

think about our own reading and the ways in which we impose our own meaning on texts. When you're doing English, the texts might be literary, but we can also think about the ways in which we impose meaning on the 'texts' of our lives and those of others.

Summary

- Narratives are everywhere and are very powerful. We tell stories in order to make sense of the world and ourselves.
- Some critics have tried to develop a 'science' of narrative, which has helped refine discussions of how stories work.
- There are different sorts of narrators. Some narrators are 'inside' the story while others are 'outside', but both sorts of narration shape the meaning of the text.
- Closure is our 'sense of an ending' and is part of all narrative. Some critics suggest that we seek closure to impose order on our lives, or to come to terms with our own deaths.
- In thinking about closure we can also think about the ways in which we try to impose meaning and 'final interpretations' on texts.

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Creative writing and critical rewriting

- What is creative writing?
- What is critical rewriting?
- How is creative writing marked?
- How has creative writing changed doing English?

When I was a student, I asked a question about sonnets; the lecturer, poet and academic Grevel Lindop astonished me by saying that the best way to really find out about sonnets was to write one. I think I was astonished both by the audacity (that I might dare to write a sonnet! As if I were an author and not like the literary critic I was being trained to become!), but more by the obvious simple rightness of this suggestion. After all, no one learns to swim on dry land. In English, though all reading is active, creative writing particularly stresses *heuristic* learning: heuristic means learning by doing, finding out, rather than being told or by simply analysing.

What is creative writing?

English is a constantly changing and developing subject, and one of the very biggest changes in recent years, following this sort of idea, has been

the explosion in courses offering Creative Writing, either on their own, or (more often) as part of an English degree or AS/A2 qualification. These focus on you as a writer, *doing* writing, as much as on you as a reader.

In a general sense all the texts studied in the discipline of English are 'creative'. But 'creative writing' more specifically names the flourishing of a new development in doing English, where students are able not only to study the work of past and current writers but to produce their own creative work. To be *writers*, that is, not only of interesting essays and analyses of texts, but of their own poems, short stories, novels, plays, journals and other literary forms. But what is creative writing? Can people be taught to be authors? Like most questions in English, answering this involves several other ideas. If creative writing is about enabling students to be authors, this too is to beg a question, one that has attracted a great deal of contentious discussion in creative writing, about what an author is, or does.

Some of the appeal of Creative Writing lies, of course, in the figure of the 'author' (which is one reason why the issues I discussed in Chapter 7, about authorship, authority and intention have been so contentious). There is an attraction in the idea of 'being an author', becoming famous, or perhaps more interestingly, being able to articulate something important about oneself or the world, to *say something*. But this idea of the author, as a sort of 'inspired genius', absorbed in self-expression, has also been a problem for these courses. As I suggested in Chapter 7, the idea of what the author was has changed over time. To some extent, the idea of an author as an inspired figure, able to express the truth about herself, himself or the world is inherited from the Romantic period at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This idea of the author fits very well with current unquestioned ideas about celebrity, in which it seems that famous writers, actors and musicians and so on are assumed to know not just more about writing, acting and music than non-celebrities (which is reasonable) but also more about world politics, life and everything else. But if one believed completely in this idea of what an author was or is – that he or she was an inspired genius – then, of course, creative writing could not be taught and would not be part of English. It would just 'happen' to you. In fact, of course, all writers have learned to write. Writing is not a natural skill: like learning an instrument, it has to be taught, practised developed and so on.

In response to this, then, a contrasting view of creative writing is that it is a discipline that exists as a 'craft', to teach the student the technical

skills of writing. In this context, Steve May, in his book *Doing Creative Writing* answers the question of whether creative writing can be taught very clearly. He begins by saying

You want to write a story. I don't know what your story is about, what genre you want to write it in, or anything else about it. However, because (I believe) stories share common features, I can be fairly certain that if you ask yourself the following questions about your story, it will help you discover its shape and point:

1. Who is it about?
2. How do they change over the course of the story?
3. What do they want?
4. Do they get what they want?
5. Who (or what) is trying to stop them?
6. What are the key events in the story?
7. Which event decides whether the main character gets or doesn't get what they want?
8. How does it end?
9. Which other characters are absolutely essential to the story?
10. Where is the best place to start?

