simply another word for ‘analysis’. It is an approach to reading that finds that a text can mean more than one thing – and even have contradictory meanings – simultaneously. A deconstructive reading might even argue that the text means the opposite of what it seems to be trying to mean, of what its author might have intended it to mean. It is, then, an extreme form of reading ‘against the grain’.

**Postcolonialism**

**Colonialism** refers to the establishment by a nation of a colony or colonies in another country which has less well-developed technologies but abundant resources of minerals, land and/or labour.

**Postcolonialism** refers to a movement in politics or culture that critiques colonialism, either in general or in relation to a specific colony.

During the period from the 1400s until the end of World War II, several western European nations – including Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands – established colonies throughout Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific islands. Power was exerted by physical force; native populations were used as a source of labour or, in the case of many settler colonies (such as Australia), forced from their lands by a combination of violence and disease.

Not all empires were equally strong throughout this period. British colonies were established from the early 1600s in the Caribbean and then in North America. During the 19th century the British Empire grew increasingly extensive and powerful, reaching its height in the early 20th century. Colonial encounters and endeavours are often referred to in English literature: Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (around 1611) and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) are two famous early examples. The end of the period of European colonialism is often taken as coinciding with the independence of India in 1947. However, many colonies experienced protracted violent conflicts during the following decades as they sought independence, and even following independence from colonial rule.

**Postcolonial readings**

The term ‘postcolonial’ is used in literary studies in two main ways.

**Postcolonial literature** refers to texts produced by former colonies of European powers. These texts often question the use of power to exploit indigenous populations as sources of cheap or unpaid labour, or to obtain valuable resources (such as gold, ivory and diamonds) for minimal cost. They also assert the fundamental rights and distinctive identities and cultures of indigenous people, who were often marginalised or oppressed during the colonial period. Key postcolonial texts include Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981).

**Postcolonial criticism** refers to the process of analysing texts that represent colonialism, and looking closely at the relationships between race, power, language and identity in those texts. It often promotes texts that present the perspectives of colonised peoples, and it can be highly critical of canonical texts that downplay the destructive effects of colonialism.
What does a postcolonial reading look at?

The postcolonial critique of mainstream literary texts does not usually take the form of an outright rejection of the worth of those texts. However, it draws the reader’s attention to a text’s gaps and silences with regard to indigenous or enslaved people. A postcolonial reading can ask questions such as the following:

- How are people of colour represented? Is their perspective shown? Are they given a voice? Do they have control over their lives?
- How does the text represent the situation of those who are servants or slaves because of their race?
- How are those who are white and powerful depicted – positively or negatively?
- Are gender roles particularly important to the depiction of power relations?
- How is language used to portray the relationships between power and identity? Is an indigenous language used, or is the language of the colonising power used?

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* can appear problematic when read from a postcolonial perspective, since it reproduces colonial stereotypes of black African people as primitive, mysterious and incapable of becoming ‘civilised’. Most famously, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe criticised the novel as being racist since its representations of black Africans denies them any humanity. It is also possible to read *Heart of Darkness* as questioning the wisdom and judgement of those invading the territories and exploiting the labour of others: that is, as offering a critique of colonialism, although from a white rather than a black point of view.

Psychoanalytic readings

Psychoanalytic readings look closely at psychological elements, such as anxiety, repression and desire. They also look for repetitions, gaps and silences, which reflect the workings of the unconscious. These elements can be evident in the behaviour of characters, or in the structure of the text as a whole.

Psychoanalysis was developed in the early 1900s by Viennese doctor Sigmund Freud, in the process of treating patients with a variety of mental disorders. Although Freud’s work has been controversial, he developed a number of concepts that remain common in popular understandings of human psychology, and that underpin the application of psychoanalysis to literary criticism. These concepts include the following:

- The unconscious refers to a part of the mind where thoughts, ideas and feelings exist without a person being aware of them.
- Repression is a process involving the transfer of ideas and feelings from the conscious mind to the unconscious. They might be memories or unpleasant experiences, or they might be desires that for social reasons are unable to be fulfilled. Repressed feelings and thoughts can re-enter consciousness at certain times, or create effects such as hysteria.
- Dreams can reveal repressed thoughts and feelings by symbolically fulfilling desires. Freud sought to understand a patient’s dreams in order to gain an insight into their unconscious; *The Interpretation of Dreams* is probably his most famous book.
A central part of Freud's psychoanalytic treatments involved patients talking about their experiences and feelings directly to the analyst – commonly known as the 'talking cure'. In this way, Freud sought to bring repressed thoughts to the surface, thus relieving the 'pressure' caused by repression and curing the neurological symptoms it was causing.

