

CHAPTER SIX

PROCESSES OF STUDY IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is different from the others in the book. So far we have been thinking about ways of approaching a range of different study tasks: reading and making sense of secondary source material in text books, articles and teaching texts; getting the most out of other ways of studying, from lectures, tutorial meetings and TV for example; and learning by ‘doing’ – making presentations and visits, using a computer and, especially, writing essays. In this chapter we turn to the *nature* of the arts and humanities themselves, and look at the main *processes* involved in studying them.

Broadly, when you study the arts and humanities you study aspects of *culture*. You explore people’s ideas and beliefs, their cultural practices and the objects they have made. Human history is criss-crossed with the traces of people who did, said and made things and these people were to some extent aware of what they were doing. So all these things *mean* something. Your task is to look carefully at people’s ideas, practices and products to try to *understand* what they mean. You achieve this understanding by:

- *analysing* the various ‘objects’ of your study (for example, plays, music, paintings, historical or legal documents, philosophical treatises, maps, buildings, religious ceremonies)
- *interpreting the meanings* of these objects
- *making judgements* of their value
- *communicating* your interpretations and judgements.

When you study a painting, for example, you take it apart to see how it ‘works’ as a painting. You *analyse* it ‘as it is in itself’, because this gives you many clues to what it might mean. But that analysis is complicated by the fact that the *way* we understand a painting *itself* changes over time. For instance, what a religious painting might have meant to the artist and his contemporaries in sixteenth-century Italy cannot be the same as it means to us now. We do not share their culture. And the painting does not ‘appear’ the same to us either. We study it close-up in a modern art gallery,

or (much reduced in size) as an illustration in a book. Look at Raphael's painting, *The Madonna and Child* in Figure 6.1 (p.192). Imagine how different the painting would seem to its original audience – perhaps contemplating it during a religious service, high up on the wall of a church, lit by flickering candle-light. What might it have meant to them?

To make an *interpretation* of what the painting means, then, you not only have to study it 'as it is in itself' – you also need to learn as much as you can about the circumstances in which it was made and viewed (who painted it, what it was 'for' and, more generally, about the values, beliefs and way of life of those people at that time). This, too, presents certain challenges. Obviously, we cannot transport ourselves to sixteenth-century Italy. We live *here* and *now*. In the end, we interpret things in the context of our ideas and beliefs.

So it is as if the painting (or novel, vase, song, idea, document, event) has a kind of 'double life' – as it was to people in the past *and* as it is now, to us in the present. You have to try to understand why it means something now, and just what it means. Ultimately, you have to make *judgements* about its *value*.

These interlinked processes of *analysis–interpretation–evaluation* are what we will explore in this chapter. But it doesn't end there. You also have to *communicate* your interpretations and judgements to other people. To explain what *you* mean, you have to learn to speak and write in the appropriate 'language'. That way, you make your own contribution to an ongoing 'conversation' about our culture – a conversation that enables us to understand ourselves, and our purposes and values, as human beings who *continue* to live in society with each other.

KEY POINTS

- Studying the arts and humanities involves coming to *understand* aspects of human *culture*, past and present.
- You study the *meanings* of people's ideas, beliefs, cultural practices and products.
- And, by *communicating* your ideas, you make a *contribution* to our culture.

1.1 Different arts and humanities subjects

If studying the arts and humanities helps us understand our culture so that we can live together more meaningfully, then why do we study particular subjects or ‘disciplines’ in our universities? You may be studying a single discipline: a language (ancient or modern), history, art, music, literature, film, law, religion, philosophy – and so forth; or *some* subjects combined, in multi- or inter-disciplinary studies. Why not the arts and humanities in general?

It is partly because our cultural experience is very *broad*. If we want to *study* a culture, rather than just experience it, we have to make it *manageable*. We have to *analyse* it, or break it down into parts: making distinctions between the different *kinds* of experience we have – such as reading an account of the Roman Empire, watching a play, listening to the charts. By ‘isolating’ these things, and naming them (History, Literature, Music), we can see more clearly just what it is we are looking at and come to understand it better. We also make these distinctions because cultural experiences such as these are *different*. At bottom, if you can’t tell the difference between a song, a painting and a poem then there is nothing much you can say about any of them. However, such discrimination depends on recognizing *similarities* as well as differences between things – for instance, recognizing that a great variety of visual images are all examples of what we call ‘paintings’. But once you have learned the concept ‘painting’, and can distinguish between a painting and a song – which we all learn to do as children – then in a sense you ‘know’ what art and music are. (Incidentally, that means you already know a lot about arts and humanities subjects even if you have not studied them as subjects before. None of us is a true beginner in them.) This kind of analysis enables us to divide up our very wide experience of the world and organize it in our minds.

A main difference between the subjects that make up the arts and humanities, then, is that they have different *objects* of study – plays, poems and novels in Literature; documents, records and diaries in History; paintings, sculptures and buildings in Art History; and so on. Having identified such similarities and differences between the objects of our study, we can go on to look at each of them more closely. And so, over time, we have been able to make even finer distinctions. Within poetry, for example, we come to recognize different *types* of poem (narrative, epic, lyric, satirical). That is the way we impose some *meaningful order* on our very broad cultural experience and ‘discipline’ our thinking about it.

‘Living’ disciplines

The subjects we study in the arts and humanities are not set in concrete. We make changes to them over time which reflect significant changes in our culture and the way we view it. For obvious reasons, *new* subjects such as Communications, Film and Media Studies have come into being quite recently. This has involved some shifting of boundaries in existing subjects such as Literature, Art History and Philosophy. And even within these older disciplines the focus of attention tends to *shift* over time. For instance, in recent decades feminist writers have drawn our attention to the roles of women as writers and artists, as characters in novels and as depicted in paintings, and as readers and viewers. Also, what was always called English Literature is now often referred to as Literatures in English. That extends the scope of our studies to include English language writing from Africa, the Americas, Australia, India and the West Indies.

These changes are sometimes dismissed as simply ‘fashionable’ or ‘politically correct’. But that is a mistake. The rise of interest in Gender Studies since the 1960s is partly a result of an increase in the number of women working in universities – which itself reflects women’s changing place in our society. And study of Literatures in English has arisen out of a deeper understanding of Britain’s past role as an imperial power and the profound cultural effects this has had on its former colonies. As academics become aware that aspects of our cultural experience remain to be explored, their curiosity draws them towards those fresh pastures. For a while ‘gender’ or ‘post-colonial’ issues seem to be on everyone’s lips. Eventually, they may become established as fields of inquiry and be drawn into the mainstream of a range of existing subjects – which are themselves *changed* in the process. Then other issues come to our attention, and so on. This process is what makes even ‘traditional’ academic disciplines *living* traditions of thought and practice.

It is by imposing order on our experience in this way that, together, we are able to examine the *substance* of our culture in great detail – not only the different ways in which we communicate with each other, but also the very ‘stuff’ of our ideas, history, literature, art, music, and religious and other practices.

KEY POINTS

- We distinguish between *different subjects*, or disciplines, in the arts and humanities.
- The distinctions we make impose *order* on our very wide cultural experience, enabling us to study it closely and understand it better.

1.2 Studying the arts and humanities

Having seen why and how distinctions are made between different arts and humanities subjects, does that mean we cannot think of these subjects ‘as a whole’? The general label ‘arts and humanities’ suggests that there *is* something that unites them, at the same time distinguishing them from other subject groupings (such as ‘the sciences’ or ‘social sciences’). What unites these subjects is that they focus on:

- cultural ‘traditions’
- ‘texts’.

Cultural traditions

Just now I said quite confidently that you already know a lot about the subjects that make up the arts and humanities even if you have not studied them before. But how can I be so sure? What makes me certain is that, like everyone else, you were born into a human culture. As you were growing up within that culture you were hearing and seeing all the things the people around you were busy saying, doing and making. And you were learning to think and understand, do, say and make similar kinds of thing. You were probably taught some things directly: by your parents; by other adults and children; at school; and through radio and TV. As soon as you could read you also learned from comics and books. But no doubt you just ‘picked up’ a lot of these customs along the way, as a member of the culture alongside other people.

In the process of growing up you learned to make sense of the world around you, to organize and represent it to yourself in your mind. You learned to recognize similarities and differences between things and formed the ideas or concepts that enable us to think. Among these concepts are the sort we are particularly interested in here – ‘story’, ‘picture’, ‘song’, ‘the past’. Even before you could read, you were no doubt told stories and listened to them on the radio or on tape; you drew pictures and looked at them in books and on TV; you sang nursery rhymes and heard all kinds of music; and you learned to distinguish between ‘yesterday’ and ‘today’. Even if you were not taught directly about these things you *experienced* them all, over and over again. And when you compare your experiences with those of your friends, you probably find that you sang similar songs, heard similar stories and (if you are around the same age) watched the same TV programmes. That is because you grew up in the same culture.

But we do not only have similar experiences. The very ways in which we think, the meanings we make, the ways we speak, our values and beliefs, and what we do, have all ‘taken shape’ *within* our cultures.

What is a 'culture'?

A *culture* is the collection of meanings, values, morals, ways of thinking, patterns of behaviour and speech, and ways of life, that a group of people *share*. And all modern cultures have histories – they are linked to the *past*. So, through our culture, what we have is shared experience and knowledge of certain customs or cultural *traditions*.

But this does not mean that we all end up like 'clones'. You are, of course, recognizably *yourself*. You experience things in your own *particular* ways too. And we know that not everyone brought up in the same culture believes *exactly* the same things or behaves in identical ways. You are probably also a member of a thriving 'sub-culture', which shares a certain kind of (perhaps, religious or moral) belief that is different from the mainstream. In any case, I hardly need to emphasize this point since the idea that we are all individuals, responsible for ourselves and in charge of our own destinies, is one of the fundamental beliefs in our culture. For us, it is more difficult to get our heads round the idea that, in a sense, we are none of us truly individual – because inevitably we live in, and through, our shared culture. Indeed, that is why we can communicate with each other. Perhaps we are more similar than we like to think.

What all arts and humanities subjects aim to explore, then, are aspects of human cultures, past and present. In fact, in the West, many of our values can be traced as far back as Ancient Greece (and beyond), so it is more accurate to say that we explore certain *cultural traditions*. It is because those traditions have been passed on through our culture, and are still alive today, that we can hope to make some sense of the past and of ideas and art of the past. If the culture in which we were reared and live had no 'links' to that past at all, the traces that have come down to us (ideas, values, written texts, pictures, buildings, artefacts) would be alien to us. It would be almost impossible to understand them.

But, equally, our culture is constantly changing – perhaps particularly fast in this age of electronic revolution. As we have seen, the way we 'slice it up' into subject areas, in order to make sense of it, changes too. What we study are *living* traditions.

Texts

We can think of all the 'objects' that we study in the arts and humanities as, broadly speaking, *texts*. They may be literary, historical, legal or philosophical *written* texts; *visual* texts such as paintings, buildings, artefacts, plays-in-performance and films; *aural* texts, as in the performance of music and in spoken languages; or *symbolic* texts, for example religious ceremonies, maps, architectural plans and music scores. These things are all

‘texts’ in the sense that they ‘stand for’ or represent the conditions of time and place in which they were created, and all the knowledge, ideas and activity that went into their making. We cannot re-create those conditions. And we can seldom study the actual knowledge, thoughts or intentions of their makers and doers, past or present. What we study are the results or *outcomes* of all these things – the written accounts, paintings, pieces of music, plays, maps, Acts of Parliament, buildings, and so on – that were and are being produced.

When we analyse and interpret these texts in appropriate ways, we can often get ‘back’ to some of the knowledge, ideas and activity that went into their making. But even when an author tells us how she wrote a particular novel and what she meant to say in it, or a painter records what was in his mind, those accounts are not the simple ‘truth’ of the matter. They are yet more *texts* which we have to scrutinize. *All* these texts are open to our interpretation of what they *mean*.