These are technical questions about writing and the decisions writers make. In this view, the author works learning a craft, putting together a story, poem or play, and learning the elements that make them up. While this is empowering, however, it does also imply a vocational sense: that someone doing creative writing will end up a making a living as a writer. However, not all creative writing students will make a living as writers and, of course, many students taking a creative writing module in higher education or at AS/A2 may not want to become writers, so to see these courses as professional training – though again, they are to some extent – is not to see them in their clearest light.

In her book on the subject, Michèle Wandor writes that creative writing is a 'mode of imaginative thought'. Here she echoes the wonderful British novelist Angela Carter (1940–1992) who writes 'Oh, hell. What I really like doing is writing fiction and trying to work things out that way'. For Carter, novels were partly 'thought experiments' which tried to explore imaginatively – but not necessarily answer – certain problems or issues, 'to work things out'. However, all subjects one learns and studies are attempts to explore certain problems: physical geography explores

why landscapes are the way they are, for example, and the sciences, at their best, need creative and imaginative responses. What is at issue with creative writing is not just that it is a mode of thought, but *how* it thinks, as it were, what its tool are.

The tools of creative writing as a subject are the literature, criticism and theory that are involved with any literary creative act. (Angela Carter again: 'reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends on new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles; especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode'.) Creative writing is another important way of engaging with literature, another of the new ideas that are reshaping English as a subject, stressing the *heuristic*, learning by doing. It brings together you, your ideas, what you have read, different and new thoughts and interpretations with 'hands on' experience of writing in a range of different ways.

One of the forms of creative writing that is perhaps the most widely practised in English courses (and not simply creative writing ones) at secondary and university level is called *critical rewriting*. This technique involves taking an established text and reworking parts of it: for example, a scene from a novel could be rewritten from a different perspective, or in a different context. This is not different, really, from what theatre directors or film and TV adaptors do when they stage a Shakespeare play ('what happens to *Hamlet* if we set it in the 1930s?', 'what happens to *The Taming of the Shrew*, when, unlike Shakespeare, we use women actors?'). More interestingly, this process of creative rewriting can tell us about the original text, about the new format and about their interaction. For example, the Facebook status update version of *Pride and Prejudice* tells us about the Jane Austen's novel by focusing on the key incidents, on contrasting views and on the events of the narrative. But it also tells us about the 'genre' of Facebook Status Updates: it shows, really clearly, for example, the discipline involved in having to say something funny, clever or moving in only a few words. Most interestingly, both the original novel and the 'Facebook rewriting' – and Facebook and Twitter more generally – share a common feature in their use of irony and humour. If people learn new things by reading texts in different ways, they also learn by writing or by rewriting them in different ways.

Creative writing, then, in some part is one of the new ideas that forms part of doing English today. If some of the ideas described as theory focus a little more on *what* texts mean, creative writing focuses on *how*

they mean: though, at some deeper level these two – what something means, how it means – are versions of the same question. In an excellent book about new ways of teaching English and creative writing, Ben Knights and Chris Thurgar-Dawson put it this way:

Many teachers . . . see a value for writing neither in terms of self-expression nor in terms of the making of future Booker Prize winners, but as an educational process that permits deeper engagement with the already written.

They go on to argue that, while the new ideas in English utterly changed the subject – thus, the need for this book – the way the subject was taught, and what students actually wrote, has not yet been changed. Creative writing and critical rewriting is about changing not only what students think but also what they do: not only to produce essays but also different sorts of heuristic responses to literary texts, ideas and thoughts. In this, the creativity of writing and the creativity of reading are really revealed as the same thing: the best creative writers are also the best creative readers. 'Creative writing' is 'Active reading'. In this way, creative writing and critical rewriting are changing the nuts and bolts of how English is studied and taught.

Nuts and bolts and assessment

Changing the nuts and bolts of English means, among other things, changing how work in English and in creative writing is marked, and one of the questions that has often been asked about creative writing, especially in education, is how it might be assessed.

On the one hand, 'creative writing' is assessed and valued all the time; newspaper or internet reviews judge novels, poems and plays, people who teach courses choose the most interesting books they can, we recommend (or don't) books or TV programmes to our friends. As I suggested in writing about the canon in Chapter 5, you can't escape literary value. On the other hand, it is very hard to imagine giving actual marks to great poets. People involved in creative writing have spent a very long time thrashing out these issues, and the answer again turns on the heuristic and practical. To begin with, much of the work done by students in this area is divided into two: a 'creative' part – the poem, short story, film scene – and a critical or reflective part.