The **Oedipus complex** in Freudian theory is a key part of a child's psychosexual development. It is named after the Greek mythological figure Oedipus, who unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother (most famously depicted in Sophocles', play from the 5th century BC, *Oedipus Rex*). According to Freud, the child's sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex is universal, and the resolution of this complex through identification with the parent of the same sex is what leads to a gendered, and ultimately an adult, identity.

**What does a psychoanalytic reading look at?**

A great deal of psychoanalytic criticism goes well beyond the scope of this book, often refining Freud's ideas and combining them with complex theories of language and subjectivity. However, in simple terms a psychoanalytic approach to literary criticism would ask questions such as the following:

- **Are there gaps, silences or omissions** in the text – things that a main character doesn’t wish to talk about, or perhaps that the author does not want to introduce into the text? Identifying these can lead to interesting perspectives on what is really happening in the world of the text.

- **Are important dreams** described in the text? An author may use dreams to suggest a character’s secret wishes and desires. As dreams are often symbolic (rather than literal), an author will use dream sequences and images that hint at or parallel what is actually occurring in the character’s life.

- **Is there a particularly strong mother-son bond**, or alternatively a **father-daughter bond**? Is there a difficult relationship between a father and a son, whereby the son resists the father’s authority and sees the father as a threat? This might give scope to think about the characters in terms of Freud’s ideas concerning a child’s growth to maturity, especially as a gendered subject.

Probably the best-known **psychoanalytic reading** of a literary text is Freud’s own interpretation of *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud saw Hamlet’s procrastination as resulting from an **Oedipal desire for his mother**, full of guilt, Hamlet is unable to kill Claudius, who has done what Hamlet (unconsciously) wishes he had done – murdered his father and slept with his mother.

Whatever your view of Hamlet, the lack of a clear, compelling reason for his procrastination is certainly a gap or silence in the text – precisely the kind of textual feature that the ideas of psychoanalysis can illuminate.
### How to analyse a piece of literary criticism

Use these guidelines and the questions in the table to analyse each of the pieces of criticism you will respond to.

#### Getting started: first impressions

- Read the published piece of criticism. Share your initial impressions with others in your class.
- Begin your analysis by using ‘PMI’ to annotate the review:
  - Use a plus sign to indicate which statements you agree with.
  - Use a minus sign to indicate which statements you disagree with.
  - Use a question mark to indicate which statements you either need to consider further or find confusing.
- Use the following general questions to guide your reading:
  - What views are expressed about the text you are studying?
  - What evidence is provided to support these views?
  - What values and assumptions inform the critic’s views?
  - Do you agree with the interpretation? Why or why not?

