

Theoretically Speaking about Literature

Theoretically Speaking about Literature:

*Understanding Theory in the
Study of Literary Works*

Edited by

David Owen and Cristina Pividori

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-7444-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7444-1

A writer only begins a book. A reader finishes it.
—Attributed (contestably) to Samuel Johnson.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This has been a long and winding road, but the journey—precisely for these characteristics—was an absorbing one. Our first note of thanks goes, of course, to our authors for their kind forbearance and unrelenting support, and for the clarity with which they have explained literary theory throughout their respective chapters.

We also wish to thank our many students who, over the years and through their questions and concerns, have led us to think about how to make literary theory more accessible and practical for their needs. In a very direct sense, this book is also yours.

David Owen & Cristina Pividori

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OPENING COMMENTS

Theoretically Speaking is an introduction to literary theory. It is intended primarily for university-level students (at all stages) and their teachers. Although it is written largely—though not exclusively—by teachers of English literature whose references are frequently to writers and critics from within the English-speaking world, it is applicable to the literatures of any language.

Understanding literary theory is now an essential part of studying literature and the humanities in general. In today's world, and in light of recent historical and social events, it has become vital that we learn how to read critically and understand the flood of information and the multitude of voices emerging from literature and culture. But students' contact with the ideas and objectives of literary theory is often difficult, not least because these are obscured by the complexity of the language used and by an implicit assumption of considerable prior knowledge required to successfully navigate the arguments presented.

This book not only recognises the difficulties faced by students in their early acquaintance with literary theory, as well as those of the teachers who set out to help these students develop greater familiarity with the notions that they encounter in this arena; it also actively takes their part.

Although this volume revolves around a sample text, in this case a folktale, our intention is to allow students and teachers to apply the critical theories discussed here to their own choice of literary readings. We introduce the major ideas of literary theory in an accessible and comprehensible manner so that students are able to see how these ideas are applicable to a fuller and more informed interpretation of literature and also, of equal or still greater importance, so that they can feel confident in applying these ideas to their own critical and interpretative endeavours.

INTRODUCTION

What is a Theory?

A theory is an idea—or a network of ideas—that attempts to provide an explanation of something. It may also contain a collection of guidelines, beliefs or criteria underlying the way in which an activity is carried out. If we apply this broad definition to literary theory, we can see that, on the one hand, it tries to explain something about literature; and on the other, it also perhaps sets down a series of directions or requirements for carrying out the activity of understanding and interpreting literature.

What Does the Theory of Literature Do?

The theory of literature does many things, partly because there is no *single* theory of literature. Rather, there are many diverse and often contradictory approaches to understanding literature (these different approaches are sometimes called *schools*). All the same, they have certain things more or less in common: they enquire into how texts are written, why they are written, who they are really written by and for, what they might really mean (if such a thing as a stable, universal meaning actually exists), how they might be understood by a whole world of unique readers in distinct places and times, and what aspects of human, animal and material qualities, concerns and preoccupations they might reflect.

Some History

There has probably never been a time in which a theory about literature did not exist in some form or other. As soon as people began telling stories, almost certainly other people were reflecting on issues relating to those stories; ('Why is the narrator shouting like that?'; 'Why are the monsters always bad?'; 'Why don't women ever seem to get the main roles?'; 'Where are the slaves in all this?'). And within the context of Western civilisation, questions that we would now recognise as issues of literary theory have been discussed in detail since at least the time of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the fourth century BCE, and have been raised and debated throughout the ages, with important works on these matters being produced in all the major periods and by the main cultural movements (the

Medieval era, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, etc.) before contemporary times.

This book is not a history of literary theory (although there are many excellent studies that will be of use to you in that respect, and which will help you to better understand the specific development of the theoretical approaches considered here).¹ But even though we do not focus on its growth and development, it is important to understand that the central position now held by theory in English literary studies is actually a fairly recent phenomenon. Many of the ideas that became influential within the English-speaking world in the last century had their roots in earlier discussions, not least the views on literature expressed throughout the Victorian period (1837–1901) by writers and critics such as George Eliot (the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, 1819–1880), Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) or, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Henry James (1843–1916). But whilst these ideas have been enormously productive, they were still prior to the period in which literary theory eventually came to dominate critical discussion. This is the main reason we begin our *coverage* of literary theory from the twentieth century.

