Reading 'literary' texts

- How can the act of reading construct meaning from texts?
- What are reading practices?
- Where do reading practices come from?
- What are 'gaps' and 'silences' in texts?
- How can readers challenge dominant or conventional readings of a text?

Texts as cultural artifacts

Like cars, computers, clothing and other consumer goods, written texts are products of culture. As cultural artifacts, these things are made to fit into people's lives and to support certain ways of thinking and acting. Also like manufactured goods, texts are created as a result of a process: raw materials are gathered; designs are consulted; guidelines are followed; the final product is distributed and consumers buy and make use of the article. How this process works in the case of, say, a motor car or a piece of clothing may seem reasonably obvious, but what are the factors involved in producing a novel, or a poem?

In groups

Working in groups of four, create a flow-chart or diagram which shows your idea of the 'manufacturing process' for a 'work of literature'.

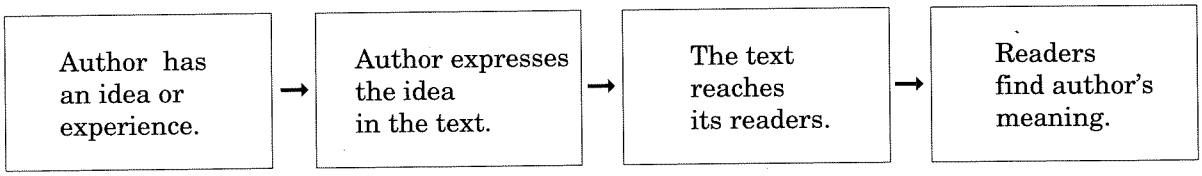
Your diagram should explain the following:

- what the raw materials are and where they come from;
- where the process begins and ends, if it does;
- the roles of writers;
- the roles of readers;
- where the meanings of a text come from;
- how beliefs and values in different cultures influence the process. (Where, for example, do social institutions such as education fit in?)

When you have finished, display your diagram on a large sheet of paper and explain to the class how it works. Keep this material for later use.

The traditional model

The idea that works of literature can be treated as cultural artifacts is fairly recent. This is because the literary tradition of the past two hundred years has regarded such writing as the result of individual creative genius. The 'romantic' view of writing diagrams the activity this way:



This approach, which begins the process with the author and ends it with the reader, rests on a number of assumptions. It assumes that:

- writers put original ideas into texts;
- a text contains the same ideas forever;
- readers extract meaning from the text;
- writers and readers are individuals acting alone.

In this view, writing is individual expression, and what is expressed is the writer's unique experience of the world. But these assumptions can be challenged by considering what happens when people read literary texts.

Song: Women are but Mens Shaddowes

On your own, read this poem by an Elizabethan poet, Ben Jonson, (c1572-1637).

Song: That Women are but Mens Shaddowes

Follow a shaddow, it still flies you;
Seem to flye it, it will pursue:
So court a mistris, shee denyes you;
Let her alone, shee will court you.
Say, are not women truely, then,
Stil'd but the shaddowes of us men?
At morne, and even, shades are longest;
At noone, they are short, or none:
So men at weakest, they are strongest,
But grant us perfect, they're not knowne. (perfect: full grown)
Say, are not women truely, then, full grown
Stil'd but the shaddowes of us men? (stil'd: styled)

Poems of this type were often structured around an interesting or peculiar **comparison**. This technique was used by Jonson, John Donne (1573-1631), George Herbert (1593-1633) and others of the so-called 'metaphysical' school.

Use the table below to explore the comparison between women and shadows in the poem above. Some examples have been completed to get you started. The numbers in brackets refer to line numbers in the poem.

Shadows	Women
Flee when chased (1)	Play hard-to-get when courted.
Follow when run from (2)	
Are long in the morning (7)	Are powerful when men are very young.
Are long in the evening (7)	
Are smallest in full sun (8)	

Write down your thoughts on which of the following might be read as the main point of the poem, its 'subject'. Give reasons for your choice(s).

a. The relative importance of women and men?
b. How women behave when courted?
c. A warning to men about the inconstancy of women?
d. The comparison between women and shadows?
e. The 'fickle nature' of women?
f. The pomposity of men?
g. The superior reasoning power of men?
h. Advice on how to succeed in love?

