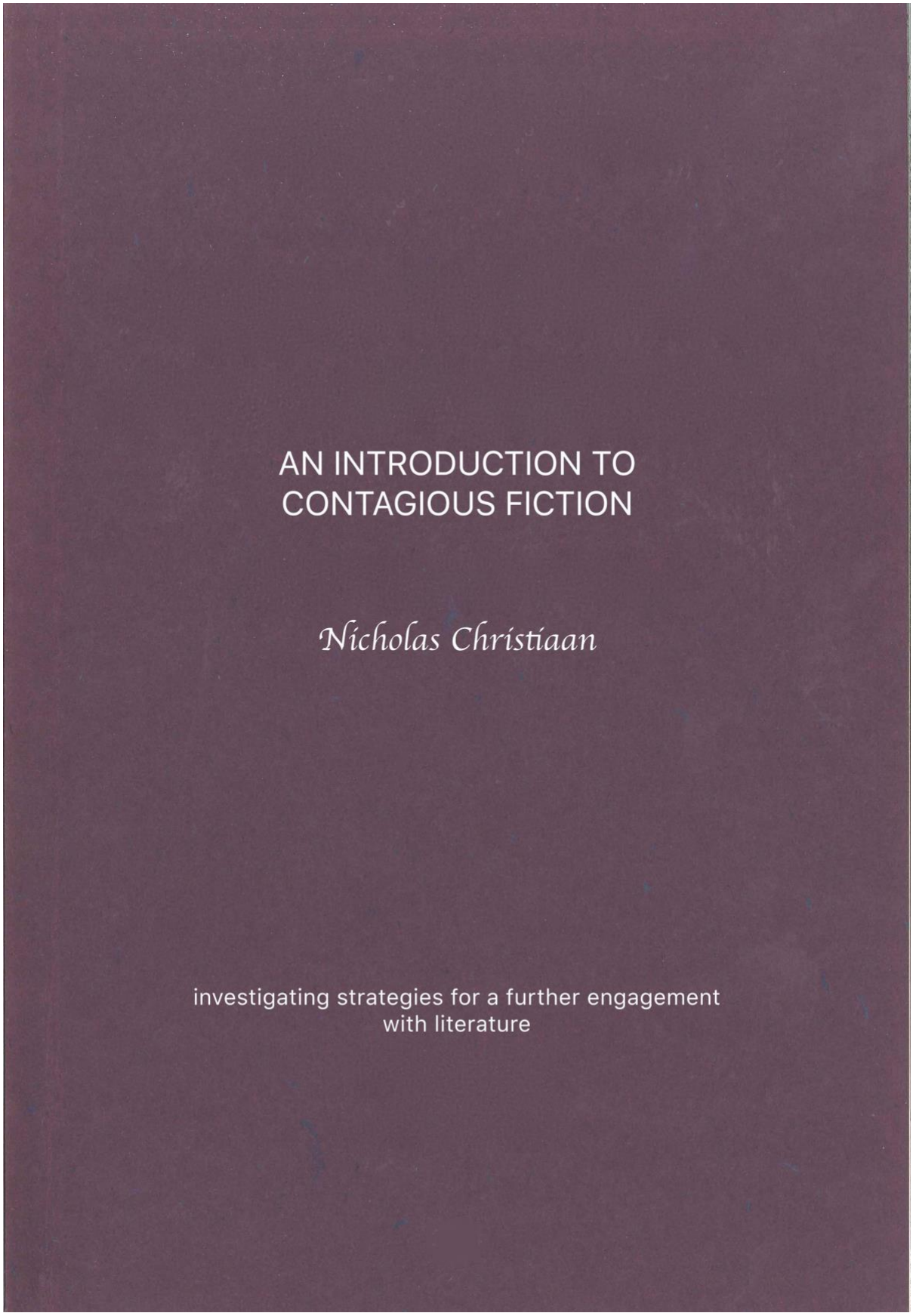
AN INTRODUCTION TO
CONTAGIOUS FICTION
Nicholas Christiaan
investigating strategies for a further engagement
with literature

Fiction is Contagious

A cinema usher I once knew, a sly, observant type, said he liked to watch audiences file out of James Bond movies. A transformation would have taken place in the men, he said. They were changed from the chatty, expectant crowd that entered. Now, they would walk several feet in front of the women with a quiet certainty and gravitas; some would tug on their shirt sleeves, others would scan their immediate surroundings. There was an atmosphere of contained power in the foyer that hadn't existed a couple of hours earlier. What's more, their behaviour towards him as an usher had changed; a class difference had opened up - they were respectful but those nuanced markers of status were now apparent. He concluded that this was the Bond effect. In other words, something in the material of the film had transmitted itself to receptive members of the audience.