For instance, we know that the Battle of Waterloo was fought in June 1815. And if we know quite a lot about what happened then, that is because people made written, visual and symbolic records of it which have come down to us: official documents, records of speeches in Parliament, journals, diaries, letters, sketches, maps, and so on. These are what we study (not the battle itself, of course). If you were to compare different accounts of the battle – from the French or British side, or by men from different ranks of the armies – then you would probably find that, because they had different ‘points of view’, their versions of the event are different. They may even conflict. An historian has to study *all* these texts with a *critical eye*: weighing up the evidence for and against particular interpretations of what happened and why, before reaching conclusions. If Wellington himself had left an account of why he made certain decisions during the battle that would of course be very interesting. It would be important as ‘evidence’ which could not have come in a direct way from anyone else. But it would need to be seen as ‘what Wellington *thought* he was doing’, and be weighed in the balance along with the rest.

KEY POINTS

The different arts and humanities subjects are *living traditions* of thought and practice. When you study them, you learn:

- how to *analyse* a range of different *texts*; *interpret* their meanings and *evaluate* them
- to think *critically* and independently
- how to *communicate* your ideas to others in speech and writing.

The meanings and significance of human activities are never just ‘in’ the texts you study, ready to jump out at you. You have to question, or ‘interrogate’, those texts and interpret their meanings for yourself. How to do this is what we will explore in the next few sections of the chapter.

2 BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE TEXT

Before you begin your interrogation of a text, though, you have to get to know it in a general way. In a sense, you can ‘see’ *visual* texts (such as paintings, sculptures and buildings) all at once; there they are before you. You can move around them, looking at them from different angles. But with *written, aural* and *moving image* texts – in which words, sounds or images *follow on* from one another – you cannot become familiar with the whole thing until you have read, heard or seen it right through. If it is quite short there is no problem about this; before you begin your analysis you will do so several times probably. But what if it is a lengthy text, such as a novel or a symphony? How should you approach it?

2.1 Reading

There are many different *kinds* of written text, and you need to approach and read them *differently*.

On first reading a *novel*, it is best to read through the way you normally do – and enjoy yourself. Some people read very quickly. That’s fine, because when you get down to analysing it you are anyway forced to re-read its various sections much more slowly and study some parts of it particularly carefully. Part of the process of analysing anything as long as a novel (a play, film, symphony) is finding a way of dividing it up into manageable ‘episodes’ – combining certain chapters, scenes or passages together to form groups. Then you can study each episode in detail, while keeping a grasp on the whole thing in your mind. So, as you read, you might just be thinking about some suitable way of doing that.

However, if you are reading a *philosophical* text you need to approach it in quite a different way. It is a mistake even to try reading it quickly because you will very soon lose the gist. If you keep going regardless, there’s a danger that you will ‘blame’ yourself for failing to understand what you read, decide you are no good at philosophy and give up. In fact you are not even giving yourself a chance. *Nobody* can read a philosophical text at the speed they read a novel and *understand* what they read. You have to take it very slowly, trying to make some sense of it as you go along, a bit at a time. That is because these texts take the form of an *argument* about certain *ideas*. Unless you understand the first stage of the argument

reasonably well you will not be able to make sense of the next stage, and so on. And, often, the argument is dense. Abstract ideas just *are* hard to understand, so every sentence may take a while to sort out.

Your reactions to the text

A few moments ago I said you might read through a novel and just *enjoy* it. But what if you are *not* enjoying it? What if you don't *like* a piece of music you will have to spend a lot of time thinking about? Or perhaps you feel thoroughly bewildered by a philosophical argument and at first you can't make head or tail of it.

Obviously, you cannot *force* yourself to find such a text enjoyable or interesting. But what you *can* do is give it a chance. At this stage you've hardly even been introduced. It may be that you are trying to read too quickly or expecting it to be something it is not. In any case, when you get down to studying it, looking more closely at this part and that, it will almost certainly make more sense to you. You may even come to enjoy it.

Having said that, you may not. We all have to study some things because they are important 'landmarks' in the subject, regardless of whether we enjoy the experience. So you need to be aware that, from time to time, you may have to just grit your teeth and press on.

However, it is always a good idea to talk things over with other people. See what fellow students make of the text. What they say may help you to 'come at' it from a different angle and see new possibilities in it.

Reading an *historical document* is different again. Much of it may be easy enough to follow, but there will probably be a number of terms that are 'of the period' or references to unfamiliar people and events that you need to look up. So reading it may be a stop-start process. In any case, you will be reading with certain questions in mind, such as:

- who wrote the document – what do we know about these people's background and particular interest in the matter?
- when was it written – how soon after the events it refers to?
- why was it written – who or what was it written 'for'?
- what was the author in a position to know; is it likely to provide sound information?

Then you can judge whether the document is a *reliable* source for your purposes, and just what it might mean.

So when you read philosophical texts and historical documents even for the first time, you will be beginning your interrogation. This is true of *symbolic* texts too, such as maps and music scores – you have to start 'deciphering' them straight away to make much sense of them.

2.2 Listening and viewing

If you are studying music, a foreign language, plays-in-performance, film or the media, you have to do a lot of listening and viewing. Again, you need to be aware that there are different *ways* of doing this.

For example, when you listen through some music for the first few times just to get a ‘feel’ for the piece as a whole, you don’t have to do it in a studious way. You can listen in the car, or at home as you do some chores. But when you come to *study* the music, you have to listen carefully and in an ‘active’ way – *thinking* about the way the piece is put together or the contribution different instruments make. You need to get organized for this kind of listening.

- 1 *Try to make sure there are no other sounds or noises in the room.* Don’t listen in the kitchen when there is a washing machine on, for instance.
- 2 *Find out where it’s best to sit in relation to the source of sound and adjust the controls accordingly.*
- 3 *Concentrate on the silence before you start listening.* Sounds exist in what is otherwise silence. If you stop to appreciate that background, the textures and ‘colours’ of the music will be more vivid.
- 4 *Just listen and think – don’t do anything else at the same time.* Get used to concentrating on what you hear. Shut your eyes if it helps.
- 5 *Try to listen without being interrupted.* If you are interrupted it is probably worth starting the piece again from the beginning.

Similar ‘rules’ apply if you are studying a language and perhaps listening to a tape of native speakers in conversation. You can listen through a few times in a less studious way, just to get the gist. But then, when you get down to work on it, you need to have quiet conditions in which to listen to the various parts of it carefully. And the same with poetry or a novel on tape, and a play on video.

When you are trying to become familiar with texts it helps a lot if you can *surround* yourself with them. You can pin the maps you are studying on your walls, and also illustrations of paintings, buildings and artefacts. And you can get into the habit of tuning in to a music or foreign language radio station, perhaps having it on in the background as you get up each morning.

KEY POINTS

- The *texts* you study in the arts and humanities are of *different kinds* (written, visual, aural, symbolic).
- There is also a *range* of texts within each of these categories.
- It is important to recognize the *differences* between texts, so that you *approach* them with the right *expectations*.
- You need to read, look or listen to the text in the way that is *appropriate* to it, and also suits your study *purposes*.

3 APPROACHING ANALYSIS

3.1 Why analyse?

Whatever kind of text you study, one of your main tasks is to try to understand it ‘as it is in itself’. That means *analysing* it. You have to examine it *in detail* so that you can see what it is made up of and how it ‘works’.

Just as you read, view or listen to different kinds of text in different ways, so you approach your analysis of them differently. In each case, you ask particular *types of question* using a specialized analytical *language*. We have just seen the sort of questions you will have in mind when approaching an historical document. Let’s take another example.

Look at Raphael’s *Madonna and Child* (Figure 6.1, over the page).¹ To understand how it is ‘put together’ you need to ask the following kinds of question about it, using some of the terms that appear in italics here.

- How much of the *picture space* is taken up by the three *figures* and how much by the *background* to them?
- Where are the figures *positioned* on the canvas and what are their *poses*?
- What is ‘in’ the background and how is this related to the figures in the *foreground*?
- Which parts of the painting are in *light* and which in *shade*, and where is the *source of light* – where is the light supposed to be coming from?
- What is the painting’s *tonal range*; are there any striking uses of *colour* in it?
- How is the *two-dimensional* (flat) painted surface made to look as if it has a third dimension, of *depth*, so that the figures appear life-like?
- What is the relationship of the figures to you, the *viewer* – at your *eye-level*, ‘looking’ down, away, or what?

In the process of analysing the painting you study as many aspects of it as you can – not only the picture surface itself (the first four questions), but also your (the viewer’s) relationship to it. All this gives you important clues to how the painting works. When you then combine the results of this analysis with what you have discovered about both the type of painting you are dealing with and the conditions in which it was painted and viewed, you are able to reach some informed and appropriate interpretation of its meanings and values, and to communicate your judgements to other people.

¹ We have only been able to reproduce the painting in black and white, so, among other things, you wouldn’t be able to analyse the artist’s use of colour. This is only one reason why you should always try to examine *original* paintings when you can. It is also difficult to get a sense of the scale and texture of a painting from a reproduction, however good it is. Of course, you will often have to use reproductions. When you do, you should always read the captions, which give you important information about a painting, including its size.



Figure 6.1 Raphael, *The Madonna and Child with the Infant Baptist* (*The Garvagh Madonna*), probably 1509–10, oil on wood, 39 x 33 cm. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London)

KEY POINTS

When you analyse a text you *break it down* into parts and *examine* each part in detail, so that you can see how the text ‘works’ as a whole. According to the *type* of text you are analysing, you:

- ask particular *kinds* of question
- use the appropriate *language* of analysis.

Let's see how these processes of analysis–interpretation–evaluation and communication actually work in practice. To do this we will *separate* them out and *illustrate* each one, taking a short poem as a working example. As we discuss the poem, I hope you will be able to see how to *apply* what we are doing to *other kinds of text* you may be particularly interested in. From time to time I will draw out some of these implications.

3.2 Carrying out an analysis

Here, then, is the two-verse poem we will focus on in the next few sections of the chapter. As you see, I have left out the ends of the lines in the second verse. So it presents you with a kind of 'puzzle'. (But I have included the punctuation, and added line numbers for ease of reference.)

- 1 The grey sea and the long black land;
 - 2 And the yellow half-moon large and low;
 - 3 And the startled little waves that leap
 - 4 In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
 - 5 As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
 - 6 And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.
-
- 1 Then a mile of warm sea-scented _____;
 - 2 Three fields to cross till a farm _____;
 - 3 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp _____
 - 4 And blue spurt of a lighted _____,
 - 5 And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and _____,
 - 6 Than the two hearts beating each to _____!

ACTIVITY

Read the poem three or four times. Then turn poet and try to fill in the missing words in the second verse *before* you read on. (Don't cheat!)

A clue

Speak the first verse out loud, and notice which of the end-words in the lines have similar sounds (that is, which lines rhyme). Notice that lines 2 and 5 look as though they rhyme, but they don't strike the ear that way. However, in verse 2 the equivalent lines do rhyme.

A warning

Anxiety can Damage your Health – so do not get anxious about this. It's supposed to be *fun*. (But it will be even more fun if a group of you can get together to do it.)

I have no way of knowing what you wrote of course. But I should reveal that I have played this game before. And I am prepared to bet that, whether you got the right words or not, the ones you wrote were almost all words of one syllable. (Syllables are based on vowel *sounds*. So 'speed' ('ee') and 'loud' ('ow') are words of one syllable (even though they contain two vowels), and 'fiery' has two syllables because the 'fie' produces the sound 'i' and the 'y' is sounded 'ee' – 'fi/ree'.)

The poem is by Robert Browning and was published in the early 1840s; here it is in full.

- 1 The grey sea and the long black land;
 - 2 And the yellow half-moon large and low;
 - 3 And the startled little waves that leap
 - 4 In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
 - 5 As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
 - 6 And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.
-
- 1 Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
 - 2 Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
 - 3 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
 - 4 And blue spurt of a lighted match,
 - 5 And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,
 - 6 Than the two hearts beating each to each!