Not so many years ago, within what has now broadly come to be called English Studies, and particularly in the ambit of Literature (with a capital L, designating the specific study of literary works, authorship and criticism), the multiple concepts, proposals and beliefs of literary theory seemed to many to be of minor and marginal concern; they were simply a series of ideas about writing and reading literature that may have been engaging to certain *continental* (that is, European) voices, but which the traditions of Anglo-American literary studies—especially the *Anglo* part of this compound—were mostly untroubled by. That said, this view, although held commonly enough in those times, probably ignores what was most likely the gradual infusion of literary theory into the academic study of English Literature, and a closer retrospective assessment would surely uncover, over the years, a number of significant encounters with theory in debates on the nature and types of textual analysis.

Whatever the case, it is unquestionably true that, since at least the early 1980s in the UK, and rather earlier in the US, literary theory in English Studies has gained an ever-more-central position in the teaching, studying and discussion of literature, of writers and their writings, and of readers and their readings, to such an extent that it is now possible to study Literary Theory as an academic discipline in itself and not merely as part of the study of literature.

¹ Some of these studies are listed in *Further Reading* at the end of the book.

The Centrality of Theory

We are now at a moment in which it would seem as absurd to question the importance of literary theory in teaching and studying literature as it would be to question the circularity of the earth in teaching and studying navigation. The consequences of the one directly influence the other. But, whereas the circularity of the earth is not a particularly difficult concept to grasp, unfortunately the same cannot be said for many of the ideas forwarded in literary theory. Or so we are sometimes told; perhaps it would be truer to say that the real difficulty with a great deal of literary theory lies not so much in its essential ideas but, instead, in the language favoured by its practitioners, which is frequently complex, obscure and—so it often seems—unnecessarily enigmatic.

This is not at all to argue that literary theory is, in fact, a collection of patently obvious ideas dressed up in inaccessible language; but it does point to a certain tendency within the world of theory—like that in most other ambits of specialisation—to make a fairly heavy use of its own jargon. As with all jargons, this is both helpful (as a shorthand that obviates the need for constant explanation) and natural (since all groups, to a greater or lesser extent, use their own internal terms of discussion). However, the inaccessibility of this language also prevents non-specialists from participating in the conversation.

A Problem with Theory

As we have seen, literary theory is now an important part of the study of literature. So a problem clearly arises when students in higher education, who have already started out on that path towards a fuller understanding of literary analysis and discussion but who, obviously, are still at a relatively incipient phase of their studies (some more so, some less so), are exposed to the critical insights provided by theory and are expected—almost magically, it sometimes seems—to comprehend the complexities of the great debates within this ambit, to recognise the validity of the contributions made to literary study by the various schools of theory, and, in a certain sense, to shape their own critical responses in light of earlier theoretical insight. This is particularly the case for undergraduate students, of course, but postgraduate students who may never have had the opportunity to satisfactorily come to terms with the general concepts of literary theory are just as much at a disadvantage.

Most students facing the sometimes-impenetrable language of a theoretical argument have a feeling of disorientation and dismay, and struggle to see how their own understanding of literary texts might have anything in common with these seemingly incomprehensible analyses. As

a result, there is often a notable mismatch between students' own interpretation of a work and the entire universe of conceptual frameworks within which theory seeks to discuss the written word.

Speaking now to teachers, we risk losing an important opportunity to greatly facilitate and enrich our students' ability to appreciate and analyse literary texts if we mishandle their access to theory by essentially leaving to chance their understanding of its significance—both historically and conceptually—and of its immense value as a critical tool (perhaps, given the range of options offered by theory, a more precise metaphor would be a *toolbox*), the lack of which will inevitably represent a considerable detriment, sooner or later, to informed, engaged and far-reaching literary study.

How We Approach this Problem

Theoretically Speaking begins with the premise that students need an effective and accessible introduction (or perhaps a *re*-introduction) to theory if they are to connect constructively with their study of literature. It seeks to facilitate a highly practical encounter with this ambit that is both comprehensible and that also indicates other necessary paths towards a fuller inquiry into the various approaches set out here.

In doing so, it places at students' disposal a range of theoretical responses to a single text ('The Seven Ravens', a folktale recorded by the Brothers Grimm²), so that they can clearly see how distinct ideas about writing go about the critical task of interpretation. With some notable exceptions, this is often difficult to perceive clearly in many works on literary theory, as assessments of distinct theories do not generally tend to discuss one and the same target text.