How might male and female readers react differently to some of the meanings produced by these readings of the subject of the poem? Why?

In groups

Share your answers; then read the passage below and discuss the questions which follow:

> In Ben Jonson's day, the dominant reading of the 'subject' of this poem was the interesting comparison between women and shadows. The poem was praised because it was read as making this unusual comparison work at a number of points. Poems based on unusual comparisons seemed to be generally much admired. The fact that this comparison rested on the assumption that women were men's inferiors appears to have been 'invisible' to most readers, because a dominant view of the time was that women were lesser beings. Similarly, the fact that the poem assumes all readers to be male (it addresses itself very clearly to men) apparently was not considered unusual.

- How do the poem's possible modern meanings compare with the former dominant 'meaning' summarised above?
- How might the meanings of this poem constructed by different groups of readers differ today?
- What does this suggest about the idea that poems contain a single meaning which stays the same forever for all readers?
- Are there groups in society today who would still read the poem without: (a) challenging its former dominant meaning; that is, that women are lesser beings? or (b) finding it offensive? (Is, for example, any particular group in your class, jokingly agreeing with the former dominant reading of the poem?) If so, discuss whether this indicates that poems can have more than one meaning at any one time, and how readers might choose between meanings.
- How do your answers to these questions complicate the study of literary texts?

Dominant and marginalised ideas

Just because it is possible to find many poems of this sort in books of poetry, it mustn't be assumed that everyone in Jonson's day accepted this way of thinking about men and women. In every age, there are groups of people who challenge and reject the prevailing views. It is important to distinguish between those ideas which are most powerfully or officially promoted, and those which are suppressed or ignored. The following terms are helpful.

Dominant ideas: these are ideas promoted by official institutions such as the law and schooling. They may not be accepted by everyone in society, but they are important in maintaining certain power structures.

Marginalised or subordinate ideas: these are ideas held by people who may not have access to positions of power. The existence of these ideas is often denied or ignored by dominant institutions.

Meaning and cultural context

If other readings of Ben Jonson's poem are possible now, this is not because the words on the page have changed. It is because changes in the dominant ideas and practices of the cultures in which it is read have made different readings possible.

Jonson's poem may have suited the dominant ideas of the time in which it was written, but we can be sure that even then some people would have challenged it. Why is it that we have little record of such challenges, but lots of poems which express a dominant view of men, women and their relationships?

As a class

How might each of the following factors help to explain the preservation of Jonson's poem and the disappearance of poems, many of them by women, which might have challenged dominant ideas? The fact that:

- Jonson is a male writer.
- publishing companies have traditionally been owned and run by men.
- men controlled the wealth and finances necessary to produce books.
- most teachers in universities traditionally have been men.
- most families educated only sons, not daughters.
- women traditionally have lacked financial independence.

Reading practices

The reading of any text is guided by a set of culturally determined **reading conventions** or **reading practices**. These are ways of reading which are constructed by, and in turn support, social structures. Some of the structures which influence the way in which literary works are created and used include: the family, the education system, the church, the law, and the media.

These social structures do not necessarily make explicit statements about how people should read. But they are powerful influences on how people see the world. In modern western societies, these institutions have all promoted the idea of authority. Through them people learn the value of being obedient, of recognising power and superiority.

In groups

For each of the social structures listed below, describe some of the ways in which the acceptance of authority is taught. An example is given.

Institution	Authority figures
Church	Authority figures include a god or gods, and officials such as priests. Followers accept the authority of sacred writings and the word of the officials.
Family	Parents Accept authority or severely punishment
School	teachers, Accept authority to learn
The Law	Gov. Police. Accept, conform. or prosecuted
The Media	

Guarantees?