(R. Browning (1940 edn) *Browning: Poetical Works*, London, Oxford University Press, p.215.)

ACTIVITY

Now read out the poem in full a few more times.

Note: It will help if you type or write the poem out accurately on a sheet of paper (including the punctuation). Then you can keep it in front of you alongside the book, as we look more closely.

The reason I am so confident that you wrote words of one syllable is that the majority of the words in the entire poem are of that kind, and all but one of the words that end the lines in the second verse ('appears'). (Just check that for yourself.) As you were reading through the poem several times your ear will have picked that up. So, if at first you wrote in two-syllable words, they would have 'sounded wrong' (unless, perhaps, English is not your first language or you happen to have very little experience of poetry). This is

why I asked you to read the poem aloud. What your ear detects is a certain *pattern* of sounds – in this case a pretty simple pattern of mainly single sounds. And that is what a poem is, a particular pattern of words and sounds. That is why you should try to read poems out loud. Your *ear* tells you what you already ‘know’ about poetry, so you should always listen to it and put your faith in it, so to speak.

You may have noticed other *patterns of sound* that ‘knit’ these particular words together: each verse has six lines, and in each the end-words are paired in rhyming sounds as follows: lines 1 and 6; 2 and 5; 3 and 4. If you expected to find that kind of patterning, or picked up my ‘clue’, you probably worked out from the first verse which of the end-words in the second verse would need to rhyme. Another thing you may have ‘heard’ is how long and drawn-out most of the vowel sounds in these end-words are: ‘low’, ‘leap’, ‘sleep’, ‘beach’, ‘appears’, ‘fears’. If you then look at the words *within* the lines you’ll find many more that sound similar in this respect (‘grey sea’, ‘half-moon’, ‘Three fields’, ‘hearts beating each to each’). Some of these long vowel sounds within the lines *also* ‘echo’ the vowel sounds in the end-words – for example, ‘black land’ in line 1, and ‘yellow...low’ in line 2 – producing ‘internal’ rhyming patterns as well. And, generally, the consonants are soft-sounding. If you find it hard to hear these things, read the words out loud in an exaggerated way.

There is another type of pattern here too, in the *kinds of word* the poet uses. A lot of these words appeal to our *senses*: of sight (the setting of ‘grey sea’, ‘black land’ and ‘yellow’ moonlight across the water); of hearing (the ‘tap’ and ‘scratch’ of lines 3 and 4 in the second verse); of smell (‘sea-scented’); touch (‘warm’) and sensation (‘two hearts beating’). In particular, the poem is very visual – in our mind’s eye, we can see what is ‘happening’ at every stage. It is a little drama that would translate very well to film.

Finding ‘ways into’ a text

The hardest part of analysing a text is *getting started*. Here, the game of writing end-words for the poem forced you to start by thinking about *sounds*. But there are many possible ways into any text. So if you feel a bit bewildered at first, don’t despair.

Generally, it is best to begin by thinking about some aspect of the text that seems to *stand out*, striking you forcefully in some way. In a written text, you may be struck by a particular *image* (or comparison), and begin thinking about what it brings to mind. (In the poem for instance, consider the way the waves are compared to ringlets in lines 3 and 4 of the first verse. Why ‘ringlets’? What do you associate with them?) Or it may be the way the words are *laid out* on the page that attracts your attention: a pattern in the dialogue of a play or novel (such as very long speeches

regularly assigned to one character and short utterances to another); in poetry, an unusual arrangement of the verses with some lines much shorter than others. In a piece of music it might be a sudden change in *rhythm*, or in *dynamics* (from soft to very loud perhaps). Or you may hear a particularly pleasing *melody* (or tune) repeated in a slightly different way at different points in the piece. You may see a certain *shape* repeated in a painting (lots of curves for instance), or notice a splash of vivid *colour* on one part of the canvas.

Wherever you begin, as soon as you notice a particular feature of the text and start thinking about it – or start to see or hear some sort of pattern – you will find yourself moving on from one observation to another (as we are doing here with the poem).

Once you think you have detected *any* kind of pattern you should look to see whether it runs right through the text. (Remember, from section 1.1, that analysis involves recognizing similarities *and* differences.)

ACTIVITY

Read the poem out loud again. Do any lines sound *different* – breaking the pattern of long vowel sounds and soft consonants we noticed?

I'd say there is a different pattern of sound in lines 3 and 4 of the poem. These lines are similar in both verses and also different from the slower, languorous movement of the other lines – especially in the second verse. There, you have to pronounce the words clearly because of all the hard, dental consonants; 't', 'st' and 'tch'. And there are a number of short vowel sounds too ('tap', 'quick', 'scratch', 'match') which, because they are short, make you speed up as you read. The sounds of these words seem to mimic, or *evoke*, the actual (short, sharp) sounds of tapping and match-scratching. Combining this observation with what we noticed about the rhyming pattern earlier, you can see that the middle two lines in each verse are knitted particularly closely together by this change in sounds and movement *and* by the fact that these are the only lines with adjacent rhymes. They are also the *only* lines we read through without stopping – they are not divided by a comma or semi-colon. They seem to be little 'units of meaning' in themselves, within each verse of the poem. But why? What's the point of this?

Once you ask that kind of question you are thinking about what the poem is *about* – that is, you are moving towards some *interpretation* of its *meanings*. In fact you will have been asking yourself that kind of question all along. It is impossible to read and analyse something without trying to make some sense of it as you go. However, we began by putting these 'why?', 'what

does this mean?’ questions to one side. The point of suspending them – while you look closely at patterns of sound, movement, and so on – is that *meaning* in a poem is closely bound up in the *way it is written*. Indeed, the poem *is* the way it is written – these particular words on the page, in this order. (So too the painting *is* the marks on the canvas, the music *is* the particular arrangement of ‘sounds in time’.) Discovering *how* the poem works is precisely the point of analysing it in detail. If you jump to conclusions about what it means too quickly, you will tend to shut off some other possibilities that may be thrown up by a more *thorough* analysis of it.

KEY POINTS

- Analysing a text shows you how it *works* and gives you many clues to what it might *mean*.
- First, examine a feature of the text that is particularly *striking*, and look out for *patterns* in it.
- Then go on to analyse the text as *fully* as you can before trying to reach any conclusions about its meanings.

So, although in reality analysing a text and interpreting its meanings are not separate ‘stages’ we go through, but are overlapping processes, I will keep them separate for the time being so that you can see more clearly what each involves.

4 INTERPRETING MEANINGS

After you had read the poem a few times, you no doubt pieced together that the ‘I’ of line 5 in the first verse, the speaker, is rowing in a boat at night. We probably realize that with the word ‘prow’. By the end of the first verse the boat is beached in a cove. The journey continues over the beach and fields to a farm (by foot, presumably, since we hear about no other means of transport). There the traveller meets someone. It appears that they exchange signals – the tap on the pane and lighted match. And all this, together with the whispering voice and beating hearts, suggests that it is some kind of secret meeting. I imagine we would not disagree about that pretty bald account. It seems to be a poem about a journey and a secret meeting. In fact the title of the poem is ‘Meeting at Night’.

But as far as I can see, we can’t be sure about anything else. Although the verse is very visual, we don’t know *where* this place is. We know the action happens at night, because of the grey and black of the surroundings in moonlight (and the title), but otherwise we don’t know *when* it happens either. And we don’t know *who* the speaker is, whether male or female, or who he or she meets, or *why* they meet. So there seems to be plenty of scope for interpretation here.

4.1 Knowledge about context and author

Starting with the ‘central character’ (traveller–speaker), I would guess that most of us just *assumed* he is male. If someone is doing something as strenuous and potentially dangerous as rowing about and walking alone through the countryside at the dead of night, we tend to expect that person to be a man. More to the point, what is known about mid-Victorian culture – the *conditions* within which this poem was written and first read – suggests that Browning’s original readers would almost certainly have made that assumption. Then (and later) woman’s place was firmly in the home, not pulling on oars and traipsing across fields at night (in a hooped skirt?). Given those conditions, then, we are in all probability right to think of the traveller–speaker as a man; this is an *appropriate* interpretation to make. The woman, if a woman is involved, is more likely to be the one who ‘waits’ in the farm ready to respond to the tap at the window-pane. And, if this is a poem about a lovers’ meeting, then it is also reasonable to assume that the lovers *are* male and female – if that was obviously not the case Browning probably wouldn’t have found a publisher for the poem.

However, I am speculating here. Is it right to do that? The answer is ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

Interpreting texts from other times and places

Yes. Like everyone else, artists rely on communicating with their contemporary ‘audience’ on the basis of the understandings they *share*, as members of the same culture. So when you are studying a text that has come down from the past, or from a culture that is different from your own, it is important to find out as much as you can about that time and place – including the way of life, values and beliefs of the people for whom the text was written. Some knowledge of the *conditions* in which the text was written and received will guide you towards making *appropriate* interpretations of its meanings.

However, you need to be aware that acquiring that kind of knowledge is not a straightforward business. If your subject is Philosophy or History, you will be particularly interested in such questions as: what is ‘true’?; in what sense can we ‘know’ what happened in the past?; how can we find out? In that connection, notice that what I have just said is carefully worded. I have said that our knowledge of this period ‘suggests that...’; that we are ‘probably’ right to make certain assumptions about the poem on that basis; that it is ‘reasonable’ to draw a particular conclusion.

You have to be *cautious* in what you say about conditions in the past, and especially so when you are interpreting a text’s meanings on the basis of your understanding of the past.

No. You have to be careful *not* to speculate on the basis of some kinds of knowledge though – such as what you know about the artist. For example, I know that Browning met a woman in 1844, Elizabeth Barrett (also a poet), and that they courted and married in secret. They fled to Italy immediately after their wedding in 1846. In view of this, I might be tempted to interpret the poem not just as the story of a lovers' meeting, but of the kind of clandestine meeting that may actually have taken place between these particular lovers. In this case I could simply be proved wrong: the poem was in fact published along with others in 1842, some two years before Browning met Elizabeth Barrett. But even if they had met earlier, I *still* couldn't be sure that Browning was writing about himself or about something he had actually experienced.

You should not make connections between what you know about artists' lives or times and their 'works of art' in a direct, *unqualified* way. We cannot get inside other people's minds, so we can never know for sure what artists feel or know or *intend* to do in their work. (And we can't just take what they themselves say at face value either because, like all of us, they may not be fully aware of what they feel or do.) Also, works of art are only ever *partly* 'true to life'. They always contain imaginary elements – even when they are portraits of real people or of actual landscapes. Artists create their work; what they are concerned with is its *composition*. A landscape painter, for example, may 'move' a tree in order to make a more pleasing pattern on the canvas, or add a figure to the landscape for the sake of visual interest. And these imaginary elements may so transform what was 'there' that it is pretty well impossible to disentangle the one from the other. So, even when there seems to be an obvious connection between 'real life' and 'work', you need to *argue your case* for that relationship rather than just assume it.

For all these reasons, you cannot just assume that the 'speaker' of the poem we are looking at *is* Browning. You cannot make assumptions about what the poet *feels* or *intends*, or what he *means* by the poem. You can only talk in terms of what 'the speaker' says and does; what Browning 'seems' to be doing in the poem; and what *the poem* might mean. The same applies when you are talking about the 'meanings' of a painting or a piece of music.

KEY POINTS

When you are interpreting the meanings of a text you should:

- try to *find out* as much as you can about the *conditions* in which the text was created and received (read, viewed or heard); but
- try *not to make assumptions* about relationships between 'real life' and 'the work', or about the artist's beliefs, feelings and *intentions*.



Figure 6.2 Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Snake Killed by a Snake*, 1648, oil on canvas, 119 x 199 cm. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London)

4.2 Meaning and 'form'

The question remains, what is this poem 'about'? Or, rather, we should ask, 'what *kind* of poem is it?' Poems (paintings, ideas, music, buildings, historical documents) are not all 'one kind of thing'. As we become familiar with poetry we learn to distinguish between different *kinds* of poem, or between different *poetic forms*.