I claim that literature, and to an extent all art, has a similarly contagious effect on those who read it or watch it. By carefully considering how fiction literature innately impacts the reader we can devise resources, exercises, classes and syllabi that deepen our relationship with the works. Furthermore, we can increase its level of contagion. This approach offsets some of the impact of critical analysis, a lens that, at its worst, narrows our appreciation of a novel, leading to passive, disengaged readers.

In part I of this essay, I summarise how students, from school onwards, study English literature, and discuss the impact of French post-modernism on the UK education system. I explore the current non-academic options for those not prepared to take the university route. Part II maps the evolution of my own thinking on the subject. Part III is a toolbox of educational techniques that promote a non-critical, humanist response to a book. Their explicit aim is to involve the reader in the novel. In other words, the reader must sit inside the novel itself rather than standing outside of it and assessing it through an objective lens. Taken

together, I have called these techniques *contagious fiction*. They are experimental and playful and would benefit from being further workshopped.

This essay is motivated by a deeply held dissatisfaction at the way English literature is taught, something I've experienced as a student, as a tutor, a workshop leader and as a course content creator. I cannot and will not forget the sense of ennui I experienced at university in the 1990s, stuffing Victorian novels under the critical microscope. It felt like performing an autopsy. This reflex to apply a critical lens has more recently escaped the academic laboratory, and the wider culture is experiencing the effects of theories incubated in university humanities departments. Analytics and ideology seem to take precedence over a more human response. My intention with contagious fiction is to attempt a return to an engagement with books that existed before modern critical consciousness.

I am not alone in articulating this problem; there is an increasing appetite for alternatives. American educationalist Margaret Kelly writes, in a recent Substack post, that university students need to learn 'beautiful forms of expression, truths about human nature, and great ideas of wisdom, love, virtue, piety and the good life'.[1] As an unhappy undergraduate, my greatest wish was to experience, once again, the excitement I felt when first reading Alice's Adventures in Wonderland at the age of ten. It remains not just the most exciting book I've read, but the single most exciting experience I've ever had. Of course, we develop as readers, our appreciation matures, and our understanding of contexts forms a vital part of our comprehension of what we read. But, if the visceral thrill I felt reading Lewis Carroll *can* be re-engaged, I know it won't be as a result of applying a post-modern critical

[1] Kelly, Margaret (2024), *The problem with English departments is they don't teach English*, Substack.

lens. And, reading fiction at its best is visceral, not critical.

Literature is the transmission of certain states through writing. Fiction is contagious. A lifetime's memories have been coloured by its inventions; our lives influenced by its benevolent or malign presence; in unguarded moments its lies are revealed to be truths – struck by the sharp smell of polish on a lift door, or that certain way in which the breeze hits you; the strange, beguiling power of fiction, infiltrates the now, altering the ways in which we see.

PART I: POLEMICS

English at school

English and maths are the only compulsory subjects at school level in the UK.[2] Literacy and numeracy underpin all education because it is almost impossible to negotiate society as an adult without them. They are practical skills. However, although maths as an academic subject is cohesive, and science divides coherently into chemistry, biology and physics, it is less clear to the average parent what the subject of English means at GCSE level. It becomes two distinct subjects: English language and English literature. It's not widely known that it is only studying English as a language - as a formal, practical skill - that is mandatory for 16 year olds.

Once the division into two subjects takes place in year 10 (at 14/15 years old), students can typically expect to study a Shakespeare play, a 20th century play, a legacy novel, for example, Austen or Brontë, a modern novel or two, and a selection of poems spanning the centuries. The syllabus varies, depending on exam boards, but traditional areas of study include the Word War I poets or the gothic novel.[3] The texts selected for the syllabus are the subject of intense debate, in part because choosing what a person reads at a young age, and then making them read it, can play a crucial role in shaping the kind of person they become.