In each of these cases, the function of the authority figure is to try to guarantee a particular meaning or set of meanings as *the* meaning of things. The truth of sacred writings is 'guaranteed' by their presentation as the word of a god. The truth of television news is 'guaranteed' by the newsreader's authoritative presentation.

Some ways of reading or reading practices try to guarantee or fix certain meanings (that support dominant views of the world) by constructing a reading of a text, which is claimed to be *the* meaning of the text; unchangeable over time and the same for all groups of readers.

The statements below summarise a range of opposing ways of reading, or reading practices. Discuss the statements and then try to match each one with its opposite. You may decide that some statements have more than one match.

Reading practices	
1. Reading 'between the lines' to find the author's meaning. 2. Accepting the interpretation given by 'experts'. 3. Looking for a single 'theme' or meaning in a text. 4. Accepting the reading apparently invited by the text. 5. Looking for the 'ring of truth' in a text. 6. Finding proof of the author's originality. 7. Assuming that the text makes sense.	a. Making visible gaps and silences in a text. b. Looking for contradictions in the text. c. Exploring the range of possible meanings for a text. d. Pointing to 'formula' features of the text. e. Questioning the text and the possible readings it supports. f. Analysing how a reading is produced and what values it supports. g. Reading for evidence of a text's connections with other texts.

Challenging tradition

Modern literary theories are exploring ways in which readers can challenge the traditional readings of literary texts. They argue that readings of a text are not simply interpretations of what is there; rather these readings are constructed in support of the values and beliefs of particular groups of people. Traditional or dominant readings therefore work to silence groups with alternative beliefs and values.

Gaps, silences and contradictions in literature

One way of challenging the apparent authority of a text is to adopt reading practices which **look for contradictions, gaps or silences** in the text. Another is to **analyse the ways in which readings are constructed.**

Traditional reading practices assume literary texts to be 'perfectly' complete and unified. But modern theories of reading suggest that this sense of completeness is produced by the reading, not the text. Literary texts *seem* self-contained and complete because they deal with knowledge that the reader already has. Because of this, it can be said that even those texts a reader has not seen before are 'already read'.

The Eagle

Read the following poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson on your own; then complete the activity below.

The Eagle

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Write about the impression of the eagle you have from this poem. What kind of creature is it? What qualities does it appear to have?

In groups

Before you compare your written responses, work through these activities.

1. List all of the eagle's **physical features** which are described in the poem.
2. List all of the words in the poem that describe the eagle's **actions**.
3. List all of the features of the eagle's **environment** which are described in the poem.

Discuss your findings, using the following points as a guide:

- Why is there so little information given in the poem about the eagle?
- How many actions described in the poem are unique to eagles or birds?
- What could this poem mean to readers who do not know what an eagle is? Could they be sure that the poem was about a bird?

Now share your initial written responses to the poem.

- How much of what you wrote was based on information from the poem, and how much was based on your knowledge of eagles and what they are associated with, or stand for, in your culture?
- Where has most of the 'meaning' come from? Is it from the text; that is, from the words 'on the page' - or from the reading? If it is from the reading, can you say how?
- Would a reader necessarily produce the dominant reading of this poem (that it is about an eagle) if the title were witheld? What does this suggest about the relative importance of textual features in triggering a specific reading for this poem? Which appears to be most influential here, the title or the 'body' of the poem?

Other readings?

Now read the poem without its title. What other possible readings of the poem might there be? What, other than an eagle, could the poem be describing?

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

The poem is printed below with a few changes to the pronouns. Read the poem and in pairs, suggest possible readings of the altered text. What might the poem be describing? Share these readings in a class discussion.

She clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, she stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath her crawls;
She watches from her mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt she falls.

Where are the readings coming from?

Here is one student's reading of the altered poem above, which was presented without its title.