Epic poems, for example, are extremely long stories about the doings of a noble warrior, voyager, or similar 'hero'. Other characters are involved too. They are always described in detail when they are introduced into the story and usually make a dignified 'set' speech which reveals their 'character'. Great battles take place, involving descriptions of the hero's appearance and weapons as well as the action. The style of writing is high-flown and elaborate, in keeping with the epic's lofty themes. These are the literary devices – or, *conventions* – traditionally associated with epic poetry. We interpret the meanings of an epic poem within that framework of understanding. So when a character makes a set speech we do not *expect* it to sound like 'real' speech. And it would be *inappropriate* to criticize the poem for not being 'true to life'. An epic is not supposed to be true to life; it is supposed to be far grander than that.

To say that the meaning of a poem is closely bound up in the way it is written, then, is to say that 'its *meaning* is bound up in its *form*'. When you analyse a poem you come to understand the elements of its 'formal' patterning. This gives you clues to the meanings it is *appropriate* to make.

'Conventions'

When you sit among rows of people to watch a play, first the curtain goes up – to reveal, say, a living room. We 'accept' this as an artificial device that indicates the start of the play (because of course curtains do not go up to reveal living rooms in real life). Then what you see is a 'room' with three walls. You simply ignore the fact that the fourth wall is missing. (Indeed, it would be odd to complain about this because, otherwise, you wouldn't be able to see the play.) These 'walls' are in fact flat, painted canvases, but you ignore that too. The furniture in the room is all turned to face the audience and people weave around it, wearing costumes, speaking very loudly and making exaggerated gestures, generally also facing the audience. And they perhaps even speak to each other in verse. *None* of these things is natural or 'true to life' (even sitting in rows in the 'audience'). They are all *conventions*: artificial devices that are 'generally accepted' as necessary to the business of presenting and viewing a play. Indeed, they are bound up in what it *means* to stage a play. If you, watching, do not 'accept' these things, then you will misunderstand what you see in a big way. As with the play, so with the epic poem.

Certain conventional 'rules' also govern the way a landscape painting is composed. (Look at the landscape in Figure 6.2.) As here, the scene is usually constructed in horizontal 'layers' that seem to recede into the distance – rather as scenery is positioned at the sides of a stage, with one 'flat' behind another – giving the illusion of depth on the two-dimensional canvas. This is another reason why a painting of a real landscape is never a faithful representation of that scene. It is not only that the painter may have added imaginary details to what she actually saw. It is that the landscape *form* will make its own 'demands'. In order to give the *illusion* of depth (light, and so on), painters *represent* what they see according to the conventions governing the painting's composition and uses of line and colour. A painting is always an '*imagined reality*'.

Some painters (composers, poets, playwrights) play around with these conventions, and so with our *expectations* of the painting, music, poem or play. A play may be presented 'in the round', for example, with no curtain, stage, or scenery. But they can only do that, and we can only *understand* what they are doing, if we all know what the (normally accepted) conventions are. It is only when we know what the 'rules' *are* that we can break them, or tell when someone else is breaking them.

Browning's poem is a *lyric* (in fact he called it a 'dramatic lyric'). When you analyse the particular patterns of words and sounds that make it up you are exploring the various *elements* of its *lyric form*. By convention, this type of poem is very short and usually expresses the feelings of a single speaker. Originally, lyrics were poems written to be sung. They are rhythmic and rhyming, and they appeal to the reader's emotions and senses. (Indeed, we have already identified some of these features in the poem.) When you can place Browning's poem as 'a lyric' you approach it with these kinds of expectations. Unlike the grandeur of epic themes, you expect it to engage with some aspect of a world that we know, and to appeal to your feelings as an 'ordinary' human being. So, in recognizing its form you are also accepting some *limits* on the kind of interpretation you can make of it – or, on the range of its *appropriate* meanings.

For example, if at first you thought the poem was about a smuggler meeting up with his accomplice (which I have heard argued, quite stoutly), that interpretation would not sit at all comfortably with Browning's use of the lyric form. Even if you argued that smugglers might well be rowing about in the night in an excited state, and meeting secretly using pre-arranged signals, still it would not be a likely interpretation of this poem – let alone a convincing one. Why then the mainly soft sounds and languorous movement of the verse; the attention to visual detail of 'yellow half-moon large and low' and the sensuousness of 'warm sea-scented beach'? No smuggler worth his salt would be responding to all that as he went about his business, nor

registering the feel and smell of the sand. And while the two accomplices might well whisper to each other, would that be out of their ‘joys’ as well as fears? Would their, no doubt, pounding hearts beat ‘each to each’?

And why, in the context of smugglers, would the poet be inclined to compare the waves in moonlight – ‘startled’ from their ‘sleep’ by unexpected oars – to ‘fiery ringlets’? Ringlets are what women had in their hair. It seems much more likely that this image of being ‘startled’ from sleep anticipates what happens in the second verse – putting the idea of ‘woman’ into our minds earlier on, so that we are in a sense prepared for the meeting. In short, in view of the poem’s lyric form and what we have understood about the way it works, it seems all the more appropriate to interpret it as a poem about a secret meeting between lovers.

KEY POINTS

When you are interpreting the meanings of a text you should be *guided* by:

- your knowledge of the *type* of text it is (of its *form*)
- your understanding of the *conventions* that ‘govern’ the subject matter, purposes, and (formal) elements of the text.

This enables you to make some *appropriate* interpretation of its meanings.

4.3 Analysis and interpretation

We have got to the point of recognizing that this is a lyric poem, and of thinking that it is probably about a lovers’ meeting. But you cannot reach firmer conclusions about a text’s meanings until you have looked at as many aspects of it as you can. I think we need to go back again to the detail of the poem, because the analysis is not full enough yet.

For one thing, there is something odd about the poem’s syntax. If you look at the verbs in the first verse you’ll see that they are all in the present tense: ‘leap’, ‘I gain’ and ‘quench’. This is what the waves *are doing* or the speaker *is doing*. We might expect that pattern to continue into the second verse. But it doesn’t. The next verb, in line 2, is ‘to cross’. This does not suggest that the traveller *is doing* the crossing, but that crossing the fields *has still to be done*. What does that mean?

ACTIVITY

Just stop for a moment to confirm the change in verb tense for yourself. What are the implications of it; what do you think it might ‘mean’?

While you’re at it, have a really close look at the last two lines in the first verse. What is being compared to what here? And what does this comparison suggest to you?

Well, I think the change in tense means that at the end of the first verse the traveller is beaching the boat *looking forward* to, or anticipating, the rest of the journey and the meeting. In other words, the things that ‘happen’ in the second verse, the journey over land and the meeting itself, are going on in the speaker’s *mind*. What are the implications of that? Notice, he knows this journey pretty well – ‘a mile’ of beach, ‘three’ fields – and he knows exactly what signals will be exchanged when he gets to the farm. What this suggests, then, is that it is not the first time he has made the journey and met his lover secretly. This is a ‘love affair’ we have here, not a one-night stand. And perhaps what *all* this means is that, in a secret love affair, what goes on in our minds – or, *anticipation* – is a large part of the excitement and pleasure.

Making meaning: ‘Anything goes’?

‘Making meaning’ is a process that goes on in our minds when we come up against something in the world, or ideas in a text, that we try to make sense of. But it is clear from talking to other people that we do not always make the same meanings, even of the same events and texts. We may respond to and interpret them differently. Indeed, on that basis, some people think you can just say what you like about a poem, painting or piece of music; there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ about it because we all ‘respond’ to it differently, emotionally and in our imaginations. So it *means* different things to us. In the realm of interpretation, ‘anything goes’. (Lovers’ or smugglers’ meeting? – it’s all a matter of personal response.) But this is a big mistake.

In the first place, just because we sometimes interpret things differently does not mean that we always or even usually do. In fact, I’d say that very often we make similar meanings to others in our culture. That’s why we can understand each other, often in subtle ways, and laugh at the same jokes. But in any case, we *cannot* say just what we like about a poem, painting or any of the other objects we study. If we think we can that is because we are only thinking about *ourselves*, about our feelings and fancies. We are forgetting about the other half of the equation – the *text* we are studying and trying to interpret the meaning of. That text imposes some *limits* on the interpretations we may make. We are limited by our understanding of the *kind* of text we are dealing with – by its conventional *form* – and by our knowledge of the *conditions* in which it was created, and read, seen or heard. In view of those limitations, what we should say is that there is a certain *range* of *appropriate meanings* we may make.

It is *within that range* that we may well disagree because of the differences there are between us. In some texts the range is wide, so there may be much to disagree about. But this is far from saying that ‘anything’ goes. Rather, it suggests that we *can* be ‘more’ or ‘less’ right in our interpretations.

Another pattern you may or may not have spotted is Browning's frequent use of *articles* ('the' and 'a'), especially the *definite article*, 'the', in the first three lines of the poem. We noted before that we don't know where these events take place. It could be anywhere on and near a coast. Or is it 'nowhere' – not a 'real' place at all? The lovers are pretty shadowy figures too: one the muscular 'T' of the first verse, the other 'a voice' and, together, 'the two hearts beating'. Why all this anonymity?

Is it that we are not *supposed* to be thinking of them as *particular* lovers, meeting at a specific place and time? Are they rather meant to represent or 'stand for' lovers *in general*? If so, this seems to be all of a piece with the implications of the change in verb tenses we discussed just now. That, too, led us to think in more abstract terms – about the *role* of anticipation in affairs *of this kind*.

So, taking these elements of the verse together, perhaps what we should be thinking about – and our feelings be engaged by – is the *state* of 'being in love'. Rather than describing a series of events that actually happened in a real place involving particular people, what the poet seems to be doing is *evoking* this *state* for us: calling up our memories and feelings about it through the sounds and movement of the verse, and the kind of words and images he uses. Through that evocation, it is as if the poem 'asks' us to recognize that when we are in love, we human beings are fuelled with energy – we will go to extraordinary lengths and run all sorts of risk. We are full of excited anticipation, with every sense alert and heightened; we invest our surroundings with beauty and romance. And it is as if our very hearts beat a tattoo in our breasts. Perhaps the poem also suggests that, in a *secret* love affair, what we have is this romantic state 'writ large' – in its extreme form.

But are we quite right to think of this state as an extreme of 'romantic' love? What about the image at the end of the first verse? The male speaker is being compared to the boat: 'I gain the cove with pushing *prow*'. Then the speaker's/prow's speed is quenched 'i' the slushy sand'. What does this comparison bring to mind? Well, within an interpretation of this as a poem about lovers, isn't it a sexual image? As people who live after Freud it is perhaps hard for us to interpret things like 'prows' penetrating sand (trains going through tunnels, and so on) as anything other than 'phallic symbols'. Come to think of it, the image in lines 3 and 4 of the first verse is beginning to take on a whole new meaning now. Maybe the 'spurt' of the match is significant too...

But perhaps you are protesting at this point. Isn't that going much too far – reading things 'into' this poem from our present ways of thinking? Isn't that interpretation *inappropriate*, given the time and place in which the poem was written? Actually, I don't see why. Browning certainly didn't know about Freud (1856–1939) when he wrote the poem. But full-blown love affairs were sexual then as now. Also, the promise of such an encounter fits with the idea of being driven to extremes of exertion and of taking risks, fuelled by the excitement of sexual passion. Anyway, if Browning were

writing about sex we would precisely *expect* to find it only ‘suggested’ in his verse rather than made plain. If he wanted his work to be published he could not have written about it explicitly at that time.