Language analysis

I am not concerned, however, with what a student studies, rather *how* they study it. Until the age of ten, studying a book at school generally involves comprehensions - answering a set of questions to demonstrate that the student understands what they've read. At the start of secondary school, students get their first taste of *language analysis.* They are told to consider language by unpicking the words in a text, examining its structure, and breaking it down into

[2] National Curriculum (2014)
[3] English literature syllabus specification (2016)

smaller, simpler elements.[4] Therefore, students are required to not only read the text, but make interpretations of it. 'Reading between the lines' is a core skill at key stage three.[5] Language analysis teaches students to first discuss, then write about what motivates characters, what themes are important in the text, and introduces the contexts of the novel – the aspects of society the writer is writing about. A typical question might be:-

> Explain the importance of conflict in Macbeth.
> In your answer you must consider:
> • how conflict is shown
> • the reasons for the conflict
>
> *Pearson Edexcel English Literature Paper 1: Shakespeare and Post-1914 Literature*

It goes without saying, this is an important life skill too – imagine how life-limiting it would be to live without a worked up sense of interpretation. But, it does mean that for the first time, at the age of 11 or 12, a student must write *about* a book, rather than simply reading it and liking it or disliking it. They are required to be objective. And, in being objective, they have to convince the person marking their answers that their objectivity is rational, coherent and cohesive. Not only do they have to write about the book, they have to explain it too. *What is the effect on the reader of metaphor x on page 160? How does the writer use language to make character x so menacing?* On one level, this is like explaining why a joke is funny rather than just laughing at it.

This theoretical work, that starts at 12, gradually shifts a child's focus. I've worked with children who have demonstratively hated this stage; and watching them hate it, I have begun to hate what *I* am doing – building an interpretative distance between them and the book. This type of formal analysis is their first exposure to a set of critical apparatus that has

[4] BBC Bitesize (2025)
[5] National curriculum - key stage 3 and 4 (2025)

become the factory setting in the study of literature throughout the school and university system. Teaching it, some students grasp the technique immediately – it's often linked to emotional maturity. Others lag behind, their stabs at analysis are unsophisticated and wide of the mark, their approach to fiction stuck in the embryonic 'once upon a time' stage.

Intuitive, individualised patterns of reading are discarded. The ways of reading the child has acquired up to this point, accumulated in what Sartre called 'private lessons'[6], are now permeated by a diagnostic way of reading that disregards the *actual* way that people read. Reading is personal – you and the book. Character A reminds you of someone you know; you have a physiological response to a particular chapter; you despise character B for reasons you can't articulate; your image of the street in which character C lives is wild and chaotic and beyond anything described in the book; Character D has now become emeshed with the waiter who has just delivered you a coffee, in the café in which you sit, immersed in a private world, with private thoughts. In other words, simply through reading, the reader is developing their own material, prompted and revealed by the book. Until now, they have been reading the book on the level of contagion – spreading from one writer to one reader, mimicking behaviours, and influencing emotions and ideas.[7] This transmission can be conscious, but more often it is unconscious – it is visceral, it is mysterious. At 12, the instinct is flattened by critical analysis.

Yet, what if it could be channelled instead? I'm interested in developing an educational framework that reifies and explores individual and innate reading patterns. If this framework were applied *alongside* language analysis, this would be a more holistic educational model; one that doesn't arbitrarily terminate 'childish' reading. The two frameworks may even inform each other. Furthermore, a set of techniques that play with the

[6] Sartre, Jean-Paul (1963), *Les Mots,* Penguin.
[7] Beyond contagion, University of Sussex (2025)

elemental reading experience - the state that existed before interpretation – may function, not only as an effective way of preserving a reading habit in children, but have a transforming effect on adult readers as well.

At 12, interpretive reading has begun (in some it has been jumpstarted). Let's presume the student's pleasure in reading has not been impacted by this, and skip forward three or four years. At A-level, named academic theorists are introduced so now, not only must the student interpret the text themselves, they must also weave into their essay writing the thoughts of professional literary theorists. These 'secondary sources' expand a student's critical consciousness. Innate reading of the text has been fractured once more, firstly by individual, rational interpretation, now by the interpretations of others. In fact, students begin to learn that there are multiple interpretations of texts – called lenses – and some of these are deeply political. Once you pick up lens you see the text has a wholly new complexion. You discover that reading books is stereoscopic. Then, with a good set of A-level results, you are faced with a similar choice to Alice: you can forget everything you've learned about critical analysis…or, you can take the drink me potion.