#### Looking closer: features of the interpretation

Use the following table to analyse the interpretation more closely. Look for its features and elements in the same way as you would in a close analysis of a literary text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of the interpretation</th>
<th>What the interpretation does</th>
<th>Activities and questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The main argument</td>
<td>Does the interpretation give a clear sense of what the text’s main concerns are?</td>
<td>Do you agree with the interpretation’s main position?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does the interpretation establish from the outset whether its overall view of the text is positive or negative?</td>
<td>If the interpretation is strongly positive or negative, look for counterarguments to generate a more balanced perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there clear underlying assumptions or a theoretical perspective that inform the critic’s interpretation?</td>
<td>Identify the main underlying assumptions or theoretical approach. Do you think these are valid or useful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referring to characters</td>
<td>Does the critic give an account of the main characters?</td>
<td>Check for important characters that might be omitted from the discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are the characters seen to be credible or realistic representations?</td>
<td>Do you agree with the account of the characters?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are the characters seen to embody views and values?</td>
<td>Focus on the views and values that the characters represent – this gives you the most effective way of contrasting your interpretation with the one you are discussing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does the discussion of characters suggest an underlying theoretical perspective, e.g. feminist, Marxist, postcolonial?</td>
<td>Look for characters being taken as representative of wider social groups or historical circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features of the interpretation</td>
<td>What the interpretation does</td>
<td>Activities and questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referring to narrative structure</td>
<td>• Is there a summary of the plot?</td>
<td>• Is the plot summary too descriptive – too much ‘what’ happens, not enough ‘why’ it happens?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the critic find the narrative compelling and involving?</td>
<td>• Do you agree with the critic’s account of the level of tension and interest, the effectiveness of the climax and resolution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is the narrative conclusion seen to provide a convincing resolution?</td>
<td>• Conclusions are important for views and values, since they are where characters are ‘rewarded’ or ‘punished’. How does the critic address this aspect of the conclusion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying key scenes or moments</td>
<td>• Does the interpretation identify key scenes to make a point about the text as a whole?</td>
<td>• Does the choice of key scenes affect the interpretation? Would you choose different scenes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How do the comments about key scenes relate to the overall argument?</td>
<td>• Look for how the choice of key scenes reflects the critic’s assumptions or theoretical position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying key images or symbols</td>
<td>• Does the interpretation identify key images or symbols?</td>
<td>• Do you agree with the interpretation of the images and symbols?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If so, how are they related to the overall argument?</td>
<td>• Look for ideas associated with those images that are not considered by the critic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments about the author’s style and tone</td>
<td>• How does the interpretation characterise the text’s style?</td>
<td>• Do you agree with the way in which the text’s style is discussed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the interpretation relate the style to other features of the text (e.g. characterisation, narrative point of view, imagery) or to the text’s views and values?</td>
<td>• Consider other ways of relating the text’s style to its characterisation and main concerns. Are there significant aspects of the text’s style that the critic has overlooked?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to other works</td>
<td>• Does the critic refer to other works (by the same or other authors) to establish a literary or social context?</td>
<td>• Research the other works or writers mentioned. Are they relevant to the text and appropriate to the form (e.g. critical essay)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are there references to other interpretations of the text or to theoretical works?</td>
<td>• Do these references clarify the critic’s overall position?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style of the interpretation</td>
<td>• Does the critic’s language sometimes obscure the interpretation by being unnecessarily wordy or playful with language? Or does their language enhance your understanding of the text?</td>
<td>• Look for vocabulary choices that are at odds with your interpretation of the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Look for word choices that match your own responses to the text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>• Does the conclusion make a strong overall statement about the meaning and significance of the text?</td>
<td>• Do you agree with the concluding statements?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the conclusion follow logically from the rest of the interpretation?</td>
<td>• Look for ways in which the conclusion ties the discussion together and presents a clear interpretive statement about the text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Analysing a piece of literary criticism**

This activity uses the table on the previous pages, and will enable you to evaluate a piece of criticism on a text in a structured and systematic way.

1. Carefully read through the piece of criticism or the perspective you are studying.
2. Work through each section of the table, answering the questions and explaining your response to each feature.
3. Write one or two sentences on each of the nine features of the interpretation (the main argument, referring to characters and so on). Think about whether you agree or disagree with the perspective, and how it has influenced your own view of the text.
4. Now complete this activity for a second perspective on the text. Look for similarities to and differences from the first perspective as you are doing so. The notes you make will give you an excellent basis for comparing and contrasting the two perspectives, and for presenting your own interpretation.

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**How to write about two contrasting perspectives**

The two models described on the following pages provide structures for an essay in which you present an interpretation of a text while also responding to two contrasting critical perspectives. They ensure that you cover the following essential elements:

- Develop your own interpretation.
- Make considered comments on two pieces of criticism.
- Signpost the main similarities and differences between the two perspectives.
- Explain how your own view is informed by the two pieces of criticism.

An important balance to achieve in your response is between your discussion of the two pieces of literary criticism and the presentation of your own interpretation of the text. As very general guidelines we suggest that:

- No more than 25% of your essay should be on one particular piece of literary criticism.
- At least 50% of your essay should focus on your own interpretation.