However, having said all that, this is an example of the kind of interpretation we might *not* agree about – *within* our understanding of the poem’s ‘range of meaning’ as a meeting between lovers. We can at least agree that it is unlikely to have some other range of meaning altogether. (It’s safe to leave the smugglers behind us, for instance.) That is because, in carrying out a fairly full analysis of the ‘formal elements’ of this ‘lyric’ poem, and taking account of the ‘conditions’ in which it was written and read, *everything* we have discovered chimes with the interpretation of it as a lovers’ meeting and *nothing* about it seems to suggest otherwise.

KEY POINTS

When you are *interpreting* a text, you should try to reach an understanding of the ‘range of meaning’ you may make by combining:

- your knowledge of the text’s *form* (the *conventions* that govern its composition); and
- your understanding of the *conditions* in which the text was created and received.

When you also take account of

- the outcomes of your analysis of its formal *elements*

you are able to make some *appropriate* interpretation of the text’s meanings.

Now, we will try to make some judgements about the text.

5 EVALUATION

As we have seen, you are fully *immersed* in the text while you try to discover how it works and what it is about. But in order to make some *judgements* of it you have to shift your stance a bit. You have to ‘stand back’, as it were, and ask yourself: What do I think about these things I have discovered?

Basically, you need to ask two *kinds* of question about the text’s ‘value’:

- 1 *What values* are represented in the text (emotional/social/moral/intellectual...)?
Are they *good* values (for us, here and now), or not?
- 2 Is the text *of value*; is this text a good one of its kind?

Returning to the poem, we’ll look at each of these questions in turn.

5.1 The values represented by the text

The first question here is, *what values* does the poem stand for? If the poem is about the nature of the romantic–sexual relationship – the state of being in love – what is it ‘saying’ to us about that?

ACTIVITY

Stop and think about this question of what values the poem ‘stands for’. Jot down a few of the thoughts that occur to you – and also make a note of what their opposites might be.

For instance, the first things that occurred to me were:

(for) *romance* ('against') everyday reality

(for) *risk* ('against') safety

How did you get on? Other things I wrote down are:

For

action/energy

intensity of feeling

sexual passion

the stolen moment

Against

passivity

quiescence

inhibition

settled domesticity

The point of thinking about the opposite of whatever the text seems to stand for is that, whenever we *affirm* one thing we also (by implication) *deny* its opposite. So looking at what the text seems to be ‘denying’ can help you get clear what values it *does* represent.

Take the first pair of terms I thought of, ‘romance’ versus ‘everyday reality’. Thinking about what the *reality* of Browning’s scenario might be, draws attention to the *ideal*-ness of what he evokes – its make-believe quality. So, the energetic traveller does *not* disembark in the cove soaked in sweat (have you ever done any hard rowing, even for a few minutes?). Nor does he twist his ankle while ploughing through ruts or mud slicks in the fields, and no farm-yard dog barks to give his presence away. We do *not* get the sense that he will have to undertake the whole journey in reverse and then set off for work the next day thoroughly knackered.²

² In fact there is a companion-piece to this poem, entitled ‘Parting at Morning’, which raises some intriguing possibilities of a different kind.

Seen from this perspective, the poem seems even more concerned with the *possibilities* of human passion than with the reality of it. Looking further down my list, it is not that the poem ‘says’ anything as crude as ‘whatever you do, don’t get “married” and settle down’. But we can see that in evoking and *beautifying* this state of intense sexual passion (even, perhaps, a forbidden love) – the vigour, risk-taking and heightening of the senses involved – the poem *celebrates* all these things. And, in doing so, it seems to ‘recommend’ these *as values* over their opposites.

Making assumptions

You might think that, having examined the text carefully and reached some interpretation of its meanings, there should be no difficulty about deciding what values it represents. But this is not always the case – they may not be *obvious* to you at all. That is because values are often *assumed* by the text (simply taken to be true), and so hidden from view. It is as if the text speaks to us ‘out of’ certain *underlying* beliefs. So, at this stage, you may have to dig around the text a bit more to be clear about them (as we are doing here). As readers, we all make certain assumptions too – we are not conscious of everything we ‘take to be true’. And some of the things we know we believe, we possibly haven’t given much thought to.

For instance, you may have assumed from the start that the lover who ‘waits’ is a woman. And we saw that it is reasonable to think so, given the time and place the poem was written and read (so it isn’t a totally unexamined assumption). However, we are now interpreting this as a poem about the state of being in love, rather than about particular lovers. If it is about human sexual passion *in general*, shouldn’t we think again about this assumption? But, then, what about the ‘ringlets’...?

Texts of all kinds, especially philosophical texts, challenge us to *explore* our assumptions, and really *think* about what we believe and why.

So, having identified some of the values the poem seems to stand for, are they ‘good’ values – for us, here and now – or not? What do *you* think?

You might take one of a number of positions on this. For example, you could argue along something like the following lines:

- 1 The poem evokes, beautifies and celebrates an ‘ideal’ of the romantic, sexual relationship. In doing so, it draws our attention to the possibilities of intense human passion – the energy, our willingness to risk, the heightening of our senses involved. And so, it espouses values that are positively life enhancing.

At this point there are at least couple of different directions your argument might take:

- (a) At a time when we seem to be obsessed with *practical* concerns of various kinds (with technology, the economy, material comfort...), it suggests that what we *are*, and may be in relationship to one another, is at least as valuable as what we *achieve*. The poem makes us question our modern assumptions; to think again about what it means, as human beings, to be fully *alive*.
- (b) In its unashamed celebration of human passion and absence of moral judgement, the poem takes what seems a surprisingly modern stance. These are not what we normally think of as 'Victorian values'. Reading the poem makes us think about relationships between then and now – re-examining what we understand by both 'Victorian' and 'modern' values.

On the other hand, leaving the first two sentences of (1) above pretty much as they are, you might add:

- 2 ...espouses values that at first sight seem life enhancing. However, the poem celebrates a *particular* view of what that means. The values it represents are, traditionally, *masculine* values – 'risk' and aggressive 'action' taken towards the satisfaction of sexual desire. As the poem idealizes *these* values, at the same time it spurns the more passive or 'nurturing' values thought to be natural in the female. These differences were no doubt widely believed to be true of men and women at the time the poem was written and first read...

Again, the argument could then take off in different directions:

- (a) ...even so, the effect of the poem is to glorify the 'male' at the expense of the 'female'. This hardly seems 'life enhancing' in our modern-day understanding. Perhaps the poem's greatest value to us is as a measure of how differently we view things now.
- (b) ...so that the superior value of the 'masculine' is simply assumed. Knowing that, we can look beyond this assumption to the poem's central, essentially life-enhancing, message – the joy *both* lovers feel as their hearts beat 'each to each'.

Or, you might not take such a positive view of things at all, possibly arguing something like this.

- 3 The romantic setting of this little 'story' and the sensuous beauty of the verse are seductive. What we have here is a slight poem that celebrates what may well be a betrayal of some kind. It is a sort of 'adolescent fantasy' – of macho derring-do? or just nonsense? As such, it bears no relationship to reality and tells us nothing of value.

The point to note here is that there is no reason why you should *accept* the values the text seems to represent. We have seen that you certainly need to try to understand *what* those values are, and *why* they might have been held at that time – otherwise you are not in a position to make informed and appropriate judgements at all. But that is not the same thing as ‘accepting’ them.

Sometimes, you may find a text a good example of its kind *technically*, yet judge its values abhorrent – a painting that seems to ‘celebrate’ a bloody massacre, for instance, through the way the brush strokes are lovingly executed. This is why it is helpful to keep your assessment of the values the text stands for *separate* in your mind from your critical assessment of that text, as a painting, poem, or whatever. However, notice that *all* the ‘arguments’ I have just set out about the values the poem stands for depend heavily on critical assessment of it – which we are about to look at. Even argument 3 refers to, and recognizes, the ‘sensuous beauty’ of the verse.

This is just another way of saying that the processes of analysing a text and interpreting its meanings are fundamental to making judgements about it. The more thoroughly you analyse a text the better you will understand it and the surer your judgements will be.

KEY POINTS

When you are *assessing* the *values* a text represents, you should:

- *question* those values (whether they are assumed by the text or are more obvious)
- try to *examine* your own values, and the assumptions *you* may be making
- firm up your judgements only when you have analysed and interpreted the meanings of the text as *fully* as you can.

5.2 The value of the text

We now turn to a *critical assessment* of the poem *as a poem*; the question is, is it a ‘good’ poem? To that we should add ‘of its kind’. As we saw, we must judge it as a *lyric* poem – it would be inappropriate to think of it in the same terms as, say, an epic, because the conventions that govern the epic’s form (its subject matter, purposes and formal elements) are very different. It is always important to understand what *kind* of text you are dealing with not only because that knowledge guides you towards some appropriate interpretation of its meanings, but also because it places limits on the *judgements* you can make of it.

As we have seen, by convention the lyric poem:

- takes as its *subject matter* some aspect of a human world we recognize
- has the *purposes* of appealing to our senses and engaging our feelings
- is in lyric *form*: short and song-like (rhythmic, rhyming).

These, then, are the *criteria* against which we make our judgements. I think it is safe to say that we have seen all these things in the poem during the last few sections of the chapter. The question is, how *well* does it do them?

As regards the poem's subject matter, we might ask 'does it "talk" to us about some aspect of the world we recognize, *in a meaningful and illuminating way*?' Looking at the series of 'arguments' I sketched out a couple of pages back, clearly the world of the poem is recognizable to us, and it is possible to make several different kinds of connection between what the poem 'says' and some of our current social, moral and intellectual concerns. These are meaningful connections and, I would say, potentially illuminating (response number 3 notwithstanding). But what do *you* think?

Turning to the poem's 'purposes', *how well* does it engage our feelings and appeal to our senses? Again, we have discussed the way the poem *evokes* our memories and feelings of 'being in love'. It achieves this through: the romantic setting (of moonlight over water...); the generally languorous movement and sounds of the verse, interspersed with the excited agitation of lines 3 and 4; the sexual imagery; the syntax (changing verb tenses and also the sensuousness of the words). On page 195 we saw that the poem appeals *directly* to our senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and sensation.

Here we have also impinged on our last criterion, the poem's song-like *formal elements* (especially its movement and rhyming, but also syntax, imagery, and so on). In short, on pages 195–6 we saw how the whole is 'knitted' closely together by interwoven patterns of sound, movement and imagery – that not a word of it is carelessly placed. Indeed, the verse is rich beyond what seems possible at first sight.

What is striking is how a poem so short and apparently simple can carry such a weight of analysis, interpretation and evaluation. But we must remind ourselves that this is, after all, a short lyric poem. We should not expect it to bear *too* much weight. (Incidentally, what do you think that exclamation mark right at the end means?)

Personal response

Do you think I like this poem? Perhaps it is obvious that I do. If you have 'picked up' my enjoyment of it, it must be something about the way I have written because it is the *poem* we have been concentrating on *all the time*. In fact I know it off by heart (which is perhaps not too surprising by now). But, anyway, I am only telling you so in this box.

That's because, if I say to you 'I love this music; it reminds me of lambs in spring-time', what I am telling you is something about *myself*. If you find me a fascinating person you will no doubt be interested to know how I feel. But if it's the *music* you are interested in then you are no closer to understanding it at all. Emotional or imaginative responses to a text are *not the same thing* as judgement of its values and critical assessment of it – arrived at through processes of analysis and interpretation. And it is the *texts* we study that are our main focus, not ourselves.

But that doesn't mean your personal responses are unimportant. Far from it. If you are moved by a novel, a passage of music, a sculpture or an idea, it is not only interesting but also a pleasure to work out why: what it is about the text that affects you in that way. Very often the text becomes more interesting and affects you more deeply the more you think and learn about it. Your feelings and intuitions are also very helpful guides to your analysis of it – showing you 'ways in', what to look out for. In any case, the very powerful effects art and ideas can have is perhaps why you are keen to study the arts and humanities in the first place. Even so, sometimes what you study may seem dull and uninspiring. Or, in extreme cases, you may find certain ideas and representations totally unacceptable or even shocking. In every case, the point is to understand *why* – what it is about *the text* – whether it is something you love or loathe.