Additionally, through this means, students are given direct insight into the ideas and beliefs that underpin critical interpretation. In this respect, *Theoretically Speaking* is different from many other introductions to literary theory, which often focus primarily on explaining the fundamental ideas of distinct theories, and (rather less frequently) on assessing the highly particular textual-critical approaches taken by their practitioners.

How 'Theoretically Speaking' Works

This book begins not with theory but with a text. It then shows how each *school* would interpret this text, helping students to see exactly how a

² Also referred to as the *Grimm Brothers*. Both forms are used in this book.

given theory would proceed; it also allows students to directly compare one theory with a range of others, since the text to which they all refer is the same. Although some of our chapters are quite long while others are quite short, and some have an abundance of footnotes while others have none, they all follow this simple methodological approach.

We believe that this will greatly assist students' understanding of how theory works when applied to critical practice and will help understand the ways in which theory can reinforce and enhance students' own literary study. Each chapter provides a number of questions that enquire into the specific characteristics of the theory under discussion, with sample answers to help direct and consolidate comprehension. The chapters also offer a brief list of relevant critical works for their particular fields.³

We have attempted to provide a concise visual overview of the theories that we discuss, by means of a 'Timeline of Prominence' that shows the approximate period in which each *school* began to become dominant. But a word of caution: although the timeline displays theories as starting and (in some cases) ending at specific moments, we are not actually suggesting by this that there really is such a thing as a precise start or end point for any literary theory—a notion that patently makes little or no sense. When, for example, can we say that Narratology 'begins'? With the critical work produced in the mid-1960s? With Vladimir Propp? Or maybe even with Aristotle? And when would we date the 'emergence' of Feminism? With the theoretical writings of scholars such as Hélène Cixous in the mid-1970s? With Simone de Beauvoir in the late 1940s? Or through the centuries-long struggle seen in the works of so many genres written by women against the limitations imposed on them in their search for more equal life opportunities? Clearly, the question of chronology is complex.

The principles that enable us to locate theories in time, and to interpret them on a chronological basis, are the very principles that attempt to constrain lives into more visible forms, that give us the idea of chapters ending and of new ones beginning. The purpose of this timeline is to make these principles more explicit, but they are—in spite of this—theoretical constructs all the same. To summarise, then, in our timeline we simply aim to show the rough dates of greatest influence for each theory, as applied to the contemporary discussion of literature, in the hope that this helps to understand the chronological relationships among these ideas.

And a further comment: although this book is not a dictionary of literary and critical terms, we do provide some brief information on what

³ Additional general works are listed at the end of the book.

we see as the most important or necessary of these, in the ‘Glossary of Essential Terms’.

Our Selection of Approaches

Literary theory is sometimes seen as being divided into two ambits: in one of these we find those theories that might be termed dominant; in the other there are the theories that are consequently seen as less influential (or else are currently emerging). It is not the purpose of this book to make any claims for the greater or lesser centrality of the theories presented here, but we have tried to balance the obvious need to include notions and concepts that have been debated over many decades with an equally obvious need to provide space for newer developments.

We organise the theories presented here into *parts* (representing broad thematic concerns) and *chapters* (providing specific contributions within these general areas). Naturally, the theoretical approaches covered here do not and cannot represent an exhaustive list. There are other critical perspectives (some emerging; some currently in a somewhat *fluid* state) that can be referred to when interrogating literature and which will most probably either come to greater prominence over time or else will establish themselves as still more central. Among these we would particularly highlight *post-humanism*, which seeks to rethink the dominant anthropocentric perception of the human being from the perspective of science fiction, trans-species communication, ethics and social systems; *critical disability theory*, which examines how the notions of *disability* and *normality* have changed throughout history, including how they are represented in cultural texts, and how these representations are engaged by literary scholars; and *critical race theory*, which in fact was developed initially in the 1970s and 1980s, but which is now undergoing appreciable political attention, not least in the challenges it receives from conservative political voices in the US and Europe. It assesses the embedding of racism and anti-inclusive practices and behaviours in law, institutions and dominant forms of communication. Although we have not discussed these theories in this book as they are currently rather open to change and therefore difficult to adequately characterise, it is highly probable that their significance and influence will be consolidated over the coming years.

