



## How to Read Literature

By Terry Eagleton

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What makes a work of literature good or bad? How freely can the reader interpret it? Could a nursery rhyme like *Baa Baa Black Sheep* be full of concealed loathing, resentment, and aggression? In this accessible, delightfully entertaining book, Terry Eagleton addresses these intriguing questions and a host of others. *How to Read Literature* is the book of choice for students new to the study of literature and for all other readers interested in deepening their understanding and enriching their reading experience.

In a series of brilliant analyses, Eagleton shows how to read with due attention to tone, rhythm, texture, syntax, allusion, ambiguity, and other formal aspects of literary works. He also examines broader questions of character, plot, narrative, the creative imagination, the meaning of fictionality, and the tension between what works of literature say and what they show. Unfailingly authoritative and cheerfully opinionated, the author provides useful commentaries on classicism, Romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism along with spellbinding insights into a huge range of authors, from Shakespeare and J. K. Rowling to Jane Austen and Samuel Beckett.

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### Editorial Review

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In this serious but breezy and idiosyncratic take on how to read and enjoy literature, English critic Eagleton performs an important if basic service, distinguishing the way people talk about fiction, drama, or poetry from the way we discuss real life. His emphasis is on form—how literature works—rather than content. The book's chapter headings—Openings, Character, Narrative, Interpretation, and Value—summarize, but do not do justice to, his sophisticated approach. Eagleton's erudition is supplemented with entertaining if occasionally over-the-top wit, most notably in his close textual analysis of Baa Baa Black Sheep and in his conclusion regarding the quality of literature, invoking the atrocious Scottish poet William McGonagall. His literary examples are well chosen and largely canonical—including Shakespeare, Dickens, and Austen (but also the Harry Potter series)—and are predominantly, although not exclusively, British. Eagleton does not elucidate how he expects his audience, which presumably doesn't yet know how to read literature, to be familiar with these, or any, authors. More seriously, though, his book should appeal to readers of James Wood's more traditional *How Fiction Works* (2008). --Mark Levine

### Review

"This is Eagleton at his most charming and an excellent guide for literature students early in their education or those seeking a refresher course."—*Publishers Weekly*  
(*Publishers Weekly*)

### About the Author

**Terry Eagleton** is Distinguished Professor of Literature, University of Lancaster, UK, and Excellence in English Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Notre Dame. One of the most influential literary critics in the English-speaking world, he is the author of more than 40 books on literary theory, postmodernism, politics, ideology, and religion, among them his best-selling *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. He lives in Northern Ireland, UK.

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