The two models are flexible and each allows for a complex, sophisticated discussion of both the text and the pieces of literary criticism. Your approach might depend on the way in which this task is presented to you – see pp.198–9 for four types of task.

For example, if you are given a very open-ended instruction such as ‘develop an interpretation of the text’, you might find it easiest to first discuss the two pieces of literary criticism in some detail, exploring their main ideas before moving on to your own interpretation and some close analysis of the text (Model 1 opposite). On the other hand, if you are given an essay topic, you could argue your response to this topic by addressing a series of main points in the body paragraphs, weaving in discussion of the pieces of criticism as they relate to your main points (Model 2 opposite).
Model 1: Structured according to texts

This first approach is more structured than the second. It allows you to focus on the two pieces of literary criticism in turn, and then on your own interpretation.

Your own view of the text will be partly presented in your discussion of the two pieces of criticism, then more fully developed in the final part of your essay.

Introduction
- Provide an overview or summary of the text’s context and main concerns.
- Briefly indicate the main points of view presented in the two pieces of criticism.
- State your own position or argument about the text, which you will develop into an interpretation.

Body paragraphs
First, focus on one piece of criticism in one or two paragraphs.
- Give an overview of its main concerns/argument.
- Explain your response to this piece of criticism, starting with areas of agreement then moving on to areas of disagreement, such as where you feel it neglects key aspects of the text.

Second, focus on the other piece of criticism in one or two paragraphs.
- Link with the previous discussion, possibly by using a connecting idea or referring to the two critics having similar or contrasting contexts.
- Give an overview of the main concerns/argument of the second piece of criticism, including some discussion of similarities to and differences from the first piece.
- Explain your response to this piece of criticism, indicating areas of agreement and disagreement.

Third, further develop your interpretation of the text in two or three paragraphs.
- Explain how your own position varies from those in the two pieces of criticism and how you are bringing something different to the discussion.
- Support your discussion with detailed analysis of the text.

Conclusion
- Sum up your argument, presenting a clear viewpoint on the text.
- Include brief references to one or both pieces of criticism.

Model 2: Structured according to ideas

This is a more integrated approach, relying on a clear argument and a logical sequence of ideas.

Introduction
- Provide an overview or summary of the text’s context and main concerns.
- State your main argument – a response to the topic (if given) or your central argument about the text.
- Include brief references to both pieces of literary criticism.
Body paragraphs
- Organise paragraphs by ideas.
- These ideas can be main points in response to a given topic, or, if there is no given topic, points that support your overall interpretation of the text.
- Include some close analysis of selected passages/stories/poems.
- Weave in comments on and quotations from the pieces of criticism.
- Compare the pieces of criticism where they engage with the same idea, noting similarities and differences.
- Present your own viewpoint throughout, especially at the ends of paragraphs.

Conclusion
- Sum up your discussion and state your main argument.
- Comment on one or both of the pieces of criticism.

Sample assessment task and response
This section includes substantial excerpts from two pieces of literary criticism on Rosemary Dobson’s Collected. It also includes a poem from the collection, which is referred to in one of the sample assessment tasks, and will help to clarify Dobson’s style and concerns if you are not studying her poetry. Finally, the sample response shows one possible approach to the task of presenting an interpretation informed by other perspectives.

Sample assessment tasks
There are several ways this assessment task might be presented; the following four sample tasks show some possibilities for Rosemary Dobson’s poetry. Whichever form your assessment task takes, the key elements of referring closely to two pieces of literary criticism, and presenting your own interpretation supported by detailed textual analysis, are the same.

Task 1
Present an interpretation of Rosemary Dobson’s Collected, referring to Geoff Page’s review and David McCoey’s Introduction.

Task 2
With close reference to ‘The Almond-tree in the King James Version’, as well as Geoff Page’s review and David McCoey’s Introduction, present an interpretation of Rosemary Dobson’s Collected.