The ongoing importance of literary theory suggests that it has become an ever-expanding field of intellectual debate. Yet, because these critical approaches help us to see something about society’s attitudes towards economic power, race, class, gender and other cultural and political factors, the future directions of literary theory necessarily remain unpredictable and will surely depend on how far the production of

knowledge regarding human relations and human experience can evolve. But it seems safe to say that, as all disciplines in the Humanities (and, clearly, those in the Sciences as well) express concerns that are reflected in literature and that require critical and comprehensive reading, literary theory will retain its centrality for a long time to come.

And finally... Why 'The Seven Ravens'?

'The Seven Ravens' is a traditional tale collected by the Brothers Grimm. We chose this tale to avoid too close a connection with any specific socio-cultural context. This is almost impossible, of course. However, we feel that the choice of a folktale provides a certain distance from the problematic connections that would be associated with a known author, or a renowned work or another more contemporary genre. Additionally, even accepting (as we do) that folktales are unquestionably culturally marked in numerous ways, the particular culture that they pertain to is often unclear, having—over time—become rather indeterminate. Finally, one of the essential characteristics of these texts is their highly succinct presentation of literary tropes that other types of literature develop in ways too complex to adequately represent in a very short fragment.

That is, we believe that our study text might function usefully as a sort of *proto-literature* (although we are most definitely not suggesting that it is even remotely *sub-literary*). It is not associated with any particular writer, and though clearly not contemporary, it nevertheless has no absolute marker of time nor, indeed, of any highly specific place or culture. As a result, it is a helpful text to which the various theoretical approaches set out in this book can be applied without having to explicitly account for factors of time, place, author and genre, though it goes without saying that some of these issues are discussed in the chapters themselves.

Following the study text, we provide a brief list of critical works on folktales for readers who may wish to further pursue this fascinating terrain, one that has shown itself to be such a rich and suggestive source both of and for literary creativity.

Cristina Pividori and David Owen

‘THE SEVEN RAVENS’

‘THE SEVEN RAVENS’

There was once a man who had seven sons, and last of all one daughter. Although the little girl was very pretty, she was so weak and small that they thought she could not live; but they said she should at once be christened.

So the father sent one of his sons in haste to the spring to get some water, but the other six ran with him. Each wanted to be first at drawing the water, and so they were in such a hurry that all let their pitchers fall into the well, and they stood very foolishly looking at one another, and did not know what to do, for none dared go home. In the meantime the father was uneasy, and could not tell what made the young men stay so long. ‘Surely’, said he, ‘the whole seven must have forgotten themselves over some game of play’; and when he had waited still longer and they yet did not come, he flew into a rage and wished them all turned into ravens. Scarcely had he spoken these words when he heard a croaking over his head, and looked up and saw seven ravens as black as coal flying round and round. Sorry as he was to see his wish so fulfilled, he did not know how what was done could be undone, and comforted himself as well as he could for the loss of his seven sons with his dear little daughter, who soon became stronger and every day more beautiful.

For a long time she did not know that she had ever had any brothers; for her father and mother took care not to speak of them before her: but one day by chance she heard the people about her speak of them. ‘Yes’, said they, ‘she is beautiful indeed, but still ’tis a pity that her brothers should have been lost for her sake’. Then she was much grieved, and went to her father and mother, and asked if she had any brothers, and what had become of them. So they dared no longer hide the truth from her, but said it was the will of Heaven, and that her birth was only the innocent cause of it; but the little girl mourned sadly about it every day, and thought herself bound to do all she could to bring her brothers back; and she had neither rest nor ease, till at length one day she stole away, and set out into the wide world to find her brothers, wherever they might be, and free them, whatever it might cost her.

She took nothing with her but a little ring which her father and mother had given her, a loaf of bread in case she should be hungry, a little pitcher of water in case she should be thirsty, and a little stool to rest upon when she should be weary. Thus she went on and on, and journeyed till

she came to the world's end; then she came to the sun, but the sun looked much too hot and fiery; so she ran away quickly to the moon, but the moon was cold and chilly, and said, 'I smell flesh and blood this way!' so she took herself away in a hurry and came to the stars, and the stars were friendly and kind to her, and each star sat upon his own little stool; but the morning star rose up and gave her a little piece of wood, and said, 'If you have not this little piece of wood, you cannot unlock the castle that stands on the glass-mountain, and there your brothers live'. The little girl took the piece of wood, rolled it up in a little cloth, and went on again until she came to the glass-mountain, and found the door shut. Then she felt for the little piece of wood; but when she unwrapped the cloth it was not there, and she saw she had lost the gift of the good stars. What was to be done? She wanted to save her brothers, and had no key of the castle of the glass-mountain; so this faithful little sister took a knife out of her pocket and cut off her little finger, that was just the size of the piece of wood she had lost, and put it in the door and opened it.

