

English Literature: A Very Short Introduction  
By Jonathan Bate

*English Literature: A Very Short Introduction* discusses why literature matters, how narrative works, and what is distinctly English about English literature. Jonathan Bate considers how we determine the content of the field, and looks at the three major kinds of imaginative literature - English poetry, English drama and The English novel.

Questions for thought and discussion

- What are some of the ways in which our senses of national and perhaps local identity have been shaped by literature?
- What have been the key texts for creating our images of Britain? Jane Austen for our idea of village life, Dickens for London, Hardy for rural England...?
- How long does a literary work have to go on being read for it to become a 'classic'?
- Which contemporary works of fiction do you think will still be read in a hundred years time?
- Do works of children's literature date more quickly than adult ones?
- Is it useful to make a distinction between 'popular' literary genres – detective story, science fiction, spy thriller, chick lit – and the 'literary' novel?
- What should the limits be to our definition of literature? What sort of literary qualities can we find in non-fictional genres such as the essay, the travel book, the history book, even the work of political theory or natural history?
- Is our sense of the role of poetry now confined to the private sphere (love poetry, nature poetry, the poetry of personal memory) whereas it used to be a more public form (political poetry, satire, war poetry)?
- Is the time coming when we will need to read Chaucer, Shakespeare, and even Milton in modern "translations"?
- Is there a tension between seeing Shakespeare's plays in performance and reading them as literature?
- Do you agree that playwrights in Britain since Shakespeare seem to have been more successful in comedy than tragedy?
- Should we worry about the 'national' origins of works of literature? Are there particular tensions between English and Irish/Scottish literature?
- And what about the literature of the former colonies and of immigrants? Should that be read through the spectacles of imperialism or do we need to move on?
- In a globalized world, will the very idea of a national literature become redundant?

Other books by Jonathan Bate

*Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

*Shakespeare and Ovid*, (Oxford University Press, 1989)

*The Cure for Love*, (Picador, 1998)