

Teaching English Literature

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ENGELBERT THALER

Teaching English Literature

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Vorwort zur Reihe

StandardWissen Lehramt – Studienbücher für die Praxis

Wie das gesamte Bildungswesen wird sich auch die künftige Lehramtsausbildung an Kompetenzen und Standards orientieren. Damit rückt die Frage in den Vordergrund, was Lehrkräfte wissen und können müssen, um ihre berufliche Praxis erfolgreich zu bewältigen. Das Spektrum reicht von fachlichen Fähigkeiten über Diagnosekompetenzen bis hin zu pädagogisch-psychologischem Wissen, um Lehren als Unterstützung zur Selbsthilfe und Lernen als eigenaktiven Prozess fassen zu können.

Kompetenzen werden nicht in einem Zug erworben; Lehrerbildung umfasst nicht nur das Studium an einer Hochschule, sondern ebenso das Referendariat und die Berufsphase. Die Reihe StandardWissen Lehramt bei UTB bietet daher Lehramtsstudierenden, Referendaren, Lehrern in der Berufseinstiegsphase und Fortbildungsteilnehmern jenes wissenschaftlich abgesicherte Know-How, das sie im Rahmen einer neu orientierten Ausbildung wie auch später in der Schule benötigen. Fachdidaktische und pädagogisch-psychologische Themen werden gleichermaßen in dieser Buchreihe vertreten sein – einer Basisbibliothek für alle Lehramtsstudierenden, Referendare, Lehrerinnen und Lehrer.

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INTRODUCTION | O

Reading and literature play an important part in people's lives – and that should be reflected in the English language classroom. Christine Nuttall may be right when claiming that “reading is like an infectious disease – it is caught, not taught”. But teachers can create the virus and, by providing a literature-rich environment, make it grow.

Intention and
structure

This book intends to help teachers in pursuing this task. As it is an introduction, it aims to look at all the main areas of teaching English literature in a user-friendly way, but does not dig too deeply into each field. English literature does not only mean the literature of England or the British Isles, but all literature written in the English language. The book consists of four parts, comprising 12 chapters, so that university teachers may – if they wish to – devote one weekly meeting to each chapter, covering the whole contents in one term. The first part (*basis*) tries to answer the questions of what literature is and why, when, where, and what for it should be taught in foreign language classrooms. The second part discusses the *competences* that our students should develop in literature classes (knowledge, skills, attitudes). The main *genres*, i.e. novels, plays, poems and also short narrative forms, are the focus of the third part. The final part goes further, exploring the relationship between literature and modern media and discussing ways of assessing students' LCC (literary communicative competence).

New type of
textbook

This book gives its addressees a brief and reader-friendly introduction to a new field of study. A didactically reflected structure, several graphical elements, concentration on the essential aspects, and a – hopefully – clear style aim at giving the reader a quick and comprehensive survey of the new field. It is written for university students (and their teachers), practising teachers and everybody interested in helping young people to want to read.

In this book every chapter starts with an awareness-raising, pre-reading question, which often makes readers reflect on their own personal experiences, since teacher development and reflective teaching need to take the (future) teacher's learning biography into account. Moreover this book contains a lot of sample texts, which illustrate the argumentation and may stimulate the readers to try them out in their classes. The lesson plans for various levels are meant to serve the same purposes.

BASIS

1 Literature: What?

1.1 Definitions

How would you distinguish between a literary and a non-literary text?

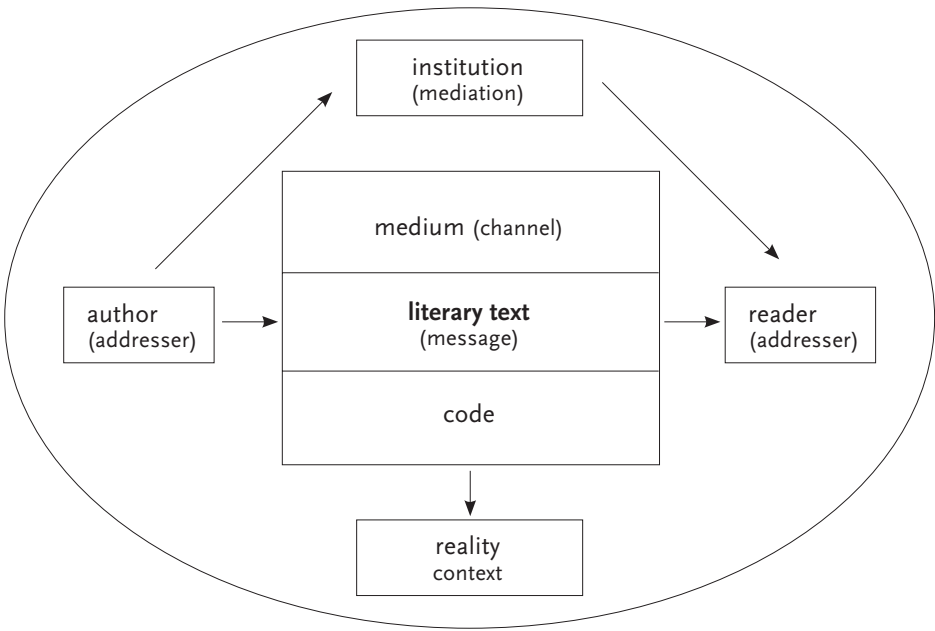
What is literature? “What is literature?” This question by the great French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre has not been answered satisfactorily yet, although countless literary theorists have tried to do so. Everybody seems to have an intuitive understanding of the term *literature*. Yet to be able to make a distinction between literary and non-literary texts, one needs some reliable categories.