English at universities

Edinburgh University is proud to house the oldest department of English Literature in the world, having first offered courses on 'rhetoric and belles lettres' nearly 250 years ago.[8] That puts it relatively late compared to other academic disciplines in the UK, and certainly by comparison to law, medicine or theology. By the nineteenth century, it was increasingly necessary for a person to be able to read and count in order to function in society, and this necessity was improving the teaching of formal literacy and numeracy at school level.[9] Whilst reading for pleasure was still derided as a popular way of gratifying common needs,

[8] University of Edinburgh (2025)
[9] Graff, Harvey J. (1987), *The Legacies of Literacy,* Indiana.

universities did finally begin to give lectures on English authors. Until this time, literature as an academic subject was, like much of academia in general, focussed on the classical canon.[10] Although literary theory had its foundations in the canon (best exemplified by Aristotle's theory of mimesis and catharsis[11]), the first whole degree in English literature was not offered until the twentieth century.[12]

In the university setting, two educational formats run concurrently: the lecture and the tutorial. The lecture is teacher to student, and the tutorial (or seminar) is a group discussion led by a faculty member. This is the standard academic model for teaching, but here it's worth pausing to take a look at the options for someone who decides against the university route. This is important because increasingly potential students are re-considering the practical implications of high debt levels often necessary to fund a degree in the humanities.

The most direct parallel to university study of fiction is the book group. These experienced a resurgence in 1996 with Oprah Winfrey's Book Club and then Richard and Judy's British equivalent.[13] A fictional TV series followed, which crystalised the book group in the public consciousness as belonging to a cosy suburbia of living rooms, extra-marital sex, with plenty of wine thrown in.[14] There is a nice circularity in this; the same associations might have sprung to the mind of a Victorian man of affairs at the thought of his wife's novel reading habits - by the mid-nineteenth century the novel was perceived as vulgar, gossipy, and strictly for women. Today, women are more than twice as likely as men to take part in a book group.[15] Without the trappings of academia, the lecture, the critical analysis, the

[10] Irvine, R 2010, *English Literary Studies: Origin and Nature*. in D Cavanagh, A Gillis, M Keown, J Loxley & R Stevenson (eds), The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 16-24.
[11] Richard B. Sewall Leonard W. Conversi, *Theory of Tragedy*, 2025, Britannica.
[12] *Irvine, (n 10).*
[13] Winfrey, Oprah, *Oprah Winfrey's Book Club* (2025)
[14] The Book Group, (2002-3) www.imdb.com
[15] Niles, Calvin, Why men don't join book groups (2022)

response essay, the book group reviewer is forced to take an avowedly and unashamedly subjective, humanist attitude to a novel - 'I like this because it made me feel melancholy' or, 'this chapter reminded me of my childhood'. Reading may be a personal pursuit, but talking about what you've read seems to be a popular second response, with book group membership increasing by 350% between 2019 and 2023 (not uncoincidentally, I would suggest, this includes the COVID years).[16] The popularity of book groups has had an impact on publishing itself, and the exposure lent by Richard and Judy potentially increases a novel's sales; Monica Ali and Audrey Niffenegger's careers took off after kind reviews on the TV sofa. A more recent, but less sociable, variant is *goodreads*, which has built an online community offering peer book reviews – a consumer service much needed at a time when dust jacket blurbs are written by friends of the novelist who may or may not have actually read the novel.

It is the social aspect to book groups that seems to be the draw; chats are gently directed by the reading material, the book a conversational prompt. However, many have also reported that being part of an informal reading community has improved their reading skills (although this skill is rarely defined).[17] If this is the case, that a non-academic group focus on a text can increase a reader's appreciation of that text, then it's worth investigating what added value, beyond a formal qualification, a degree in English literature offers.

