

# Constellations and Horizons: Navigating a student's voyage into 'Literary Worlds'

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Two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The "stars" in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable.

Wolfgang Iser (287)

I can hardly describe to you the effect of these books. They produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejection.

Mary Shelley (105)

A reader's engagement with any literary work is a complex, dynamic process. While the forms and structures of the text are constructed by an author, arguably the 'work' of the text is not fully realised until it is animated by the reader, whose imagination, personal context and reading history bring the text 'to life.' The author may provide an 'infinity of new images' and impressions never before conceived by its audience; nonetheless, it is the reader's situation and emotions that produce the experiences of 'ecstasy' or 'dejection.'

The complexity of experiences that can be evoked by literature is recognised in the NSW English Extension I Common Module, which uses the concept of 'literary worlds' to encompass a diverse range of texts, subjects and approaches to literary criticism and composition. This 'Common Module' is intended in part to provide critical language to connect a diverse range of prescribed texts and 'electives' (with titles such as 'Worlds of Upheaval', 'Literary Homelands', 'Literary Mindscapes', 'Reimagined Worlds' and 'Intersecting Worlds') for the purpose of providing a common concept against which all students can be assessed primarily through their ability to construct, interpret and analyse 'literary worlds.' The terminology of the 'Common Module' and the way it seeks to unite a diverse range of literary texts and concepts provide several questions and challenges for students and teachers about to embark on a study of 'Literary Worlds.' This essay will seek to understand the NSW Education Authority's (NESA) description of 'literary worlds' by considering the way this concept connects with established literary theory. In

addition to this, the complex processes that shape 'literary worlds' will be demonstrated through Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which is a prescribed text in the 'Worlds of Upheaval' elective.

## An Overview of NESA Terminology

In the module outline, the concept of a 'literary world' is not clearly defined and it somewhat unclear how the term differs from the similarly broad notion of a 'literary text'. We are told texts construct 'worlds' or represent 'lives' within 'literary worlds', nonetheless, there are sufficient clues in the rubric outline to justify some assumptions. The metaphor of a 'literary world' suggests space or place that has been constructed, where the text provides signs, symbols and structures that act as a framework for meaning making. A reader might become 'immersed' in such a space, while being engaged in the imaginative act of making connections, inferring meaning as well as visualising and animating this 'world.' The idea of a 'world' literally involves the presence of numerous countries and peoples, suggesting that this 'space' can be inhabited by a wide variety of readers, who may experience the 'world' in similar or differing ways, forming a number of 'communities' shaped by their interaction with each 'literary world.' Conversely, numerous communities may be said to play an active role in shaping these 'worlds', with reading groups, literary movements, online communities, and writers' festivals providing dialogue and interactions that inevitably shape a reader's experience of a literary world.

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The NESAs Common Module Rubric describes this process as the way 'ideas and ways of thinking are shaped by personal, social, historical and cultural contexts' (NESAs, 28). Despite the recurring use of terms like 'construct' and 'represent', the existence of 'composers' or 'authors' within this process is not explicitly addressed. Instead 'the text' is the active agent in this process; we are told that texts 'represent and illuminate the complexity of individual and collective lives', 'construct private, public and imaginary worlds' and 'contribute to [reader's] awareness of the diversity of ideas, attitudes and perspectives evident in texts' (NESAs, 28). Conversely, the reader as 'student' is ever present as the 'students explore... analyse... evaluate... [and] compose' literary worlds. In addition to this, students are instructed to consider how a text's context shapes the values it represents, while also reflecting on their own 'values, assumptions and dispositions' in the reading process. The module also refers to ways in which texts 'contribute' to reader's 'awareness' of 'ideas, attitudes and perspectives', while noting the way texts can 'explore new horizons and offer new insights', suggesting that literary texts can both build on reader expectations while also providing departures from conventions that might reshape expectations and perceptions.