Task 3
‘To read [Dobson’s poems] is to follow a quiet mind, but an acute one, through a writing life that over the decades is increasingly responsive to what is near at hand and to the oddness as well as the grandeur of things.’ (David Malouf)
‘This is a voice to carry ideas, not subjective perception or personality …’ (Bonny Cassidy)
In the light of both or either of these views, develop a written interpretation of Rosemary Dobson’s Collected. Refer to both Geoff Page’s review and David McCoey’s Introduction in your response.
Task 4

'Dobson's poetry shows that what is personal and commonplace can also be eternal.'

In the light of this view, present an interpretation of Rosemary Dobson's *Collected*. Refer to both Geoff Page's review and David McCooey's Introduction in your response.

**Perspective 1: review by Geoff Page**

The following review by Geoff Page was published on the *Mascara Literary Review* website in Issue 12, November 2012. It has been edited for reasons of space; for the complete review, see http://mascarareview.com/geoff-page-reviews-rosemary-dobsons-collected/

**Geoff Page reviews Rosemary Dobson's *Collected***

Reading Rosemary Dobson's *Collected* in those few short (and now poignant) weeks between its delayed appearance and her death at 92, I was particularly struck by how little these poems, beginning in the mid-1940s, have aged.

Most of the crucial ones, I was familiar with from having read her earlier collections and hearing the poet read them quite often over the four decades she lived in Canberra. It’s always a particular pleasure for a reviewer to be able to have in his or her auditory memory the sound of the poet presenting and interpreting her own work.

In Dobson’s case it was invariably a quiet, unassertive voice, almost shy but with an underlying confidence in the material – which she felt no need to ‘tart up’ with histrionics of any kind. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* called this being ‘restrained and decorous’ but this is to sell her way too short. Some others were inclined to mutter at poetry readings about ‘poets not reading their own works well’ (not as well as Shakespearean actors, for instance) but in Dobson’s case this criticism was misapplied. She read quietly because (unlike much of, say, Dorothy Hewett's oeuvre) Dobson’s are quiet poems. Quiet – and thoughtful. Quiet – and often wryly witty. [...] 

Reading Dobson’s *Collected* from the second volume *The Ship of Ice* onwards, one is struck by the sheer consistency of its artistry, its author’s personal qualities and preoccupations. There is a tone of voice (quiet, meditative, wry at times) which is effortlessly maintained. There is an unstrained range of cultural reference. And there is her constant feel for narrative (even within the lyric) – culminating in *Untold Lives and Later Poems* (2001), arguably her best book (though not as technically formal as her earlier ones).

It was in this last full collection that Dobson’s empathy for others became most apparent. It comprises a persuasive set of observations of, or vignettes about, a considerable range of people. They are not types but individuals whose often low-key lives (and fates) have something important to tell us. Written in a flexible blank verse and in relatively plain diction, enlivened occasionally by a more colourful image or turn of phrase, these poems are very different from, and much more relaxed than, the ones with which Dobson began her career back in 1944.

In this context we can see that David McCooey is correct, in his Introduction to *Collected*, in stressing Dobson’s concern with ‘the half-seen, the ghostly, and the half-understood’. Dobson, despite her insistence on the ‘simple’ was never one for the trite. It is likewise appropriate for McCooey to quote from an interview he conducted some years back with Dobson where she insisted: ‘Simplicity, clarity and austerity are qualities I hold to.’ She had no desire to complicate or extend poems unnecessarily – or to set up false barriers for readers. Communication was important to her but so was the complexity and elusiveness of what was to be communicated. [...] 

At 358 pages, Rosemary Dobson’s *Collected* is a book to be savoured over several weeks; then shelved for ready and repeated reference. With the (now often unavailable) ‘Collected’ of her other eminent friends and contemporaries, this comprehensive and well-designed book, issued just a few weeks before its author’s death, will remain an important part of our literary heritage.
Perspective 2: Introduction by David McCooey

The following critical essay is the Introduction to Dobson's Collected, published by the University of Queensland Press in 2012. The essay has been edited for reasons of space.

[Rosemary Dobson’s] poetry has always been praised by her peers, and her services to Australian literature have been notable, as her numerous awards suggest. But her greatest service has been to write poems that are beautiful without being precious, challenging without being obscure, and that strive for timelessness without losing sight of what grounds them to reality. We see these qualities most powerfully in this superb new edition of her work, the first to bring together all the poems that Rosemary Dobson wishes to retain.