As she went in, a little dwarf came up to her, and said, 'What are you seeking for?' 'I seek for my brothers, the seven ravens', answered she. Then the dwarf said, 'My masters are not at home; but if you will wait till they come, pray step in'. Now the little dwarf was getting their dinner ready, and he brought their food upon seven little plates, and their drink in seven little glasses, and set them upon the table, and out of each little plate their sister ate a small piece, and out of each little glass she drank a small drop; but she let the ring that she had brought with her fall into the last glass.

On a sudden she heard a fluttering and croaking in the air, and the dwarf said, 'Here come my masters'. When they came in, they wanted to eat and drink, and looked for their little plates and glasses. Then said one after the other, 'Who has eaten from my little plate? And who has been drinking out of my little glass?'

'Caw! Caw! Well I ween Mortal lips have this way been'.

When the seventh came to the bottom of his glass, and found there the ring, he looked at it, and knew that it was his father's and mother's, and said, 'O that our little sister would but come! then we should be free'. When the little girl heard this (for she stood behind the door all the time and listened), she ran forward, and in an instant all the ravens took their right form again; and all hugged and kissed each other, and went merrily home.¹

¹ In 1812, the Brothers Grimm published a version of this tale titled '*Die drei Raben*' ('The Three Ravens') in the first edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*.

***Selected Reading and Critical Works
on Folk and Fairy Tales***

- Aarne, Antti, Stith Thompson, and Hans-Jörg Uther 2004: *The Types of International Folktales* (4th ed). Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications.
- Bettelheim, Bruno 1976: *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Bottigheimer, Ruth B. 1987: *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Fromm, Erich 2007: *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths*. Beijing: International Culture Publishing House.
- Lüthi, Max 1976 (1965): *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Propp, Vladimir 1968 [1928]: *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Trans. Laurence Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Tatar, Maria 2015: *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Von Franz, Marie-Louise 1970: *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. London: Shambhala Publications.
- Warner, Marina 2014: *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Zipes, Jack 2000: 'Introduction: Towards a Definition of the Literary Fairy Tale', in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. by Jack Zipes. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- . 2002 (1979): *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, Revised and Expanded Edition. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- . 2010: *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- . 2011 (1983): *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. London: Routledge Classics.
- . 2013: *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- . 2015: *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of the Grimms' Folk and Fairy Tales*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

The second edition of 1814 (revised in 1819) presented a rather distinct version, titled the '*Die sieben Raben*'. This is one of over a hundred versions of a worldwide tale-type catalogued by Aarne, Thompson and Uther (2004) as type ATU451: 'The Maiden Who Seeks her Brothers' (formerly, 'The Brothers Who Were Turned into Birds'). The translation is by Edgar Taylor and dates from 1823–26.

PART ONE:

**THEORY?
WHAT THEORY?**

CHAPTER ONE

LIBERAL HUMANISM

DAVID OWEN

What is Liberal Humanism?

Liberal Humanism denotes a system of thought that emphasises the values of human beings, whether considered discretely or collectively, placing particular emphasis on individual freedom and agency. It is often understood as the series of principles and beliefs that traditionally underlay all studies in the Humanities, particularly as these were developed throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within literary criticism, it is a term given to complex and broad-ranging ideas—some implicit, some explicit—concerning the nature and interpretation of literature. In what we now call English Studies, these ideas were especially prevalent, most notably in the British context, up to the time of the great influx of literary theory (beginning approximately in the 1960s and accelerating through the 1980s), the fuller acceptance of which would then permanently change the critical discussion of literature.

Though not strictly a literary theory in the sense that it does not forward a clearly identifiable, central and unitary idea about the interpretation of literature (nor does it attempt to), liberal humanist ideas nevertheless infused many of the critical works and approaches produced within the English-speaking world (predominantly in the UK and the US) prior to the general embracing of theory. Liberal Humanism is a useful starting point in discussing literary theory in English Studies because, first—as an approach to analysing literature—it predates much literary theory; and second, because many of the fundamental positions espoused by specific literary theories can be understood in comparison with or even in opposition to the ideas promoted by Liberal Humanism.