The syllabus

University prospectuses market an English literature degree to students as multidisciplinary. Of these disciplines, there is great value placed on an understanding of literature's cultural contexts. Northumbria University's course teaches 'how words and language have developed, and what this means for us and society'.[18] Liverpool John Moores'

[16] The Guardian (2024), In the midst of a boom in book clubs as gen zs hobbies change
[17] Morris, Adam, Twinkl (2025) The Benefits of Book Clubs
[18] University of Northumbria study guide (2025)

course examines ‘a wide range of cultures and intellectual traditions’.[19] The practice of examining books in relation to the culture in which they were written has been a crucial part of academic English literature for generations. Cambridge colleges divide their courses by era plus contexts:-[20]

Early Medieval Literature and its Contexts 1066 to 1350

English Literature and its Contexts from:

1500 to 1700

1660 to 1870

1830 to 1945

There is a much emphasis on contexts in undergraduate prospectuses (the word is even capitalised in some course subheadings). This socio-cultural commentary is considered necessary to give students an informed reading of the text. However, I would argue it, more often than not, gives students a deeper understanding of the culture into which the novel was written rather than a particularly deep understanding of the novel itself. We seem to take it on trust that by increasing contextual knowledge, we are deepening our engagement with the writer or the novel. In reality, the depth of an individual student’s reading of a book is more determind by the motivations that brought them to read a particular book in the first place and how it personally impacts them. Deep Context does not equal Deep Reading. Yet, University of Bristol’s prospectus makes the claim that their degree programme is ‘designed to give you a deep understanding of the literary past and the literary present’[21] Here, the word ‘deep’ is

[19] Liverpool John Moores, (2024), Reasons to study English, blog
[20] University of Cambridge, Undergraduate admissions (2025)
[21] University of Bristol undergraduate prospectus (2025)

doing a lot of work. Perhaps we focus on cultural contexts at university level because there is no scheme available to educators to *properly* assess understanding of a novel. Examining students on cultural contexts better suits the standard teaching and assessment techniques at universities: tutorials, essays, and exams.

Applying theory

If English literature exists as a kind of written record, and this record is to be effectively studied, it is necessary to formalise a set of academic standards and language. To an extent, comporting oneself with this academic standard is what separates the university reader from the book group reader. The written record is potentially a trillion words, and this now includes, surely a billion or so words of criticism. Much has been written *about* literature. Nevertheless, I would argue we don't read books only to speak or write about them, but also to enter the world the book contains. That's a fundamental distinction that a seven year old is more likely to be able to grasp than a 47 year old. Academic criticism has formulated a language to better assess a text, but this language does not necessarily get us closer to the world the text contains.

In the codifying of this interpretive language, it is hard to underestimate the role of French post-modern thinkers working in the second half of the 20th century. The influence of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Guy Debord and Louis Althusser has changed the way we talk about books at a university level in the UK, imitating much of their syntactical gymnastics and their thesis that, not only is it useful to look at texts through a political lens, it's impossible *not* to do so.

Derrida, for example, was of the opinion that western thought from Plato onwards laboured under the illusory promise that language was capable of capturing a reality beyond language. He was pessimistic about the meaning of what we say or write, explaining that it is always undecideable, struggling to take shape, tumbling and tearing in a battle of 'differing

and deferring'.[22] This is why, he explained, it is crucial that meaning is exposed to a continual struggle session, presided over by especially educated scholars. Once decoded, this academic interpretation of the text can be employed to whatever end the academic has in mind.

And there are many potential ends. Apply a Marxist lens and the end will be political. Apply a post-colonial lens and the end will be to identify latent prejudice. Apply a feminist lens and the end will be to centre women in the culture. Jacques Lacan viewed literature through a psychoanalytical lens, which is how we end up with literary criticism like this:-

"It is the connexion between signifier and signifier that permits the elision in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation using the value of 'reference back' possessed by signification in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports."[23]

Undoubtedly, there is a place for the Lacanian lens, and if those who actually understand the above sentence are more enlightened about a particular work of literature as a result of it, then this is not to be dismissed. Personally, I feel equally disconnected from its verbiage as the 12 year old boy stuck in the 'once upon a time' phase feels disconnected from language analysis.

French deconstruction may seem like a peculiar form of sophistry, but it is axiomatic in some English departments. In the course outline for the University of Warwick's English degree it is acknowledged that 'no other philosopher has exerted as powerful an influence over literary studies during the last thirty years as Jacques Derrida'.[24] To some, these kind of language games are benign – just another way of seeing the world. To others, they are a way