Throughout her career, Dobson’s poetry had been light-filled and lucid. Light is, of course, the primary medium of paintings and sculptures, books and museums, those things that predate Dobson’s work. The word ‘light’ appears repeatedly in Dobson’s poetry.

But Dobson’s poetry is not ‘merely’ lucid. Things come in and out of vision in Dobson’s poetry, like the half-surreal nuns and deer in ‘A Walk in Richmond Park’. For Dobson, the fleeting vision is the condition of art, as suggested by the numerous poems about early modern artists in her third collection, Child with a Cockatoo. In ‘The Mirror’, for instance, Jan Vermeer, the seventeenth-century Flemish artist famous for his use of light, states after painting his picture that ‘The vision fades / And Time moves on’. Such moments of vision can only be found through a special kind of attentiveness. In ‘The Cry’ the poet waits in silence, even if it means looking foolish, ‘for a sign’.

Artistic vision is found by attending to such ‘signs’, ghostly messages, and mysteries. For this reason, Dobson’s poems are haunted – in ways not often noticed by critics – by visitations, apparitions, omens, announcements, prophecies, and premonitions, things that seem to run counter to Dobson’s rational, light-filled style. In ‘Out of Winter’, the poet asks for ‘The simple truths of early painting – / Births, deaths, and belief in visions’. In her later work, omens and apparitions appear as tropes for loss and the process of getting old. In her marvellous poem on ageing, ‘The Almond-tree in the King James Version’, Dobson writes that ‘it is as I have always been led to believe: / Premonitions, recognitions, the need for acceptance’.

Apparitions and ghostly messages are ambiguous things. On the one hand they signify loss and discontinuity. On the other, their very presence indicates continuance, a remnant of presence not wholly lost. Such a tension is central to what makes Dobson such an interesting poet. Dobson seeks to balance, in compelling and original ways, opposing categories: the seen and the unseen, the material and the immaterial. Continuity and discontinuity, tradition and modernity.

These tensions, which are present more or less from the start of Dobson’s career, emanate from a basic tension between communication and non-communication. As Dobson puts it: ‘Simplicity, clarity, austerity are qualities I hold to. And I feel the need of communication between writer and reader. But then I also like wit, the high-spirited as well as the spiritual, and a certain waywardness or originality – a stepping outside of the expected.’

Even as it attends to the mysterious, Dobson’s poetry is populated by everyday things: ‘blankets, ash-trays’, ‘taxis’, ‘coats hanging in wardrobes’, ‘strange jars of cosmetics’, ‘mown grass and rainfall’ (all from ‘Taken by Surprise’ in the ‘Daily Living’ sequence). What is notable about the many things that appear in Dobson’s poetry is how often they are mediating surfaces: books and pages of books, newspapers and maps, canvases, stones engraved with words, painted vases, tapestries, coins with their stamps, a printer’s typeface, sheets, holland blinds, windows, a cardboard cut-out of Ronald Reagan.

In her most recent work, collected here as ‘Poems to Hold or Let Go and Others’, we are offered the precious gifts of a master poet coming to the end of a long career. These poems show that Dobson remains both brilliantly austere and humane, remaining as ever open to productive tensions. ‘Divining Colander’, dedicated to the poet’s late husband, offers a powerful image of poetry’s power to create a sense of permanence. In ‘Poems a Long Way after Basho’, the poet continues the long poetic tradition of attending to the momentary, the here and now: ‘I breathe the leaves of the basil / It has news for me – / For all my senses’.

Permanence and the momentary: such themes – appropriately – take us back seventy years to the first poem in this book.
Points to consider

- Remember that the purpose of referring to the pieces of literary criticism is to show how they inform your own reading. You are not asked to judge the effectiveness of the writing or to enter into a sustained critique of either piece.
- You are looking for similarities and differences between the two perspectives, as well as similarities with and differences from your own perspective on the text.
- If you are responding to a given topic or other statements (as in sample tasks 3 and 4 on pp.198–9), look for the relevant ideas or terms within the pieces of criticism you are using. For example, in task 4 the key terms are ‘personal’, ‘commonplace’ and ‘eternal’. Geoff Page highlights the personal early in his review (‘one is struck by ... personal qualities and preoccupations’), while McCooey foregrounds a ‘striv[ing] for timelessness’.
- As you read and re-read the two pieces of criticism, think about key passages (or poems or stories) in the text you might draw on to confirm or challenge the ideas presented. You could use a passage/poem/story referred to in the criticism, as well as one or two of your own choosing.