Functions of language A good starting-point may be the outstanding Russian linguist ROMAN JAKOBSON. Based on the six dimensions he postulates for the communication process, he distinguishes between six functions of language.

Functions of language		
<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Addresser	Emotive, expressive	To convey one's attitude towards the addressee (self-expression)
Addressee	Conative	To influence the attitudes of the addressee (persuasive addressing of recipient)
Message	Poetic	To refer reflexively to the form of the message (autotelic: having itself as its purpose)
Subject	Referential	To relate the message to reality (contextual information)
Contact	Phatic	to establish contact between addresser and addressee (channel of communication)
Code	Metalingual	To refer to the linguistic code (checking code working)

Based on Jakobson's communication model, Nünning/Nünning developed a model of literary communication (2004:13). An author (addresser) produces a literary text (message), using the medium of writing (channel), and sending it to the reader (addressee, recipient). To understand the text, which – in aesthetically mediated form – refers to the historical and contemporary reality (context), the reader and the author must share a common language and some background knowledge (code). Several institutions (publishers, media, critics) act as mediators of literary works.

Model of literary communication



Models like this put the literary text into a wider communicative context, but do not define what constitutes literature. Descriptive and normative definitions of literature can be found in encyclopaedia, e.g. the Random House Dictionary lists seven different aspects:

Definitions of literature

1. writings in which expression and form, in connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest, are characteristic or essential features, such as poetry, novels, history, biography, and essays
2. the entire body of writings of a specific language, period, people, etc.: *the literature of England*

3. the writings dealing with a particular subject: *the literature of ornithology*
4. the profession of a writer or author
5. literary work or production
6. any kind of printed material, such as circulars, leaflets, or handbills: *literature describing company products*
7. *Archaic*. polite learning; literary culture; appreciation of letters and books

Broad and narrow definitions

This definition already suggests that one can distinguish between broad and narrow definitions of literature (GRABES 1981). In the broadest sense, literature comprises all forms of written communication, i.e. written, printed works. British literary histories such as the *The Oxford History of English Literature*, for example, also include essays, travel literature, pamphlets as well as semi-fictional or non-fictional text types like biographies and works of philosophy. Narrower definitions reduce the scope by focussing on various criteria, very often referring to the poetic and imaginative quality of literary texts. The criteria used, however, are subject to historic change and vary from one cultural context to another.

Literature with a capital *L* and a small *l*

Against the background of broad and narrow definitions, McRae (1997) made a distinction between *Literature with a capital L* and *literature with a small l*. Whereas the former consists of the classical texts of English literatures, such as those by Shakespeare, Dickens, Austen, the latter includes jokes, puns, graffiti, advertisements, newspaper headlines and other short forms not commonly cherished as 'great' works. McRae's distinction encourages the teacher to use texts which may not be of outstanding aesthetic quality ('high-brow' literature), but are motivating because they are short, easy or funny.

Reality and ambiguity

Two recurring criteria for differentiating between literary and non-literary texts are the relation of a text to reality and its ambiguity (polyvalence). In contrast to 'referential texts', "literature makes no claim to convey or represent 'facts'" (Nünning/Nünning 2004: 16). The 'fictionality' (Latin *fingere* , to invent, form) of a text means that the setting (time, place, circumstances) and characters have been fabricated in the author's mind. Therefore literary texts cannot be judged as 'true' or 'false', but rather ask the reader to accept this invented world (*willing suspension of disbelief*: Samuel Taylor Coleridge). And contrary to the explicitness and clarity of non-fic-

tional texts, literary texts “allow for various interpretations, thanks to their internal ambiguities” (Nünning/Nünning 2004: 18). If a text has several potential meanings, teachers cannot insist on a single, binding interpretation, and readers / pupils are offered enough freedom to construct their own meanings and interpretations.