[22] Derrida, Jacques, Différance transl by Alan Bass, Margins, Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp 3-27.
[23] Evans, Julia, Lacanian Works Exchange (2025)
[24] University of Warwick Master's postgraduate prospectus, (2025)

of changing the world. Michel Foucault, co-opting Marx, refined the battleground of meaning established by Lacan and Derrida into one dominated by power dynamics: the oppressed against the oppressor. Foucault asserted that are no objective truths; those that have erroneously been established are the outcome of 'contingent historical forces', rather than objectively grounded truths.[25] This claim acts less like a lens through which to view the world, and more like a meteor with which to destroy it. Nevertheless, it's a perspective with an obvious political utility, and Foucault's work, building on the work of Herbert Marcuse, found an initial audience in left wing radicals in the wake of the student revolt of 1968, themselves channelling the spirit of Mao Zedong's Chinese cultural revolution. To an extent, literature and literacy has always been associated with revolutionary agitation – by the late eighteenth century, increased literacy rates amongst the working classes had helped build a political picture of the organisation of their society, the works of Dickens and social realist writers were crucial to development of class consciousness.[26] It's rare to find an English course that has nakedly political aims, but, as is widely acknowledged, Foucault's critical approach is liberally applied at universities, and the raising of critical consciousness *is* an often stated aim.[27] And, anyone who has spent any time in a university humanities department, will have noticed that the word critical, in the words, of Isaac Gottesman, has become a 'descriptor for left educational scholarship'[28] Critical analysis ends reading as a politically naïve activity – there's no going back once you've swallowed the red pill. It is

[25] Bernauer, James William, 1990, Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward An Ethics for Thought, (Contemporary studies in philosophy and the human sciences), Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
[26] *Graff, (n. 9)*
[27] Clark, R. Ivanic, R, The Critical Turn in Education From Marxist Critique to Poststructuralist Feminism to Critical Theories of Race, 1999
[28] Baker, Aaron A.. "Isaac Gottesman's The Critical Turn in Education: From Marxist Critique to Poststructuralist Feminism to Critical Theories of Race." Intersections: Critical Issues in E ducation 4, 1 ().

expedient to teach English literature this way - in a Guardian article, the author, educator, speaker, broadcaster and journalist Jeffrey Boakye wrote:-

> 'Now more than ever, we need to be encouraging successive generations to enter the world with curiosity, sensitivity and criticality. The polarised nature of popular politics and swelling tides of historic bigotry show us that we need intimacy with the lived experiences of marginalised groups and awareness of how dominant identities have been constructed, as well as critical distance from the ideologies that threaten to consume us. The arts are a crucial location of these aims and, for me, literature has been where ideological fault lines are best addressed.'[29]

Boakye's attitude gives us an insight into how critical theory of reading has morphed into political theory of reading. Universities teaching students to understand literature within its cultural context has now become the first stage of a political activism to undermine and evolve *out* of those cultural contexts. Here it is not the text that matters most, but the context. The context is crucial - by a factor of at least a hundred.

We can begin to understand how an 18 year old who has been exposed to critical theory for the first time might feel. If they are sensitive, it is an almost religious revealing of truths. Reality, as they have always known it, is shown to be a smoke and mirrors of latent power dynamics, and word meanings that are undecideable until such a time as they can be decolonised or reclaimed. To thus deconstruct a society that authority figures have always told them is the truth – the be-all and end-all – must be visceral.

But it is not as visceral as the works themselves. For fiction to be properly contagious, to read it as its authors intended it, our responses must be naked. In effect, Derrida's microscope of competing interpretations acts deliberately against this nakedness. It builds, in a student, a reflex that is perpetually defensive, hedging, and qualifying. The retreat to critical

[29] The Guardian 2022 What an English degree did for me

distance that began at school, retreats still further. The actor Sir Ian Mckellan once spoke about how babies are born with the ability to put themselves in imaginary worlds and as adults we forget to do that.[30] McKellan pointed out that actors are simply people who haven't forgotten. I claim however, that there has been a conscious effort, in the way the educational system is structured, to *make* us forget how to place ourselves in imaginary worlds. In raising a student's critical consciousness universities are distancing students from the works themselves and therefore, from their own imaginations. The wide adoption of the jargon of French structuralist thinkers – the lingua franca of course content - can be compared to the liturgy of Latin mass in a pre-reformation church or an entomologist labelling insects that have always been to referred to by common names; simply switching to a more utilitarian English would make university courses more accessible to ordinary people. Unlearning the postmodern critical thinkers may also help dispel the motivated misconception, apparent both in academia and in the book publishing industry, that literature exists to make the world a better place.[31] Personally, I am more than happy to read books that make the world a *worse* place. Surely there is a danger, in assessing works on the basis of this fallacious pretext, that we honour moral virtue over artistic merit? Yet here is the contradiction at the heart of university curricula: we can make no definitive claim about artistic merit, but we can do so about moral virtue.