Organise your notes

Good organisation is essential for a coherent, balanced and clearly argued response to this task. Use the table on pp.194–5 as the basis for notes on specific features of the text. Here is an example for two important elements in Dobson’s poetry:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page’s Review</th>
<th>McCooey’s Introduction</th>
<th>Your ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying key images or symbols</td>
<td>* Later poems include ‘observations of, or vignettes about, a considerable range of people’.</td>
<td>* Light; ‘apparitions and ghostly messages’; ‘everyday material things’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments about the author’s style and tone</td>
<td>* ‘There is a tone of voice (quiet, meditative, wry at times) which is effortlessly maintained.’</td>
<td>* Dobson’s ‘rational, light-filled style’ suggests clear ideas and communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* The later poems are ‘written in ... relatively plain diction’ with ‘occasionally ... a more colourful image or turn of phrase’.</td>
<td>* McCooey quotes Dobson’s own liking for simplicity, clarity, austerity as well as ‘wit’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This process does more than simply organise your material; it also forces you to reassess your own ideas about the text, and how you would select textual evidence to support your view.
Poem: ‘The Almond-tree in the King James Version’

The sample response on pp.203–4 makes close reference to the poem ‘The Almond-tree in the King James Version’ by Rosemary Dobson.

White, yes, pale with the pallor of old timbers,
Thistle-stalks, shells, the extreme pallor of starlight –

It is the almond-tree flourishing,
An image of Age in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Premonitions, like visitors turning the door-handle,
cry out, ‘It’s us. It’s only us.’

And I, opening the door from the other side, reply
‘Of course. You are expected.’

To memory I say: ‘You must be disciplined.’
To hands: ‘Do not tremble. Be still.’
To bones: ‘Do not ache. Remain flexible.’
To ears: ‘Do not be affrighted
It is only the voice of the bird.’

To eyes I say: ‘Be faithful. Stay with me.
Do not, looking out of the window, be darkened.’

Yes, it is as I have always been led to believe:
Premonitions, recognitions, the need for acceptance.

*The almond tree shall flourish, and the grass-hopper shall be a burden*
It is all in the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes.

This poem makes an intertextual reference to Chapter 12 of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the King James version of the Bible, which you can read here:
http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Ecclesiastes-Chapter-12/
Sample response

The following essay responds to task 4 on page 199:

'Dobson's poetry shows that what is personal and commonplace can also be eternal.'

In the light of this view, present an interpretation of Rosemary Dobson's *Collected*. Refer to both Geoff Page's review and David McCooy's Introduction in your response.

In Rosemary Dobson's poetry there are many personal and commonplace objects and experiences. There are grape-vines and door-handles; pregnancy and old age. In each she finds a personal perspective, an emotional connection that allows her to tell a story that is both individual and universal. As Geoff Page puts it, her voice is 'quiet, meditative, wry at times', yet at the same time her 'range of cultural reference' and 'constant feel for narrative' gesture towards the wider world of poetry, and of art more broadly. For David McCooy, Dobson understands that 'the fleeting vision is the condition of art', with the implication being that art can take what is 'fleeting' and make it lasting. Through metaphor and image, Dobson gives the commonplace a resonance and significance that link past and present, the personal and the universal, the momentary and the eternal.

David McCooy's Introduction to Dobson's *Collected* notes that Dobson's poetry is 'populated by everyday material things: "blankets, ash-trays", "taxis", "coats hanging in wardrobes", "strange jars of cosmetics", "mown grass and rainfall"'. This is particularly the case in the later poems, as the earlier poems tend to be more abstract, often concerned with art itself. Yet even in such early poems as 'The Mirror', written using the persona of Dutch painter Jan Vermeer and focusing on qualities of light and seeing, Dobson captures the unexceptional materiality of Vermeer's world: a 'curtain's folded shade', 'a window sill'.