However, if it seems to you that analysing texts simply 'spoils' your enjoyment of them then perhaps you shouldn't be *studying* these subjects. Why not just continue to enjoy your experiences?

In making a critical assessment of this poem it helps to be familiar with a range of other lyric poems, so that you have something to compare it with. And this is true generally. You become surer in your judgements as you become more familiar with the *kind* of poem, painting, piece of music, argument, or historical document you are faced with.

We should note here that the criteria for evaluating historical documents and philosophical arguments are different, both from each other and from the kinds of criteria we have been looking at here. As we have seen, the analytical questions you ask about a document are to do with the type of source it is, who its author was, when and why it was written; and therefore *what* it is actually telling you and how *reliably*. These are the criteria against which you judge it. A 'good' document is a reliable source that is useful for your purposes.

Philosophical texts argue through 'problems': such as an ethical dilemma, the question of free will, of what exists, and so forth. In evaluating this kind of text, you are concerned with the *logic* and '*truth*' of that argument. A 'good' argument is logically sound and also illuminating.

KEY POINTS

When you are making a critical assessment of the *values* of a text, you should:

- recognize that the *text* is your focus; be guided but not bound by your personal responses to it
- evaluate the text according to the *criteria* that are appropriate to its *form* (its subject matter, formal elements and purposes).

5.3 A 'circle' of understanding

It may seem as if analysing, interpreting and evaluating a text are 'stages' we go through, one after the other. But it's nothing like as mechanical as that. You do not analyse a text into separate parts, then 'add up' those parts to produce some interpretation of the whole, and then evaluate it. Rather, analysis–interpretation–evaluation are *overlapping processes*. They are different *kinds* of activity, as we have seen by looking at them separately. But when you try to understand a text you are unfamiliar with, what you actually do is 'circle around' it in the following sort of way.

- As you read, listen to or look at the text for the first few times, you form some impressions of what kind of text it is and what it is 'about'. And of course you respond to it, emotionally, in your imagination and intellectually.
- These perceptions help you find 'ways into' the text, and you start to analyse parts of it carefully.
- Then you draw back and have a think about how the whole thing looks now.
- Guided by that, you go back into the detail of another part of the text – draw back again, and see how that further analysis affects your view of the text's meanings as a whole.
- Meanwhile, you are beginning to make judgements about the text, which you also revise as you go along.

And so on, back and forth between the *parts* of the text and your conception of it *as a whole*, shifting your attention and revising your interpretations and judgements as you go. What we did in section 4.3 ('Analysis *and* interpretation') comes closest to this process.

You do this circling around as you *engage actively* with the text and *make meaning* of it in your mind. 'Meaning' is not a thing; it is not just 'inside' the text, waiting to be 'uncovered' when you apply certain analytical techniques to it. Making meaning is a *process*. What you do is more like 'communicating'

with the text – looking at and ‘listening’ to it, as it were, and ‘talking back’ to it. The *last* things you firm up are your judgements: of the values the text represents, and its value as the kind of text it is. After all that, you are ready to communicate your interpretations and judgements to other people.

6 COMMUNICATING YOUR IDEAS

If you were talking to a friend about a picture hanging on your living-room wall, you might say: ‘I really like that portrait because the man looks so life-like’. That is, you’d make some kind of *judgement* about the painting. (I’ve never heard anyone say ‘I really like that portrait because of that little white brush stroke in the top right-hand corner’.) So, in effect, you turn the process we have just been through on its head. When you are communicating your ideas to other people, you *start* with what were the *conclusions* of that process – and you go on to present an *argument* in support of your judgements that draws on the detail you discovered in the text. Having previously taken the roles of investigator and judge (or ‘critic’) of the text, you now have to take on the role of *advocate* for your interpretation of it. As an advocate, you try to *make a case* for your view of the text’s meanings and values that will *convince* other people.

6.1 Making a convincing case

Let’s suppose you wanted to argue in support of the ‘stem’ of the first argument on page 208. Here it is again, broken down into its component parts.

- (a) The poem (i) evokes, (ii) beautifies and (iii) celebrates an ‘ideal’ of the romantic, sexual relationship.
- (b) In doing so, it draws our attention to the possibilities of intense human passion – (i) the energy, (ii) our willingness to risk, (iii) the heightening of our senses involved.
- (c) And so, it espouses values that are positively life enhancing.

This is an outline sketch of the *argument* for, say, an essay. There are three main points (a, b, c), the first two of which contain several different claims (i, ii, iii.). *All* these claims have to be *demonstrated* in order to make both main points in a convincing way. In the process you will have demonstrated point (c), your conclusion, so at that stage you would just need to sum up.

But how do you ‘demonstrate’ a claim *convincingly*? If you look back to what we did in section 3.2 you will see how. You have to *explain* what you mean, using examples from the text to *illustrate* your meaning; and you have to provide some *evidence* from the text that shows you are right to say what you do about it.

Let’s take the first claim in point (a), that the poem ‘evokes’ the romantic, sexual relationship. Earlier (in section 5.2) we saw that this depends on the poem’s success in engaging our feelings and appealing to our senses. So you could demonstrate the claim by referring to:

- the romantic setting, of sea and landscape bathed in moonlight – offering textual detail as *illustration*
- the languorous movement of the verse – quoting some of the words of the poem to *illustrate* long vowel sounds and soft-sounding consonants
- the syntax – quoting a word or phrase that appeals to each of our senses, as *illustration*; the significance of the shift in verb tenses between the verses – *explaining* and *illustrating* this
- the imagery (‘ringlets’ and ‘prow’) – offering textual detail as *illustration* and *explanation*.

In each case you are also providing *evidence* in support of this claim, by referring to *precise* details of the text and/or *quoting* relevant words and phrases directly from it (see section 6.2). As a result, your reader should both understand what you are saying and find your argument convincing.

As you actually write the essay, the main difficulty you face is keeping this argument *going forward* while *also* including as much detailed reference as you need to explain, illustrate and justify what you say at each stage. So, at the points when you ‘interrupt’ the onward flow of the argument in order to provide this textual detail, you need to *remind* your readers where they have got to and where they are headed next, before you set off again. That is because, when you present a case in writing, you can’t ‘check’ with your readers to make sure they are following your meaning. You need to keep ‘signposting’ the direction your argument is taking (see Chapter 5).

Why communicate?

Studying arts and humanities subjects involves learning particular ways of expressing ideas, and of ‘arguing a case’ that is supported by appropriate kinds of ‘evidence’. That is, we learn to think, speak and write in the *terms* and ways that are appropriate to the subject we are studying. Those are the terms and ways in which *everyone* who has studied the subject speaks, so that we can understand each other and learn from each other. In short, we learn how to *join in* that ongoing discourse.

Indeed, each subject in the arts and humanities is itself a different kind of discourse (a way of using language and other symbolic forms (such as pictures and music) communicatively, so as to *produce meaning and understanding*). Poetry is one way in which human beings communicate with each other and art is another, different, way; so is music; so is a legal document or an Act of Parliament; and so is a philosophical argument. When we are actively reading and thinking about these texts, then, we engage in a kind of ‘communication’ with them.

Similarly, when you discuss your interpretations and judgements of these texts or write an essay, you become a participant in the *academic* discourses that are *related* to them – that produce meaning and understanding *about* the different subjects we study. You are making your own enquiries and producing your own ‘texts’. The essays you write are judged according to how close you come to ‘speaking’ appropriately, within the terms of the academic discourse concerned.

The upshot is that, in the arts and humanities, the *knowledge* we have is what we have made and continue making through our *discourse*, past and present. Whichever way you turn, communication is the name of the game.

So, as an advocate for your interpretations and judgements of the text, you have to present a clear and consistent line of argument, that is well explained and illustrated and also supported by appropriate kinds of evidence. And you have to try to write simply and directly to your readers in order to *engage* their minds.

KEY POINTS

When you are *communicating* your interpretations and judgements of a text you have to make a convincing *case* in support of them.

At each stage of a written argument, you should:

- *explain* yourself clearly and give *examples* of what you mean by what you say (illustrations drawn from the text)
- provide appropriate *evidence* from the text
- use the appropriate *language* of communication
- ‘signpost’ the *direction* your argument is taking.

But what exactly is ‘appropriate’ evidence? And how do you know what terms are the ‘appropriate’ ones to use?

6.2 Different kinds of 'evidence'

The *terms* you use and the *ways* in which you support your argument depend on the subject you are studying and what *kind of text* you are talking or writing about.

Quoting from written texts

We have seen that when you are discussing a poem, you talk about its 'rhythms' or movement, its patterns of sound such as 'rhyme', and its 'imagery' and 'syntax', *quoting* words, phrases and lines from the poem as evidence of the points you want to make about it. And this applies to play-texts and novels, too. As you discuss the 'characters' involved, you quote parts of their 'dialogue' or passages from the 'narrator's' descriptions of them. You also *quote* from relevant parts of historical documents when you discuss their 'purposes', their 'reliability' as 'sources' of information and the 'evidence' they provide. And from a philosophical text when you discuss the 'premises' and 'logic' of an argument. However, in philosophical writing, part of the process of showing that you understand the ideas you have been grappling with is being able to *invent* examples of your own to illustrate the points you make. What matters most is how carefully you handle the details of the argument and how clearly you *explain* yourself.

Presenting quotations

Some general points about quoting from secondary sources are discussed in Chapter 5 (using quotation marks and three dots to indicate that some words have been left out, for example). Those conventions apply when you quote from *any* prose passage such as an historical document, novel or philosophical argument. But when you quote more than a few words you should *indent* the quotation rather than trying to incorporate it in the flow of a sentence, as follows:

Ellis concludes that:

The steady migration of women into the towns was the logical consequence of conventional perceptions of femininity and of correct female behaviour.

In this case, you do *not* use quotation marks because you are indicating that it is a quotation by indenting it.

However, when you quote from poetry you have to show where lines end.

If you quote only a few words you can incorporate them into a sentence, separating the lines with a slash (/):

In 'the quick sharp scratch/And blue spurt...' the consonants are dental and the vowel sounds short, in keeping with the sound of the match-lighting that the words evoke.

If you want to quote more than one line of the poem in full, you should indent the quotation:

Here, though, the consonants are dental and the vowel sounds short:

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,...

Notice that all punctuation marks must be included in the quotation too. Indeed, *whenever* you use quotation you must quote *accurately*.

Representing visual and symbolic texts

We saw that when you discuss your judgements of a visual text such as the landscape painting or *The Madonna and Child*, you talk about its 'composition': the way the 'picture space' is organized; the relationships between 'foreground' and 'background', and between 'figures'. You discuss the way 'perspective' is used in the painting to show 'depth'; the painting's 'tonal range', and its uses of 'colour', 'shape', 'line'; 'light' and 'shade', and light 'source'. This kind of description is based on detailed observation of the painting. But here – and when you discuss a sculpture or building, and symbolic texts such as maps, plans and music scores – you may *also* want to include your own *sketches*, *diagrams* or *notation* to demonstrate these relationships, and show precisely which elements of the text you are drawing attention to.

Precise reference to 'linear' texts

You may find it more difficult to provide evidence from texts in which sounds, words or images follow on from one another over time (such as music and videos, plays and novels). Music is perhaps particularly hard to pin down. Sounds weave in and out of each other so that at first you may experience the music as seamless. But there are different 'movements' or 'passages' in music; moments at which a 'melody' is first introduced and later passages when it is repeated, for example. You can distinguish between these and other, different passages in the music by locating them within a description of the music's 'development', making precise reference to its *structure*. A certain 'chord' sounds just *after* the 'first repetition' of the melody, for instance; or just *before* the trumpet 'fanfare'. You can also identify and *describe* the patterning and effects of different elements of the music, such as its 'harmony', 'rhythm' and 'timbre' (the quality of sound associated with different instruments or voices).