Applying criticism

If naïve reading engages directly with the text, and critical theory develops the framework by which the *student* interprets the text, then criticism applies that framework, and evaluates the text.

For the literary critic, no text is ever dissociated from its author or context. A good

[30] BBC articles, Sir Ian McKellan

[31] Pancrazi, Laetitia, *To read or not to read - the importance of literature in advocating for social justice*, 2023

case in point is the battle over Josef Conrad's soul. In a 1974 essay, 'An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness', Chinua Achebe identifies the many signs and symbols of Conrad's latent and not so latent racism.[32] Achebe's reading of the text gained some currency. Essays were written in defence of Conrad, amongst them by Caryl Phillips, who suggested that Conrad was in fact attacking the racism of colonialism.[33] Conrad, who by this point had been dead for 50 years, was not able to give his own opinion. Very few, if any, chose to read the text as a metaphorical journey or an inner exploration – but then an interpretation such as this is impossible if the reader refuses, even for five minutes, to disentangle the novel from its surroundings, from its time and from its author.

Of course language can be read politically, but it can also be read naïvely. I once gave a talk in front of a small group of students. Going off-script, I finished a joke with… 'just like the blackness of my soul'. Driving home, re-living my talk, as some of us are unfortunately prone to do, I thought about that line. I had been addressing a racially mixed group of students, some of whom were black. Was the gusto with which I associated blackness with evil a sensitive thing to do? Lost in these thoughts I was demonstrating applied critical theory – criticism – an act of self-auditing. Yet, I continued to think beyond this: if we have souls, then surely they contain a positive or negative charge, and this can be compared to the bringing in of light, or its leaving. And white reflects all colours whilst black absorbs all colours. So, here the problem wasn't my metaphorical use of 'black', it was the indistinct racial categorisation that is routinely used in society and applied to people - we are not really black and white people. Calling us these words and then sensitising people to their use contributes to a climate in which language becomes a battleground; lost in the midst of the battle is a greater truth, often bound up in individual metaphors. Instead of talking or writing

[32] Achebe, Chinua, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, 1974
[33] Phillips, Caryl, *Out of Africa*, 2003, The Guardian.

about literature, these metaphors can be separated from their critical context and enjoyed as an abstraction, like they regularly are when we read naïvely. In Mark Cousins' Scene by Scene interview with film director Roman Polanski, the Polish auteur, irritated by the journalist's continual reference to political contexts snaps that the viewer has rights too – 'what's important is what [the audience] sees in the cinema. [As a viewer] you are catering to your own desires.'[34] He dismisses much of Cousins' interpretations as 'monkey see, monkey do' arguing that they are all far too simplistic.

If we were to accept that all our interpretations, no matter how learned or skilled, are ultimately superficial, then perhaps we could begin to engage with the works in a more meaningful way. Unfortunately, critical interpretation is more often seen as the last, or the definitive word on the subject. But, if the metaphors of fiction could be formally explored in an educational setting, the student might get closer to the sort of truth revealed by the work itself, rather than by its proxy – the critical lens. In other words, the trillion or so words of English literature, properly purposed, is a metaphysic – a repository of truths universally acknowledged. And, as Mark Edmundson observes, this is your right:-

> 'If you set theory between readers and literature — if you make theory a prerequisite to discussing a piece of writing — you effectively deny the student a chance to encounter the first level of literary density, the level he's ready to negotiate. Theory is used, then, to banish aspiring readers from literary experience that by rights belongs to them.'[35]

So many of the arguments made in favour of studying literature at university reduce the subject to yet another sociology. In clinging to this sociology its advocates simply cannot

[34] Cousins, Mark, *Scene by Scene*, 2000, BBC
[35] Spreng, Eric, Book talk: Mark Edmundson's why read? (2015).

invoke the abstract and universal, the socratic power native and alive in books. Doing so would undermine the cultural relativism of their position.