Before literary theory had become so central to the study of English literature, it is fair to say that such study had, through its own critical practices, looked to isolate itself from other disciplines (such as sociology,

linguistics, psychology, history or political science) as a means of establishing its independent academic identity.¹ In doing so, English Studies largely closed itself off from the currents of literary theory that influenced discussion in Europe; instead (again, particularly in the UK), it kept to its own principles of textual appreciation.

The critical practices that led to the separation of English Studies from other disciplines tend to focus on the ambit of practical literary criticism, which effectively means the highly detailed (sometimes word-by-word) analysis of how a text conveys meaning. This has come to be known as *close reading*,² and is a manner of studying texts that expressly aims to isolate the literary work from all context that pertains to it; that is, it discusses a text exclusively in terms of itself, rejecting any opportunity to connect it with other disciplines and ambits that critics (and, indeed, general readers) holding distinct views from Liberal Humanism would see as relevant to the text.

But close reading is only one aspect of a liberal humanistic approach to analysing literature. Underlying this is an unwritten but mostly accepted series of critical tenets that have had enormous significance for English literary criticism and also for the often-fervent resistance to the application of literary theory in English Studies (at least until the late twentieth century).

What are the basic ideas of Liberal Humanism?³

The following points provide a brief overview of the main tenets of Liberal Humanism, and particularly how it approaches literature.

1. The significance of any important work of literature is deeply rooted; readers must seek it out through careful examination of the text.
2. The function of criticism is to act, as it were, on behalf of the reader to illuminate and perhaps even to decipher the deeper significance of the text. But this is done by attending exclusively to the literary characteristics of the text itself, and to the text alone. Reference to

¹ This idea—of the *sovereign* nature of English literary studies—may seem wholly natural to us today, but it was one that some hugely influential universities did not share until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. As Barry indicates, in academic discussion in the late 1800s, a commonly held idea about the study of English literature was that it simply was not a discrete area of knowledge and could therefore only be approached and taught as a complementary feature of other established disciplines such as philosophy or philology (2009: 12–14).

² For a brief history of this critical approach, and especially its connection with I. A. Richards, see Barry 2009: 15. See also chapter two on Formalism.

³ For a more detailed series of characteristics, see Barry 2009: 17–20.

other ambits of knowledge (history, biography, philosophy, psychology, politics, etc.) is not considered relevant or important.

3. Literary form and expression are aesthetically decisive and are a sign of great art (and great artists). But they must work together with the narrative purpose of any work, otherwise they are merely cosmetic and distract from any deeper artistic purpose. What is particularly valued is a sense of literary originality or *truthfulness*, and consequently an avoidance of clichéd language, which would be seen as a lack of authenticity. Where a writer attains a freshness and vitality of literary expression, they are said to have a particular *voice*, which is seen as having creative value.
4. Literature of the greatest cultural importance remains valuable over time and is not limited to its period of composition. As a result, little attention is given to the context in which this literature was written. The historical moment and the author's circumstances are not of critical significance, however interesting they may be.
5. Human nature as reflected in great literature is universal, perennial and not determined by the social and political times in which a work was produced. It concerns what is known as the *transcendental subject*.
6. Although good literature teaches us valuable lessons about life, it does so in an indirect and symbolic way. If, in reading this literature, these lessons are too evidently pedagogical, we would then say that this is propaganda, which is not the true function of literature and which corresponds, instead, to forms of writing such as journalism.

How would a Liberal Humanist approach 'The Seven Ravens'?

The first thing that is important for us to understand in the interpretation of our study text by a critic promoting the literary viewpoints of Liberal Humanism is the insistence with which the analysis would focus on the text itself and the consequent lack of acknowledgement of any contextual concerns. So, we would find nothing (or very little) about the possible origins of such tales; nothing (or very little) about any social or political meaning that they might have; nothing (or very little) about any psychological significance that might be attributed to the narrative, and so on. This would probably also extend to downplaying the orality that underlies all folktales, since this feature—though present in our version of 'The Seven Ravens'—is essentially an echo of a characteristic prior to this written version. And it is this written version of the text (and not other possible versions) with which the analysis must connect.