Although novels, play-texts and film-scripts are written rather than aural texts, they are similar in the way that they unfold bit by bit, in a linear way. Here too you can identify particular developments or moments by locating them within the overall *structure* – in this case, of the ‘plot’ – and again by reference to *time* and *event* (after the scene at the ball, when the characters first meet, before the picnic, during the thunder storm). And, as with music, you can *describe* and discuss formal elements, such as ‘character’, ‘tone of voice’, ‘dialogue’, ‘point of view’. However, in these cases, you can *also* quote relevant words, sentences and short ‘speeches’ from the text.

When you are discussing the performance of a play or moving images, you again think in terms of ‘plot’ and structure, identifying particular moments in the ways we have just seen. Here again, you can include your own sketches or diagrams to provide evidence of the visual relationships you are discussing.

Multiple texts

Very often you will be studying ‘the art’ or ‘the literature’ of a particular period and therefore a *number* of texts rather than just one. Or perhaps you will be using a range of *different* documents as the basis of your interpretation of an historical event. And what if your subject is interdisciplinary (Religious or Classical Studies, say) and you study many different *kinds* of text (written, visual and symbolic), ‘bringing together’ your judgements of them to explain certain beliefs, practices or ways of living?

In all these cases, the processes of analysis, interpretation and judgement we have discussed still apply to *each* particular work of art, building, document, ceremony and so forth that you study. And the kinds of evidence you use to justify your judgements of these different texts are also just as we have seen. However, the *danger* here is that you may be tempted to analyse and interpret these many texts less carefully than you might when dealing with only one or two – moving too quickly towards your judgements, and then too quickly again towards their implications for the times, beliefs or ways of life you are discussing. This is known as ‘reading off the text’ (that is, off its surface), and you should try not to do it.

For example, if your subject is Religious Studies and you are discussing the beliefs of, say, Browning’s contemporaries, there will be many different sources you might study – hymns, paintings, scientific theories, church buildings, accounts of religious ceremonies... In this situation, it is better to select a few representative texts and talk about them in some detail rather than opting for thin coverage of a large number of them. In the end, precise and detailed reference to fewer texts makes for a more convincing case.

Evidence ‘from authority’

When you present evidence for your judgements in an essay, you don't *only* draw that evidence from the text. You also often call on the ‘authority’ of other writers on the subject (critics, academics), drawing on their judgements. You can see in Chapters 2 and 3 how to read and ‘make sense’ of other people’s ideas in books, articles, TV programmes, and so on; and how to weigh up these ideas and use them to help you form your own. As regards your writing, you have to learn how to use this kind of ‘evidence from authority’ – how to work other people’s ideas into your argument, and also how to acknowledge your sources (see section 8.3).

KEY POINTS

You should present *evidence* for your interpretations and judgements of a text in order to *justify* them (showing your reader why you are right to say what you do).

According to the *type* of text you are discussing, you should:

- use appropriate *kinds* of evidence
- ‘speak’ in the appropriate *terms*.

7 BELIEFS AND THEORIES

‘Authorities’ – critics, historians, philosophers and so forth – of course argue from *their* interpretations of what a work of art, an event or an idea means. And their judgements are based on certain *beliefs* – about the nature of the objects they study and about what they themselves do as readers and interpreters of them. From our discussion of ‘Meeting at Night’ you have seen what my beliefs are: that people can reach some understanding of a text through the processes of analysing its formal elements and acquiring some knowledge of the conditions in which it was created and received. Because I was talking about these very processes I said all that explicitly. But, very often, what writers believe about these things is ‘assumed by’ rather than ‘stated in’ their argument. For example, look again at these judgements about ‘Meeting at Night’:

The romantic setting of this little ‘story’ and the sensuous beauty of the verse are seductive. What we have here is a slight poem that celebrates what may well be a betrayal of some kind. It is a sort of ‘adolescent fantasy’ – of macho derring-do? or just nonsense? As such, it bears no relationship to reality and tells us nothing of value.

ACTIVITY

Stop for a few minutes and think about what *beliefs* lie 'underneath' these judgements.

It seems to me that beneath the judgements lies the belief that there is quite a strong relationship between a poem and the 'real world' and that if a poem has no relationship to 'reality' then it does not tell us anything worthwhile. And the moral judgement here – that it is improper to celebrate what might be a betrayal – also implies that a poem should say something of *moral* value to us.

Now that we have unearthed these beliefs we can take a good look at them. We can see more clearly what is involved in agreeing with the argument (again asking, what does it 'deny'?). Then we can decide whether we do agree or, if not, what exactly we disagree with. So, do you agree with these beliefs or not? For instance, do you think that there is quite a strong relationship between a poem and 'real life'?

Of course I don't know what you think about that. But you have seen that I think there is. The poem's form is conventional (agreed, as it were, *by people*). It was created and received within certain conditions, and it is received now within different sorts of condition. I believe it does communicate something to us about both those 'worlds'. However, as we saw in section 4.1, I do not think this relationship between 'art' and 'reality' is either a simple or a direct one. What I was trying to say there is that *none* of the texts you study simply *reflects* the world of human experience 'as it really is'. As created objects, they are *artificial*. ('Artificial' *means* 'made by art, not natural'. That is, *people* made them, with different purposes in mind.) They are not simply 'true to life' and they do not 'tell' us things in the direct way this speaker suggests. Remember the painting of the 'real' landscape, with its imaginary additions and conventional form? But think too about an historical document, such as an Act of Parliament. We have to interpret the meanings of all these texts.

In my understanding of 'reality', human invention and imagining is as much a part of our 'world' as anything else. So I would not agree that fantasy is necessarily worthless (adolescent or otherwise). And I think that works of art can communicate all kinds of thing, not just about our moral values. In saying all this I am disagreeing with what the speaker appears to understand by both 'art' and 'reality' – which in both cases seems far too narrow – and about the relationship between the two, which seems too direct.

However, not everyone would agree with my beliefs (perhaps you don't). For instance, some people believe that texts of all kinds have no relationship to the 'real world' because there is no such thing; what 'really' exists are the ideas and beliefs that we human beings have – what we *construct* in our minds and *represent* in our texts. So a text can only be related to the constructions – or, other 'texts' – that have come before it.

These are just a few of the ideas people have about what a work of art *is* and what *relationship* it has to the ‘worlds’ of its makers and receivers. When such ideas are connected together in a thorough-going way we say we have a *theory* about these things.

Theories

A theory is a ‘system of ideas’ through which we *explain* something. In the arts and humanities we try to explain such things as the role of the artist, the nature of the text, the way the text is received and interpreted, and the relationships between these things. However, people have not developed a single, ‘universal’ theory that attempts to explain *all* these things, at all times and in all places. Rather, a number of theories guide us towards looking closely at different aspects of this ‘complex’ of issues and relationships. Some theories draw attention to the artist’s role; some focus on the text and its ‘context’; and others explain readers’ ‘reception’ of the text, in their contexts.

In the course of your studies you will no doubt come across many different theories (indeed, it may seem there is a bewildering array of them). You will be asked to *apply* them to the texts you study. That is because theories suggest *different ways* in which you can view the text. As you approach a text from this or that ‘point of view’, you come to understand and *value* it differently. And, in the process, you become clearer about your own ideas and beliefs.

Using theories prompts you to ask different *kinds of question* about the text, from a range of points of view. For instance, can you see what kinds of question this speaker was asking when making judgements about the poem?

The values [the poem] represents are, traditionally, *masculine* values – ‘risk’ and aggressive ‘action’ taken towards the satisfaction of sexual desire. As the poem idealizes *these* values, at the same time it spurns the more passive or ‘nurturing’ values thought to be natural in the female. These differences were no doubt widely believed to be true of men and women at the time the poem was written and first read...

I think the questions have to do with *gender*. The speaker has approached the poem from the ‘point of view’ of the way the words in it relate to ideas about the sexes, male and female. (I’ll call the speaker ‘he’; did you assume it was a woman?) His approach draws on feminist theory, broadly speaking. As a result of adopting this stance, he ‘comes at’ the poem from a different angle from the other speakers, ‘sees’ different things in it and makes very different kinds of judgement from them.

But, although adopting this (or any other) theory means taking a *particular* point of view, it does not act as a ‘straightjacket’ on your thinking – *forcing* you towards a particular conclusion. We have already seen that this feminist line of thinking could lead in quite opposite directions:

(a) ...even so, the effect of the poem is to glorify the ‘male’ at the expense of the ‘female’. This hardly seems ‘life enhancing’ in our modern-day understanding. Perhaps the poem’s greatest value to us is as a measure of how differently we view things now.

(b) ...so that the superior value of the ‘masculine’ is simply assumed. Knowing that, we can look beyond this assumption to the poem’s central, essentially life-enhancing, message – the joy *both* lovers feel as their hearts beat ‘each to each’.

If you had not thought about the poem in such feminist terms yourself, you may have found these interpretations and judgements surprising and interesting. And does this prompt you to wonder *why* you hadn’t?

Whether you are aware of it or not, your interpretations and judgements of the texts you study are based on certain beliefs: about the world, about the nature of those objects, and about your role as ‘critic’ of them. If you are *not* aware of it, then these ‘beliefs’ lie beneath what you say, as *assumptions*. We can’t be aware of all the assumptions we make, all the time. But, as you study, you should be thinking about at least some of these things. Our beliefs change, and our thinking becomes richer, as we assess other people’s ideas and try applying their theories.

KEY POINTS

Examining other people’s beliefs, and applying their theories to the texts you study helps you:

- recognize the *assumptions* that academics and critics make in their writing
- look at texts from different *points of view*, asking different kinds of question about them
- and so, become clearer about your *own* assumptions and beliefs.

Finally, leaving the poem behind, we turn to one of the main ways in which you can become a *participant* in the subject(s) you study. It is when you do some research of your own that you understand more deeply how all the processes we have been looking at actually work in practice.

8 MAKING YOUR OWN ENQUIRIES

Many courses in the arts and humanities now include a substantial *project work* component, which involves research even if it is of a limited and guided kind. This is an opportunity for you study a topic of your own choice in depth, working independently and extending interests and ideas of your own. It involves:

- setting your own targets
- posing central questions to explore
- seeking out the primary and secondary source material you need
- analysing and interpreting your material, and assessing its value
- producing a substantial text of your own.

These activities remind you that knowledge doesn't just appear in books by magic, but results from someone recognizing the importance of a particular question and setting out to find some 'answers' to it. They give you an idea of how knowledge is *created* in your subject. When all goes well, this kind of independent work increases your enthusiasm for your subject, brings a great sense of achievement and produces a deep kind of understanding. But it is very demanding. It can be very interesting and satisfying, but it can also go badly wrong.

The biggest pitfall is that almost everyone is *too ambitious* to begin with. Things always turn out to be more complicated than they seem and every aspect of project work is more time-consuming than you anticipate. There are several stages involved, each of which takes time and effort. One of the keys to success is recognizing the importance of each stage and spreading your time and energies across all of them. These *stages* are:

- 1 Formulating a question to explore
- 2 Planning the enquiry
- 3 Carrying out the research
- 4 Writing a project report.

At first sight, the third stage looks like the bulk of the work. But deciding on the question to investigate, narrowing it down sufficiently, and designing and planning the project always take a lot of thought. You can easily let these early stages eat too far into the time you have for the project as a whole. Then that third stage almost always throws up plenty of unexpected problems – sometimes quite minor, but enough to slow your progress. However, the writing phase is the one that really catches people unawares. You have to present your research in the wider context of the subject it arises out of, and also work out how to structure the report so that your line of argument is clear and leads to your conclusions. And you have to keep the forward momentum of that argument going while also introducing what you have discovered – of which there is plenty. All this takes several draft stages and a lot of time.