1.2 Classifications

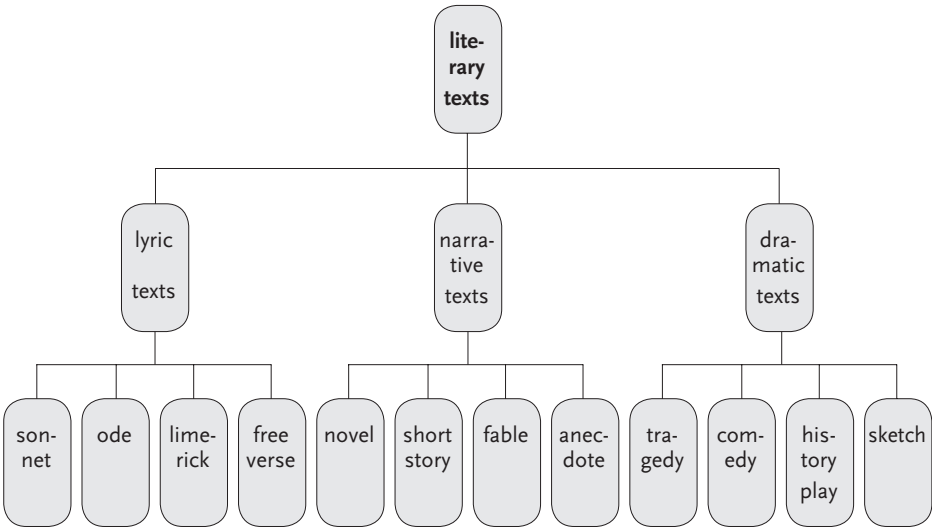
What genres of literature do you know?

Classifications are a helpful tool to structure and order the vast amount of texts. Some of the most important criteria for categorising literature in English (and other languages) are listed in the table below. It goes without saying that the boundaries between the various categories are fluid.

Criteria for
classifications

Literature in the English language	
Nation	English, Scottish, Irish, American, US-American, Canadian, Australian, Indian, African etc.
Historical period	Medieval, Elizabethan, Augustan, Romantic, Victorian etc.
Sociological	Working-class, women's literature
Age	Children's literature, young adult fiction
Genre	Lyric, narrative, dramatic texts
Aesthetic evaluation	High-brow vs low-brow literature, avant-garde, popular literature, pulp fiction
Sense of production	Written, oral
Mode of writing	Narrative, descriptive, argumentative, expository, dramatic, satirical
Media	Printed text, oral literature, audio books, audiovisual, interactive formats, web-based
Relation to reality	Realistic (mimetic) vs fantasy (anti-mimetic) literature
Conventionality	Traditional, experimental, innovative literature

Genres One of the most influential and helpful categories of these is genre. Genres are “constructs based on socio-cultural, literary and social consensus” (VOSSKAMP 1992: 256) and are characterized by “generic features”, i.e. special characteristics to do with content, form, and function. An overview of literary genres with two levels, starting with the three main types (lyric, narrative, dramatic genres), is suggested by the following tree diagram.



1.3 Selection

According to what criteria are you going to choose a text for your class?

The 3 C's When reading literature in class, the first and foremost task is to select a suitable work of literature for one's learners. The students' motivation and the efficiency of the learning process depend to a large extent on the right choice of literature. The three C's – catalogue, canon, criteria – can help in this important matter of selection.

Catalogues All publishing companies offer catalogues and brochures in which they inform the reading public about the books they have in stock. The publishers specialising in English language titles

usually list their books according to age or reading ability. They include short descriptions about the book, and browsing through these pages can give the teacher a lot of new ideas.

A canon is a list of books which are generally recognized as being the most important pieces of literature – artistically superior examples known as classics. The English and American departments of many universities offer such canons on their homepages (e.g. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München: <http://www.anglistik.uni-muenchen.de>). In England, Education Secretary Alan Johnson and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) issued a list of recommended authors for the secondary curriculum in 2007:

Canon

QCA list of classic authors

Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Blake, Charlotte Bronte, Robert Burns, Geoffrey Chaucer, Kate Chopin, John Clare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, George Eliot, Thomas Gray, Thomas Hardy, John Keats, John Masefield, Alexander Pope, Christina Rossetti, William Shakespeare (sonnets), Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jonathan Swift, Alfred Lord Tennyson, HG Wells, Oscar Wilde, Dorothy Wordsworth and William Wordsworth.

Such canons may serve as a guideline and a contribution to a well-rounded (British) education, but they also pose problems because it is hard to find a consensus on which works to include, and some people reject its prescriptive, imperative quality. Moreover, the QCA list met with sharp criticism from teachers' organisations, who argued that teaching texts of such linguistic complexity to 11-14-year-olds, who are not yet ready for them, would be counter-productive and turn them off from classic authors. How much more complex must those classics seem to teenagers who learn English as a foreign language?

A third source of selection can be used by looking at certain criteria. The following list contains some of the most important guidelines grouped around school, teacher, learner and text.

Criteria