Perhaps ironically, in order to assess the first, 'creative' part, teachers have provided very detailed assessment criteria, focusing on relevant issues to the writing:

- How effectively the piece presented explored the point of view of the main character?
- How clearly has the plot been advanced in this scene?
- Does the choice of rhyme scheme (or lack of rhyme scheme) suit the subject?

In turn the critical and reflective part might be, for example, an essay on the technical features (say, the sort of tropes, following Chapter 8 your creative piece might have used, and why you chose those), or a piece laying out the aims of your creative work and assessing how far you were successful, or an discussion of how you saw your creative piece about growing up in London in the wider context of other novels and stories about childhood.

If the main form of assessment for creative writing has been the creative work together with some reflective work, the main form of teaching creative writing has been the workshop or seminar. The novelist and creative writing teacher Douglas Cowie writes that a

Creative Writing Workshop is usually run in part or in whole as an opportunity for student writers to submit work-in-progress for consideration by their peers, under the guidance of an experienced writer. A student's work will be read by each member of the group, either during the workshop or beforehand, and the group will then discuss the poem, story, novel extract or play, offering constructive criticism about how the piece does and doesn't achieve its aims, and also offering suggestions for improvement of the piece. There are a number of variations on how creative writing workshop discussions can be run, and in my own teaching I've organized them in different ways depending on (among other things) the experience, size and ability of the particular group. However, the basic foundation of a student's work-in-progress receiving oral and/or written feedback from his or her peer group under the guidance of a more experienced mentor is common to most workshops.

Like much in English, the creative writing workshop is controversial and can, of course, be difficult; some of teaching creative writing is about how these sessions are managed. However, workshops do also reflect an interesting and often forgotten thing about writing itself. While the image of the writer is of a lone person creating by themselves – and there are writers that fit this stereotype – usually writers are involved in communities of different sorts. Novelists and non-fiction writers have friends and competitors (often the same people) to whom they show drafts, as well as editors (*wonderful* editors, as my editor Polly Dodson suggests I add here) and publishers who look at their work and make suggestions. Writers for the stage, TV and film have many collaborators from (one hopes) the informed and sympathetic directors to (one fears) the less scrupulous people for who art is simply another business. Poets read to each other, attend events, festivals, form supportive groups, compose manifestos and make aesthetic friends and enemies to help shape their own writing. The creative writing workshop is a version – perhaps a delimited and controlled version – of these different and jostling communities, so doing creative writing is also about learning how to be in these communities.

Creative English?

To paraphrase Ben Knights and Chris Thurgar-Dawson again, creative writing/critical rewriting should enable you, students doing English, as writers, allowing you to use not only a range of genres but also the fullest range of new ideas about literature and interpretation in as full a way as possible – to say more, perhaps, and understand things that the more traditional forms or writing could not. But these changes have an impact on all the other parts of the subject of English too. Paul Dawson in his book *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* discusses 'Fictocriticism' or 'personal criticism', a sort of criticism that draws more and more on the personal voice and on personal responses to texts. But, at its root, all responses to literature are our own, reflected on, evaluated and changed by all we have learnt and thought. You might not need to invoke a personal voice, or (as the eminent Shakespeare critic Stephen Greenblatt does) tell a story about one's father to be creative in your responses. Another great twentieth century critic, Geoffrey Hartman, argued as long ago as 1980 that 'all criticism entails a rethinking, which is itself creative... in every aspect of learning and life'. Because of this, like

creative writing, other sorts of ways of responding to texts, other sorts of literary criticism 'may cross the line and become as demanding as literature'; criticism is 'an unpredictable and unstable genre' not limited to a commentary on literary texts. All responses to literature are creative.

Summary

- English is a constantly changing and developing subject; one of the very biggest changes in recent years is the growth of Creative Writing.
- Creative Writing focuses on you as a writer.
- A creative writer is not an 'inspired genius' or simply following a craft, but someone learning about and responding to literature in a different, more heuristic way.
- One form of this is critical rewriting, which involves reworking on already existing text or part of a text.
- Creative writing is often assessed by both a piece of creative work and a piece of reflective work.
- Creative writing stresses the creativity at work in all responses to literary art.