As part of their analysis and critical evaluation of 'textual representations', students are instructed to consider 'notions of identity, voice and points of view', suggesting that literary texts tend to represent the 'experiences of others' and that 'literary worlds' create a space for readers to engage with a voice or point of view (presumably this interaction could be either empathetic or combative, depending on the disposition of the reader). Ultimately, NESAs description of 'Literary Worlds' suggests a complex process of meaning making, with mutual construction operating on a number of levels: 'literary worlds' are shaped by the 'real' world, while also shaping perceptions of the world; a reader's context shapes their response to texts, while texts also shape reader's values.

As has been already noted, some of the challenges involved in the 'Literary Worlds' Common Module is the effort to unite a diverse range of elective concepts, each of which focuses on a more specifically defined aspect of 'literary worlds'. By familiarising themselves with the language used in all of the electives, students and teachers can develop a richer sense of the way NESAs is seeking to describe 'literary worlds'.

The 'Literary Homelands' elective focuses students' attention on the way the world may be understood as a complex interaction of nations, cultures and places, as students consider 'textual representations of experiences of place, country and culture' (29). This unit suggests the possibility of resistant readings as students are asked to consider the way 'historical and social contexts have an impact on the extent to which perspectives are privileged, marginalised or silenced' (29). Thus, through this elective, certain reading strategies and theories, such as those informed by post-colonial or gender studies, may be shown to shape a 'literary world' over time, while also emphasising the way literary worlds can potentially provide divergent experiences for those who inhabit them.

The 'Worlds of Upheaval' elective, requires students to consider the relationship between 'social and political change' and literary texts. This elective in particular notes the dynamic relationship between literary worlds and events in the 'real' world, illuminating the potential for each to shape the other, as students analyse the way 'texts represent... individuals and groups in periods of upheaval', while they are also asked to 'reflect on the potential of texts to activate change in attitudes, perspectives and social circumstances' (30). In contrast, the 'Reimagined Worlds' elective asks students to consider the way texts can 'push the boundaries of the imagination in creating new worlds and alternative experiences' (31).

Literary Mindscapes, meanwhile, asks students to consider the notion of 'interior worlds', favouring a cognitive approach to literary analysis that considers how individuals in works 'perceive, think and feel about themselves and the societies in which they live' (32). This elective foregrounds empathy and an attempt to understand the rich 'inner world' of characters as students consider various 'representations of the mind, including desires, motivations, emotions and memories' (33).

Finally, 'Intersecting Worlds' focuses students' attention on ecological issues in literature, as students explore 'the intersection of human experience and activity with the natural domains of our planet' (34). Thus, the tangible, physical 'world' is foregrounded as students 'consider how nature is valued in literature for its beauty, its spiritual or emotional inspiration, or as a resource' (34). This focus encourages an ecocritical approach to analysis, as students 'critically evaluate the implicit

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or explicit values and assumptions in particular representations of nature' (34). Thus a wide range of critical approaches may be taken to engage with these diverse aspects of 'literary worlds'; however, the challenge remains on how to unify these diverse takes on literature through the 'common' module.

### An Overview of Approaches to Literary Criticism

As has been demonstrated, the 'Literary Worlds' rubric requires students to primarily focus on the 'text', while authorial intention is marginalised in a close reading (including analysis and evaluation) of the 'literary world'. This reflects the on-going influence of 'close reading' which emerged from 'New Critics' such as Wimsatt and Beardsley, who in *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) argue that the 'poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it)' (470). In such a view, the 'literary world' is not distinct from the text itself; the poem 'is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge' (470). This view reflects NESAs suggestion that the text is the agent that 'constructs' meaning and 'contributes' to a reader's understanding. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, the reader's work then is to 'judge' the poem in the same way as one might 'judge a pudding or a machine'; on the basis of whether or not the poem 'works' as 'a feat of style by which a complex of meaning handled all at once' (469). This approach, however, would ignore the importance placed on the reader's and the text's contexts in the 'Literary worlds' rubric; it also offers little distinction between the concept of 'literary text' and 'literary worlds', which seems necessary if students are to successfully engage with the language in the module.