> I think this is a poem about a witch or hag. I can't be sure what she is doing, but I think she might be climbing up a craggy cliff to get to a castle or some kind of lair. I think she is a witch because her hands are crooked and gnarled, and because she gazes down from the mountain with a stare that makes the sea crawl. Also, she falls like a thunderbolt, as if she has magical powers of some kind. Or she may have been struck down as punishment for a wicked deed. The woman in the poem is powerful but evil. The reader is made to feel anxious as he or she looks up in his or her imagination, waiting to see what she will do.

- Are there any points in this paragraph which match with your reading of the altered poem? If so, discuss these points in your group.
- Many people produce readings of the altered poem which contrast sharply with their readings of the original. Can these changes be fully explained by such small alterations to the text? If not, where are the readings coming from?
- If a text's meanings are constructed, at least in part, by filling gaps in the text with ideas that are already available in the reader's culture, what might this activity suggest about dominant attitudes of your culture to women and men?

Silences

Texts do not only exhibit gaps, they are also silent about certain issues. Because the raw materials of a text are drawn from ideas which circulate in a culture, texts share in promoting the values and beliefs of dominant groups. This may be the case even if a particular author is concerned to challenge a dominant way of thinking.

Hard Times

This extract is from Charles Dickens's novel, *Hard Times*. Read the passage carefully, and then complete the activities which follow.

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained; against them were to be set off, comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned. The rest of its features were voluntary, and they were these.

You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there - as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done - they made it a pious warehouse of red brick, with sometimes (but this is only in highly ornamental examples) a bell in a birdcage on the top of it. The solitary exception was the New Church; a stuccoed edifice with a square steeple over the door, terminating in four short pinnacles like florid wooden legs. All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakum-child school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.

A dominant reading

A dominant reading of this passage sees it as a powerfully realistic description and condemnation of industrialisation. In this view, Dickens has described a grimy Victorian town in order to reveal the activities of industry as inhuman and unnatural.

In pairs

List all of the references and phrases which could be used to demonstrate that the passage is an attack on industrialisation.

Which arguments below might such a reading 'find in' the passage?

Industrialisation is bad because it:

- pollutes the environment;
- makes life too easy for people;
- isn't 'natural';
- dehumanises people by making them more like machines;
- concentrates wealth in the hands of a few people;
- uses up resources recklessly;
- replaces variety with sameness;
- replaces moral and spiritual motives with profit motives.

Ambiguities in the text

Like all readings, however, this dominant reading is selective about what counts as evidence in the passage; it ignores silences which contradict it; and like most readings, it doesn't acknowledge the possibility of other readings or interpretations of the passage.

The following is a summary of a range of other possible readings of the extract. In pairs, find sentences or phrases in the passage that might be used to **support** each of the following readings. The passage:

- condemns the working class for not having the strength of character to change their circumstances.
- sympathises with the working classes, who are shackled and oppressed throughout their lives.
- condemns the wealthy for living off the labour of the poor.
- suggests that nevertheless some good comes from the unpleasantness of life in the town.

The fact that readers *can* find evidence for each of these sometimes contradictory readings, suggests that the passage is not a unified and coherent whole. Rather, it can be considered a collection of fragments, which readers unify according to a particular reading practice that fills gaps and makes meanings in the light of a particular set of ideas about the world.

Silences in the text

In the dominant reading, one of the criticisms made in the passage is that the things that are produced in Coketown do not reveal the environment in which they were manufactured. The fine ladies who use the products can 'scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned'. This might suggest that industrialisation involves deception; a separation of the product from its means of production.

Dickens wrote *Hard Times* as a serial, with episodes being published in a newspaper. Which of the following descriptions from the passage might also be considered applicable to the newspaper publishing industry?

'a river that ran purple with ill smelling dye' 'severe characters of black and white' 'people... who went in at the same hours... to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday' 'machinery and tall chimneys' 'serpents of smoke'

Is it possible that this piece of writing, like the industrial activity it criticises, remains silent about its own industrial origins?

- Does the dominant reading contribute to 'silence' on any other issues? For example, how might the reference, 'painted face of a savage', now be read?

Whose reality?