As McCooy observes, these everyday 'things' are often 'mediating surfaces' that form a connection between spaces, such as inside and outside. In other words, the possibility of communication is always present in Dobson's poetry. A later example of such mediating surfaces occurs in 'The Greek Vase', in which a garden vase full of leaves from the grape-vine, some of which are blowing away, becomes a metaphor for the origins of western literature. The leaves 'spill out like an alphabet', 'some words perhaps dissembled / from the Iliad or the Odyssey'. Here, too, there is a personal dimension, as the 'whole stanzas on the paving' might also be 'inscriptions for Musa and Erina, friends of my childhood, / in a cryptic calligraphy'. The leaves trigger memories that are personal, but the use of simile and metaphor gives them the wider significance of myth, of stories that last through time as a result of the poet's craft.

The personal in Dobson's poetry is tied to what is universal because it constantly holds open the possibility of communication, even when writer and reader are separated by distances in both space and time. As Geoff Page puts it, 'communication was important to her but so was the complexity and elusiveness of what was to be communicated'. For Page, the experience of reading Dobson's poetry is doubly personal as he frequently heard her read her poems aloud. His review highlights the importance as well as the subtlety of voice in these poems, and the ways in which Dobson's 'personal qualities and preoccupations' lead not simply to introspection, but also to connections and communication. Even
the reader who has not heard her speak is still aware of the poet’s voice in the poems’ speakers, all of whom share a desire to convey something particular about the complexities of human experience in a lasting, meaningful way.

In ‘The Almond-tree in the King James Version’ Dobson draws explicitly on Chapter 12 of the Book of Ecclesiastes, written over two thousand years ago, to signal the universality of the experience of ageing. Once again, simple, familiar objects such as ‘thistle-stalks’ and ‘the door-handle’ ground the poem in an everyday reality; the images of aching bones and trembling hands convey common, recognisable experiences. As McCooey notes, in Dobson’s poetry ‘the seen and the unseen, the material and the immaterial’ often sit side by side; his observations of pairs of binary oppositions— or ‘opposing categories’— that run throughout the poems is a key insight into their creation of surprising connections and tensions. In ‘The Almond-tree in the King James Version’, such a tension is present in the whimsical notion of the speaker addressing intangible ‘premonitions’ as ‘visitors’ on the other side of the door, trying to keep them – and the signs of old age – at bay, knowing all the while that, in the end, the ‘need for acceptance’ is paramount. This is an aspect of Dobson’s wit, which he herself noted and which Page identifies as a key element of her style. But there is also a serious purpose in this holding together of opposites, in noting the paradoxes of life. It is a way of finding in the commonplace a thread that connects with another place, another culture, or especially with another time.

The almond tree is ‘an image of Age’, yet it is flourishing. Memory, hands, ears and eyes may work less efficiently, but the poet, with what McCooey calls ‘a special kind of attentiveness’, finds in age a beauty and transcendence. In places in Dobson’s poetry it is art that transcends – as in Vermeer’s painting; but often the transcendent element is simply life itself, as its deepest experiences are shared by humanity, and that alone gives them an eternal aspect. ‘Annunciations’ describes the experience of pregnancy by including both a physical awareness of ‘the drumming of my blood’ and the cosmic dimensions of ‘the furthest galaxies receding’, conveying a state that is both physically intimate and spiritually mysterious. In ‘Reading Aloud’ the memory of a lifetime of shared reading experiences (‘From Sterne to Kipling, Flaubert, Boswell, Proust’) is unique to two individuals, and also a metaphor for a deep bond between people who share several decades of their lives. The sense of loss when one partner dies is both particular and universally recognisable: the speaker concludes, ‘I press on’.

David McCooey suggests that Dobson’s poems ‘strive for timelessness without losing sight of what grounds them to reality’. In fact, it is through their unwavering attention to what ‘grounds them to reality’ that Dobson’s poetry expresses what is timeless, what connects people who live in different centuries and different continents. They are personal in the sense that their speakers are alert to their experiences and environments; and through this alertness, they find lasting significance and resonance in what seems transient and ordinary.