Wolfgang Iser's definition of a 'literary work', which is outlined in *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach* (1972), provides a more helpful distinction between a 'text' and a 'literary world'. Iser describes 'two poles' of a 'literary work': the 'artistic' (which refers to the text 'created by the author') and the 'aesthetic' (which is the 'realisation' of the text 'accomplished by the reader') (279). Iser argues that 'that the literary work cannot be identical with the text, or with the realisation of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two' (279), with the 'literary work' existing in a 'virtual' space,

not to be identified with the 'reality of the text' itself nor the 'disposition of the reader' (279). The position of this 'virtual space' between reader and composer suggests that this 'world' can be viewed as a culmination of a number of readings, interpretations and imaginative acts. This distinction between 'literary work', text and reader experience provides a model that might helpfully be applied when distinguishing between the notion of 'literary worlds' and literary texts; viewed this way, the 'literary world' is capable of growing and evolving within the structures fixed by the 'text'. This notion reinforces the 'dynamic nature' of literary works, suggesting that the convergence of text and reader is capable of producing numerous interpretations and experiences, thus reflecting the complexity and layers of meaning implied by the term 'literary worlds'.

Louise Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration* (1968) provides useful insights into some of the pedagogical implications of engaging students in 'Reader Response' styles of criticism. Rosenblatt describes a work of literature as analogous to a piece of music, which must be 'performed' by the reader using the 'instrument' of themselves (their thoughts, feelings and sensibilities) (280). She advocates a philosophy of teaching literature which is focused on developing students' skills as a 'performer' rather than imparting existing knowledge. By describing the educator as analogous to a 'voice teacher', who attunes the student's sensibilities to hear the pitch and tone of their 'performance', Rosenblatt echoes the contemporary education maxim of being a 'guide on the side, not a sage on the stage'.

This notion is extended in *The Reader, The Text, A Poem* (1978), where she argues that a text 'must be thought of as an event in time' rather than an 'object or an ideal entity'. This is particularly true when a text is discussed during a class seminar, with the 'performance' being more akin to a chorus than a vocal solo (albeit a potentially unruly chorus where the performance may benefit as much from discord as harmony). She suggests that any changes to the readers, time and classroom involved will create a 'different circuit, a different event' and thus will evoke a different literary world. Therefore, it may be argued that the classroom (and other reading communities) and the performative 'event' it facilitates becomes a literary world in its own right, providing a space and framework for meaning making.

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Hans Jauss in *Toward An Aesthetic Of Reception* (1982) also reaffirms the role of 'active participation' of audiences in understanding literature. His approach of 'Reception Theory', however, departs from Iser's and Rosenblatt's theories somewhat, by considering the way changes in aesthetic values in literary history can shape the reception of a literary work, describing the 'dialogical and at once processlike relationship between work, audience, and new work' (18-19). He argues that literature cannot be viewed as a fixed entity—'it is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence'—rather it is 'much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers' (21). His approach to reading a literary world stresses the way changes in context, including emerging trends in literature, shape the interpretation of work in a way that 'frees the texts from the material of the words and brings it into a contemporary existence' (21). Jauss emphasises the way a literary work 'awakens memories of that which was already read' by drawing on knowledge of 'specific rules of the genre or type of text, which establish 'expectations... that can be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading process' (23). He describes a readership's expectations as a 'horizon of expectation', emphasising the way a long history of literary works interacts with one another to shape a reader's aesthetic experience of a single work's 'horizon'. Jauss describes the appearance of a new work, which provides 'aesthetic distance' from the established conventions, as providing a 'change of horizons' for a reader, which is a useful way of understanding NESA's description of the way new works can offer 'new horizons' and 'insights' for a reader. Perhaps more significantly, Jauss describes a 'variable distance' between the 'actual first perception of a work' and the 'virtual significance' the work develops over a long history of readership. Jauss argues that a new work's innovations often cannot be understood within the first reception of a work if it poses too great a resistance to its first audience's expectations and thus 'a long process of reception' is needed 'to gather in that which was unexpected and unusable within the first horizon' (35). This echoes Iser's language of a literary work operating in a 'virtual space' beyond the text and any single reader, and offers an understanding of the way a literary work cannot be understood as an isolated 'event' or an unalterable 'world', rather the experience it provides for readers is shaped by the

complex interaction of old and new works.