Recent literary theory argues that texts do **not** simply describe or reflect a given reality. On the contrary, it is argued that texts attempt to construct 'reality' in particular terms and to promote particular versions of it for particular purposes on behalf of particular groups of people.

How does this challenge the view that Dickens's novel is:

- a realistic description of a Victorian industrial town?
- a true and accurate reflection of the times he lived in?
- an accurate picture of the evils of industrialisation?

In groups

Readers have become so good at using one set of reading practices that it has come to seem 'natural' to read in this way. The following student, for example, has been trained to use a dominant reading practice.

- As you read her commentary on the passage decide which of the following assumptions seem to be a part of her reading practice.

1. Literature offers reflections of the real world.
2. The 'meaning' of a text is determined by reading practices.
3. Literary texts are complete structures.
4. There is a meaning hidden or contained in the text.
5. Meanings in the text were put there by the author.
6. Texts have potential meanings rather than actual meanings.
7. The reader's job is to re-make the author's meaning.

This is a very realistic description of the kind of town which sprang up in England following the industrial revolution. Dickens makes the description come to life by giving the reader plenty of details about the town. He portrays the buildings, the machines and the people, commenting on the noise and dirt to be found there. He uses metaphors ('interminable serpents of smoke') and similes ('like the head of an elephant') to help the reader understand what the scene was like. In his writing style Dickens mocks the factory-like qualities of the town, where everything repeats over and over, and where mass produced goods are created. He repeats 'fact, fact, fact' to emphasise the repetitious activity, and he uses long, repetitive sentences to reproduce the feeling of never ending conveyor-belts of items.

It is a successful piece of writing because it shows how degrading life in such a town was. The people have no comforts; even their churches are like factories, so there is no rest from work. As a writer, Dickens was appalled at the mechanisation, a place where there are no arts or recreations, only slavery to the machines of mass production.

Same practice, different reading

Using the same reading practice does not mean, however, that readers will produce or construct identical readings.

Here is a response that might have been written by another reader - a factory owner from the nineteeenth century. This reader also uses the dominant reading practice, and assumes that, as he reads, he is simply finding the meaning in the passage (put there by Mr Dickens), but his conclusions are quite different from the student's. He fills gaps and make inferences, using ways of thinking available in his culture, which support very different values.

> Mr Dickens has once again shown us what a keen observer he is, for his description of Coketown is in every sense an expression of my own perception. Here we have a writer who understands the difficulty of working with a class of people who have neither the wit nor the determination to make anything of themselves in this life, and whose contribution to industry is characterised by idleness and foolishness. Mr Dickens is right to invoke the image of savages with paint on their faces, an image which aptly describes my employees, who exhibit neither intelligence nor the ability to maintain common standards of cleanliness. Their sullen expressions and constant ill-humour indeed make the factory towns places of 'melancholy madness'. Small wonder it is that ladies of refinement cannot bear to hear mention of these places, for the mere word conjures images of people who behave like animals, blindly stumbling to and from their work without ever trying to improve themselves, just as they blindly stumble from lying-in hospital to cemetery. If England is ever to reap the benefits of mechanisation, it will be in spite of her working classes, and no thanks to them. We need more people like Mr Dickens, who might hold up a mirror to the masses and show them the error of their ways.

- How does this reading differ from that of the student above?
- How would you choose between the two readings? Which reading would you support? Why? Would your decision be based on the 'accuracy' or 'truth' of the reading, or on some other grounds, such as moral values?

These examples are reminders that every reading works to support the values of particular groups of people - factory owners, workers, teachers, students, and so on. There is no such thing as a 'natural' or 'objective' reading. It is important that account is taken of the values supported by texts and readings when we evaluate them, for the whole practice of producing texts and readings of them is bound up with the way power is structured in society. We must ask, Whose way of life is supported by this reading? Whose interests does it serve? At whose expense is it made?

Phone Call

Readings and re-readings

Following is a short story, which has generated or produced a variety of readings from different readers. Read the story, 'Phone Call' by Berton Roueche; then complete the activities which follow it.