Post-critique

For all the limitations and distortions of critical theory, English literature remains a multi-disciplinary subject, and there is a persuasive case that critical theory is a key component of it. It does convey a rigorous academic objectivity, so that, in the words of novelist Linda Grant, 'it [doesn't] matter whether we [find] any of the characters in the novels we read likable, relatable, or relevant to our personal experience.'[36] Done well, critical theories offer students an objective apparatus that can be applied to novels that, if not quite as useful as theories in engineering or chemistry, do contain a certain amount of academic consistency. Done badly, they do not illuminate, rather they dismantle. There are signs the academy is already reflecting on this. In 'The Limits of Critique', Rita Felski outlines one potential future, with the aim to 'de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—therefore freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument'.[37]

However, I would go further. The fight for the primacy of the book may be better (and certainly more cheaply) fought away from the universities. The academic process, by definition, requires distance - it should be a rational method that builds evidence, and builds *on* evidence. Therefore, it can never incorporate personal, naïve literary responses. Yet, we know that, no matter how educated we are, we continue to feel those responses – our schooling in critical distance has not removed them completely. The audience at a James Bond screening are having a visceral experience; the reader who finishes Eimear McBride's

[36] *The Guardian (n 29)*

[37] Felski, Rita, *The Limits of Critique*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

The Lesser Bohemains, then sits staring at the walls, tears rolling down their cheeks, is not placing the novel through a critical lens. If we have been educated in the UK, we have been educated in critical distance; the motivation for this is, as educationalist Ken Robinson remarks, is because the education system is set up so that its pinnacle is the university professor.[38]

Contagious fiction is not an academic discipline. Rather, it is a set of techniques that are grouped in order to 'play' with what is most immediate in a reader's response to a work of fiction - as a technique, it should have more in common with yoga than with academic English literature. The two approaches to literature can sit happily alongside one another, even enrich each other; the broader practice of literary criticism, in its many forms, is not inimical to the appreciation of literature that a seven-year-old might spontaneously develop.

That is, up to a point. A humanist response to literature is less likely to be popular with someone like Jeffrey Boakye, for whom literature exists only as a 'dialogue with the way things are now', whilst it might be applauded by the critic Harold Bloom, who calls Shakespeare a 'miracle' who 'transcends any context that you try to find for him'.[3940] This fact alone might lead some to consider teaching contagious fiction as an act of political belligerence, but there really are some of us who have had glimpses of a reality, greater than politics, that exists in literature. We should remember however, in using such devotional language, we are just as vulnerable to bullshit as critical theory is to Derrida-esque nihilism.

The techniques outlined in part III of this essay, engage with the 'art' of literature. This is important - until 2016/17, around a fifth of AS/A-level students chose to study English Literature (19% of the 2015/16 cohort). This has since declined to 11% of the

[38] Robinson, Ken, Do schools kill creativity? Tedtalk, 2006

[39] *The Guardian (n 29)*

[40] Bloom, Harold, Shakespeare: the invention of the human, Charlie Rose, 1998

cohort.[41] Beyond this, at university-level, there is a conspicuous lack of confidence in literature as an academic discipline – its link to employability increasingly important in an era of mounting student debt. If we can plausibly argue that the soft skills of critical interpretation are invaluable in society, then perhaps we can also look upon advances in artificial intelligence as an opportunity to uplevel our more innate, human skills. There exists a palpable sense that our humanity is being degraded by technology. In a future dominated by artificial processing power, a student's educated, worked-up access to the human condition becomes a transferable skill. Literature, in its primitive form, offers us this. In Matthew Arnold's eyes culture is 'to know the best that has been said and thought in the world', but I argue the study of literature has not been organised to highlight this latent power.[42] Indeed, if literature teaches, and this teaching is spontaneous, can we formulate a technique to harness its power? Can we teach students by increasing the rate of its contagion?

There are answers in literature, but it can also ask the most perceptive questions, give and teach. There is a layered richness in writing that comes out under the microscope of engagement that is missed by theory, which cannot analyse the forms of creativity.

If this is to done effectively, we must stress the importance of play and of testing ideas. We must actively engage with literature, and the first step in this is to acknowledge what literature actually is - a bunch of made-up stuff that comes directly from our imaginations – those of the writer and crucially, of the reader. It is possible to cut across critical distance – the nailing down of words, the explanation of jokes. We can reclaim naïve reading. I know it's possible because I have done it.

---

[41] *Scott, Michael et al, Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*, 2024

[42] Arnold, Matthew, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism,* Cornhill Magazine, 1867