Finally, Bo Pettersson's, *How literary Worlds are Shaped* (2016), offers a useful survey of accounts of 'world creation' in literature, tracing theory from formalist analysis of narrative to contemporary cognitive theory. His approach outlines the complexity involved in shaping literary worlds, noting the 'double act of imagining' that must occur when 'the author (who invites the reader to imagine) and that of the reader (who, by continuing the act of reading conceives the world imagined)' (111). His account of psychological development of reading habits in children is used to argue that 'all literary worlds, however realist or fantastic, are the result of complex double acts of imagining' (111). Pettersson's focus on the imagination also offers useful ways of understanding the relationship between literary communities and literary worlds, particularly the way influence and intertextuality contribute to the way literary worlds 'explore new horizons and offer new insights' (NESA). He argues that an individual's imagination and 'popular imagination' (such as mythology or cultural narratives) are combined by 'literary imagination', with literature building on existing representations as well as a reader's knowledge as 'imagination and knowledge, the real and the fantastic, rhetorical figures and narratives can be combined' to 'awaken or stir the mind in different ways' (38).

Pettersson argues that the diverse 'modes' of expression that construct a literary world (including oral, written, visual, figurative tropes) are united in the way 'they focus on representing humans or human-like characters, as speakers and agents' (125). This claim reflects the Common Module's focus on 'voice, point of view and identity' as central features to be analysed and evaluated by critical readers. Some of the challenges in this approach are identified as Pettersson points out the two approaches to understanding literary characters. The 'humanist tradition' treats characters 'as real people' with motivations and personalities who can be discussed beyond the limits of what is ascribed in the text, while the 'more recent structuralist-semiotic' approach understands characters 'as artefacts made up of semiotic or descriptive markers' (125). NESA's Common Module's situation seems to be more in the structuralist-semiotic approach due to its focus on the 'text' as the main agent of meaning making. This partly reflects Roland Barthes' argument in *The Death of the Author*, which points out the inherent difficulty in

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attributing voice to character or author, as he argues that 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin' and that 'writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost' (142). Moving analysis away from the 'sway of the Author', Barthes argues that it is 'language which speaks, not the author' and that 'language acts, 'performs' and not 'me' (143). Thus, Pettersson argues that 'most scholars—and general readers—would agree that literary narrators, characters and speakers (even postmodern ones) are in some sense modelled on humans, but have traits that show that they are 'mere' fictions of language' (125). While these 'voices' cannot be understood as having a concretely 'human' source, their position within language and the difficulty that we may have in attributing them to one source points to the way 'points of view' and 'identity' may be fluid constructs within texts, thus all the more open to a dialogue with each reader and their 'performance' of the text.

### 'My Hideous Progeny': Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

The origins of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* demonstrate the way that the 'private world' of a writer, the 'public worlds' of philosophy and popular imagination and the 'imaginary world' of speculation and dream all play a role in the construction of literary worlds. Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* offers her 'account of the origin' of the story and points to the way literary communities may constitute their own 'world' which influences the reading and writing habits of its members. Shelley's private world is perhaps uniquely intertwined with the literary community of Romantic and political writers and she notes her motivations in her earliest writings were partly driven by the urgings of Percy Shelley, who was 'very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame' (190). Certainly, the influence of her husband as well as the writings of her father, mother and other key figures such as Coleridge and Wordsworth are evident *Frankenstein* through frequent poetic allusions and philosophical asides which form a 'literary world' which is an amalgamation of several voices and influences. Joyce Carol Oates suggests that the multiple voices and genres that construct these features of *Frankenstein* make it a 'novel sui generis, if a novel at all, it is a unique blending of Gothic, fabulist, allegorical, and philosophical materials' (543).