8.1 Formulating a question

When you make your own enquiries you draw on your existing knowledge of a discipline or subject area and decide on a *specific* question to explore; a question that is relevant to some aspect of the subject and which interests you. That means you must have some understanding of what the important questions and issues are in your subject area, and why they are important. In other words, you must have acquired appropriate ‘frameworks for thinking’ within it (see Chapter 3, section 2.1). That background ensures that your topic is a significant one, from the outset. And, later on, it enables you to show *why* your investigation matters and just *what* it contributes to an understanding of the wider subject.

It is very important to be clear about what you are setting out to do, and not to be too ambitious. If you start from an interest in a broad issue in, say, social history – such as ‘how independent broadcasting has developed’ – you need to narrow this down to a more precise enquiry that is manageable within the *time* and *word limits* set for the project. One way of doing that is to take a case-study approach: to focus your enquiry mainly on a *particular* independent broadcasting company – let’s say London Weekend Television (LWT). So your topic then is ‘The development of London Weekend Television company’.

But it is most helpful if you actually put the enquiry to yourself *as a question* rather than a ‘topic heading’: for example, ‘What factors influenced the development of LWT?’, rather than ‘The development of LWT’. The *question* focuses and channels your enquiries by forcing you to seek out some ‘answers’ to it. You must analyse the factors involved and explain and justify your conclusions. Working from the topic heading, it is all too easy to meander around the issues in a rather aimless way and, ultimately, find yourself on the receiving end of the project marker’s most common complaints: ‘Failed to relate project work to the wider context. Didn’t *use* the information: too descriptive, not enough analysis and explanation.’

Focusing your research

Whatever subject you are interested in – music, art, literature, a particular period/place (such as Classical Rome) – you must try to define a ‘do-able’ project for yourself. If you are comparing the work of two composers or novelists, for instance, you cannot hope to look at all their work. And you cannot explore every aspect of an historical period, or of its art or literature. You have to be *selective*. But how do you know what to select, what to focus on?

This is where your knowledge of the broad subject-area comes in. When you are fairly familiar with a subject you *know* what the important questions and debates are within it. These are what your enquiry should contribute to in some way.

You don't do research just for the sake of it, or to find out everything it is possible to know about D.H. Lawrence or Buddy Holly. You enquire into something because your particular and detailed work will shed light on some issue of more *general* importance within the subject.

While you are reading around the subject, and the question you will explore is taking shape, you need to make *preliminary enquiries* into what *resources* are available to you. If you cannot easily get hold of the main primary sources you need then you will have to re-define the enquiry and make changes to your research question. In the case of LWT, it might be difficult to get hold of the kinds of internal reports, papers and memos that document the company's development and may be held in a private archive. You will certainly need permission to use the archive and you need to seek it as soon as possible. You will also need access to the government reports and back numbers of newspapers that provide information about the context of public policy and opinion within which the company's decisions were made. If you ask, you may find you can use the reference section of any university library (though not borrow its books). And a library may be able to get books for you through interlibrary loan schemes. But if this primary source material turns out to be too difficult or impossible to access then you will have to alter your plans. Making these kinds of enquiries *early on* enables you to change the direction of your work before you have invested too much time in the project.

8.2 Planning your enquiry³

At this stage, you will be deciding what *methods* of enquiry to use and the *scale* of investigation to attempt. Will examining company papers, government reports and newspapers provide enough of the right kind of information? Or, since independent broadcasting companies have developed fairly recently, is it possible to seek first-hand information by interviewing past and present LWT policy-makers? If so, which post-holders and how many of them?

Whatever decisions you make about method and scope, you will certainly need to consult secondary source material too. You might make a start by looking in a library catalogue to see whether there is a specialist encyclopaedia (a general collection of facts and analysis) on the subject of television. There you will find:

Sendall, B. (1983) *History of Independent Television in Britain*; Volume 1, *Origin and Foundation 1946–1962*; Volume 2, *Expansion and Change 1958–1962*, London, Macmillan.

³I am grateful to Tony Coulson, Liaison Librarian (Arts) at The Open University, for his help with this section; also to Magnus John, Information Services Manager, International Centre for Distance Learning.

There are specialist encyclopaedias for most subjects in the arts and humanities. Because they provide a general overview of the field, and usually contain extensive bibliographies, they are a very good place to start.

Or, if you browse in the library under the label 'Performing Arts (film, television and radio)', you will soon come across relevant books such as:

Briggs, A. (1979) *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*; Volume IV, *Sound and Vision*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

I even found:

Docherty, D. (1990) *Running the Show: 21 Years of London Weekend Television*, London, Boxtree.

The references included in these books will lead you to other relevant books and articles.

But you will also need to read up-to-date work. For that you have to refer to the academic *journals* that regularly publish scholarly articles and the results of recent research in your field. Again, there are specialist journals that cater for all arts and humanities subjects and any good library will have access to lists of them. In this case, you might look through the contents lists of the *Journal of the Royal Television Society* or the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, picking out articles related to your topic. You may well find that other people have carried out fairly similar enquiries, and you will want to learn from the methods they used as well as refer to their discoveries in your work. Having identified the material you need, you have to order it up or acquire as much as you can before the start of the next stage of the project.

Using a computer for research

These days you can conduct a 'literature search' by computer. You can also access data-bases and multi-media packages on CD-ROM. These developments are highly convenient and, as long as you know what you are looking for, fairly trouble free (see Chapter 3, section 4.2).

You may also have access to the masses of information now available on the Internet. But this is not without its difficulties. First, there is a problem about the *status* of this material. Some of the information available is offered by institutions such as universities, so you can be reasonably confident that it is reliable. Much is not. You may not know where it comes from nor what status this 'knowledge' has. When you surf the Internet you need your wits about you and your critical faculties on full alert.

Second, there is *masses* of it. More and more is becoming available every day. You can waste countless hours reading through what turns out to be

useless for your purposes. Even if you find relevant material that you judge to be reliable, what are you going to do with it all? Do you have the time to read and analyse it carefully, and absorb it? At the least, you will have to be very selective. On what basis will you make your selections? Making these kinds of decisions alone takes time.

In short, the so-called 'knowledge explosion' seems a mixed blessing.

At this stage you also have to decide what *deadlines* you need to meet at each stage of the project and draw up an appropriate timetable for your work, perhaps week by week. (Remember to allow for the time you will spend travelling about to libraries and so forth.) And you may well be asked to submit a *project outline* for discussion with your tutor. Your tutor's advice will undoubtedly save you time and effort later on, so do not miss this and any other opportunity for guidance and help.

8.3 Carrying out research

During this stage you get down to the business of analysing and interpreting the meanings of all your primary and secondary source material (documents, reports, newspaper accounts, books and articles), in the ways outlined in the previous sections of this chapter and in Chapters 2 and 3. As you do so you will be making notes towards your project report. In this connection, it is very important to write down full *references* for all the material you use *as you read each item*. Then you can easily find particular parts of it again when you need to. And if you do that, you will also be building up your bibliography *as you go along*. A bibliography is a list of all the sources you refer to in your work which you attach to the end of your report, compiled in alphabetical order of authors' surnames. It is much better to build this list up gradually rather than leaving yourself with a lot of fiddly work to do at the end.

Presenting references in a bibliography

When you make a reference to a *book* you note: author, date of publication, title, place of publication, publisher – and any other relevant information, such as the edition, the volume number, and page references for any quotations you make. It looks like this:

Potter, J. (1990) *Independent Television in Britain; Volume 4, Companies and Programmes, 1968–1980*, London, Macmillan.

A reference for a *chapter* in an edited book is made as follows:

Sparks, C. (1994) 'Independent production', in S. Hood (ed.) *Behind the Screens: The Structure of British Broadcasting in the 1990s*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, pp.133–54.

And you enter an *article* in a journal in this way:

Kandiah, M. D. (1995) 'Television enters British politics: the Conservative Party's Central Office and political broadcasting, 1945–55', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 15, no. 2, June, pp.265–84.

There are variations in ways of referencing and you may be advised to follow a slightly different convention. But, however you do it, you should always provide as *much* information as you can.

Whatever style of referencing you use, what matters is that you always make the references in the *same* way throughout. You should also keep your references together in one place as you work (on cards, loose leaf or in a note-book) so that you don't lose anything. You have to keep your source material and notes well organized too, or you will waste a lot of precious time hunting around for things.

Towards the end of this research phase you should be starting to make an *outline plan* for your project report and even to draft sections of it as they begin to take shape in your mind. And, as the deadline for this stage approaches, you will simply have to call a halt to your investigations. Whatever your topic, there is always more material than you can handle in the time available. You must be ruthless about keeping to your schedule.

8.4 Writing a project report

Finally, you write up your project report. It is important to recognize that this will go through several *drafts*. You can't just sit down and write a report on this sort of scale quickly or easily. You will have gathered far too much material for that. And it may take you a little while really to get into the writing. Towards the end of the research phase, as you face up to writing proper, you may reach a kind of plateau where nothing much seems to be going on. The excitement of the planning and discovery stages are behind you. You may have become so familiar with your topic that it seems trivial, and your findings insignificant. But push on. Once you are fully engaged in writing you will rediscover your enthusiasm in the intensity of the experience. Talking about your work with other students and friends helps at every stage, and especially now when you are really having to sort things out in your mind.

Try to achieve *different* things at each draft stage. For the first full draft aim just to get everything down on paper, even if you are dissatisfied with parts of it as you write. Writing a project report involves a lot more than producing a description of your work. You have to:

- explain the *rationale* for what you have done, outlining the background from which your question arose so that your readers can see its significance
- explain your choice of research *methods*
- plot a coherent line of *argument* for your report that takes you towards your conclusions, explaining yourself clearly and justifying your judgements.

So it is quite enough just to get things down somehow at this first stage.

As you work towards the second draft you can go back over the unsatisfactory parts of the report. Concentrate on the *structure* of your *argument*, making sure that ideas are adequately linked and sections follow on one from the other towards your conclusions. Then reorganize and prune your writing until it is closer to the required length. As we saw, the difficulty with writing on this kind of scale is keeping the forward momentum of argument going while at each stage adequately explaining your ideas and introducing appropriate illustrative material and evidence. So, to enable the reader to follow you, you must keep 'signposting' the direction your argument is taking. Finally, for the third draft, you will need to check that the meaning of each sentence is clear and polish up the report. Your writing is the means through which your ideas exist, so care lavished on expression is not an optional extra.

If you are using a word-processor these draft stages may not be as distinct as my account suggests. But it is very important *not* to try to do everything at once. So it is still worth behaving as if you were producing several separate drafts: at particular points going through your work with these *different* aims in mind.

8.5 Research skills

This kind of work teaches some very valuable skills:

- how to set about an enquiry
- how and where to find source material and information
- how to make your own investigations
- strategic planning
- time management
- cutting corners and being pragmatic

- analysing and interpreting primary and secondary source material
- forming your own conclusions
- writing clearly and concisely when you have a lot of very varied material to present
- making a convincing case.

You need to approach a project with care and allow yourself time to develop these skills. And you will need all the help you can get, especially if you are studying as a distance student. So start your project work early, seek your tutor's advice at every stage and study carefully any 'project guidance' material that is offered. Above all, be *modest* in your aims and take very seriously all *deadlines* for different stages of your work, for project outlines and draft reports.

KEY POINTS

When you undertake your own enquiries:

- don't be too ambitious at the outset: define a narrowly focused *question* which you can investigate fully in the time available
- make a *timetable* for your work and stick to all deadlines; start early and allow plenty of time for each project stage (especially writing the report)
- in your report show why your investigation matters and what it contributes to your discipline or subject-area; include analysis and explanation as well as description of your work
- try to achieve different things at each draft stage
- if in doubt about source material, ask your tutor or a librarian
- if in despair, don't suffer in silence; get in touch with your tutor and other students, or with anyone who is prepared to listen.

When it is successful, this kind of work is a great opportunity to explore your own particular interests. In spite of the time it takes, it is all-absorbing and very rewarding. It helps you really get 'inside' the subject you are studying.