Any cultural or historical element of the narrative that might influence a character's thoughts and actions in ways that are clearly at

odds with contemporary ideas of human behaviour would, most likely, not be given great attention; instead, the emphasis would lie on those aspects that underline a universal, transcendental quality to individual characteristics and human relationships.

What we would find, in contrast, is an emphasis on seeking some type of key to understanding the *true significance* of this story, possibly by focussing on the universality of experience that the tale reveals (sibling rivalries; inter-generational friction; bravery in the face of adversity; the need for healing in community strife; the value of personal sacrifice).

We would also expect some engagement with the quality of the writing itself, most particularly as a means of assessing its validity as a literary voice in order to remark on the presence and purpose of rhetorical devices that make up this voice, and to consider whether form and content are integrated in a way that is consistent with expectations of *good* (or even *great*) *literature*.

A critical analysis of ‘The Seven Ravens’ from a Liberal Humanist perspective

She is beautiful indeed, but still 'tis a pity that her brothers should have been lost for her sake.

At the heart of this story, as its *motor* so to speak, we find a debilitating sense of guilt that initially waylays our innocent protagonist, the ravens’ sister, but which then also serves to push her to the very limits of her physical and mental powers and, in doing so, to bring about the restitution of normality to her family by the triumph of love through self-sacrifice.

For the story (despite this tale’s famous title) is above all the story of a young woman, beautiful, much loved but terribly deceived. It is a tale of the consequences on community of misunderstanding, petty rivalry and rash reaction; it reveals—dreamlike through the beauty of its symbolism—the terrible truth that even the strongest bonds of kinship can be torn apart, transforming those who were once dear to us not simply into strangers but also, in effect, into creatures of another kind.

Where does the guilt lie for the unfortunate event that led to this sad state of affairs? In the brothers’ irresponsible efforts to outdo one another for their father’s affection? In their feeble inability to accept the consequences of their error? Or with the father, who rather than seeking first to assist his own offspring in a moment of difficulty, blithely assumes their indifference to their sister’s illness and foolishly utters his oath?

The question is perhaps moot (although we will return to it later), but the force of this narrative also shows us that it is fundamentally irrelevant. It is restitution, not dissolution, to which this story tends. What will save

the brothers from this ostracism (and surely, we are right to see in the metaphor of their bestial transformation an implicit and profoundly humane awareness of the emotional damage that the loss of parental love can bring), and what will repair the father's ill deed, is the saving grace of the sister's determination to make right what has been made wrong.

More remarkable still, and here we must speak again of the poetic and symbolic beauty of this text, is the sacrifice that the sister has to undergo in order to realise her intentions:

Thus she went on and on, and journeyed till she came to the world's end; then she came to the sun, but the sun looked much too hot and fiery; so she ran away quickly to the moon, but the moon was cold and chilly, and said, 'I smell flesh and blood this way!'

That is, her journey towards this salvation is both long and perilous, involving the harsh indifference of some and the veritable hostility of others. And despite the more amicable stars—a body of well-wishing advisors whose gift in effect leads directly to the act of self-sacrifice that the sister must make if she is to ever find her long-lost brothers—it was still left to the girl herself to renounce something of great importance to her (her finger perhaps representing the assured and privileged position within the family that she had been accorded in the brothers' absence) in order to draw her quest to a successful closure, reasserting the communion of kinship and celebrating the restitution of family.

What this story calls to mind is that it is often the innocent who have to pay the price for the sins of their forebears, sins of which they knew nothing yet which leave them with a crippling sense of their own guilt. And also, that it is often, through the extraordinary selflessness of these innocent victims of domestic strife (or even, more sadly, of internecine struggle) that disruption can be healed, and the errors of the past put to rights. These are simple truths, but they are powerful and enduring; and the simple but powerful language in this tale of reunion is a fitting testament to these very concerns.

But in recognising these things, we must also recognise that, ultimately, the story may well be forwarding its own position on just who is most to blame for bringing about the initial strife. The brothers, transformed and happy, head home in the company of their equally delighted saviour-sister. Blessed are the peacemakers! But by *home* do we understand that the siblings actually returned to their ill-starred father? The story is strangely silent on this, leaving us with its last implicit but possibly most emphatic message, one that has rung true down the ages: those whose rash and ill-counselled actions destroy the integrity of their community may very well have forfeited the right to live within it.