Like Victor's monster, Shelley's novel is stitched together from a variety of sources and voices, and – just as the monster is animated by the charge of galvanism – the text is animated by the reader's imagination as well as an ever shifting 'horizon of expectation.' This dialogue between various 'voices' is reinforced in the novel's structure, with multiple narrators framing one another's accounts, with numerous letters and manuscripts together shaping the 'literary world' that the reader experiences. The difficulty of attributing voice to any one source identified by Barthes is particularly evident when the account of Victor's studies into the sources and 'elixir of life' are broken off when he discovers this 'astonishing... secret' and the text addresses the reader, asking them to 'remember, I am not recording the vision of a madman' (33). Is this a continuation of Victor's narration and thus an instruction to Walton, or is this an interruption by Walton as he 'records' Victor's narration? Or is the imperative to 'remember' an ironic intrusion by Shelley, asking the reader to recall the madness of both Victor and Walton that drives them to the Arctic? Indeed, this might prompt us to remember one of the first descriptions of Victor whose 'eyes have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness' (12). This reinforces Aidan Day's description of *Frankenstein* as a work that employs Romantic allusions and ideologies but treats these ironically, as it 'pushes the Romantic model of the solitary, creative imagination to its extreme and illustrates its dangerous and destructive propensities' (145). This demonstrates the way the presence of multiple voices (in allusions to other writers and the presence of multiple narrators) produce ironic clashes and associations, reinforcing the way that voice might be best understood as the literary work speaking, forming a dialogue within itself as well as with the reader's 'horizons of expectation.' Pettersson notes that these features of *Frankenstein*, including pastiche, allusion, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and an unreliable narrator, are often described as a 'modern and especially postmodern phenomenon with some forerunners' (182). Arguably, contemporary readers, attuned to these features of literary works by the prevalence of these features in their postmodern 'horizon of expectations', are likely to emphasise these qualities in their reading. This reflects Jauss' view of the way a literary work is likely to be reinterpreted as the horizon of expectation shifts around a work, accumulating new meaning from the resonances created with new works and new contexts.

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The interaction between the 'horizons of expectation' and both the reception and production of new works is demonstrated in Shelley's account of the summer of 1816, when Mary and Percy became neighbours to Lord Byron in Switzerland, read 'some volumes of ghost stories, translated from the German into French' (190), and entered into a 'ghost story' competition with one another. Shelley's particularly vivid account of one ghost story offers a useful demonstration of Rosenblatt's description of readings as being 'performative' and 'played' through a reader's own body, while also being shaped by the events surrounding the reading. Despite not having read the story for 14 years, Shelley has internalised her experience of the ghost story and 'their incidents are as fresh in my mind as if I had read them yesterday', describing a character as a 'gigantic, shadowy form, clothed like the ghost in Hamlet, in complete armour but with the beaver up' who was 'seen at midnight, by the moon's fitful beams, to advance slowly along the gloomy avenue' (190-191). In her recount of this story, Shelley provides a new performance of this literary work. In addition to this, her allusions to Hamlet demonstrate Pettersson's point that multiple acts of imagination are active in forming a literary world, with a reader's and writer's imagination as well as popular imagination and literary creation all acting to 'shape' a literary world. After reading the ghost stories that Shelley still recalls so vividly, her 'imagination' becomes 'possessed... gifting the successive images that arose in [her] mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie' (192). This account of the 'pale student of unhallowed arts' and the 'hideous phantasm of a man stretched out' suggests the 'birth' of *Frankenstein* in some ways preceded its text, with the text itself being the fruition of Shelley's experiences, reading habits and imagination, suggesting that we should not conceive of any 'literary world' as a singular entity, but understand that each is positioned within a 'galaxy' of influence. This is clear when we consider the way the mythology and imagery of *Frankenstein* has at once contributed to popular culture while also being radically transformed and moulded by new composers (through film adaptations and spin-offs) as well as new readers. This is something Shelley seems to have foreseen when she writes in 1931 'and now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper' (193), recognising her creation, like Victor's, is beyond the control of the artist once it enters the larger 'world'.

## Conclusion

A 'literary world' is a 'virtual space', one that is shaped by a confluence of meaning making processes, including the text, the reader as well as the influence of other literary worlds. As a 'virtual' space, it is not a fixed entity; it is never completely described nor completely defined, it is always contingent on the possibility of new inferences from new reader experiences. Thus, the metaphor of a 'literary world' can provide some useful ways of understanding the complex processes involved in constructing these experiences, drawing our attention to the way literary communities and many voices may construct a more complex world, as well as the influence of an ever-expanding 'galaxy' of influences.

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