# *INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE*

**Cristina ARSENE-ONU**
**University of Piteşti**

***Abstract****: This article addresses the concept of interdisciplinarity and the role of interdisciplinary studies in studying British and American literature, with further instances from the works of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck. In the article, I offer a definition of interdisciplinary analysis and examine its manifold role in literary criticism; I also provide a brief history of interdisciplinary study.*

***Keywords*****:** *interdisciplinarity, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, feminism, biblical perspectives.*

**Towards a Definition of Interdisciplinarity**

This paper aims to consider several ways in which the interdisciplinary approach has been defined and the discussions that have been conducted about its **meaning**, **purpose**, and **practical applications,** emphasizing at the same time the fact that interdisciplinarity has become a fashionable word across many academic studies.

To start with, we can say that literary forms are/can/should or may be analyzed against the background of cultural forms within the wide context of interdisciplinary studies. Literary critics, researchers working within the field of literary studies have been introduced to the idea of interdisciplinary perspectives from others fields, since the 1920's. Referring back to these fields in particular one can enumerate the following: cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, geography, the sciences, and theology. Mention should be made that in point of terminology a slight overlap in usage is to be noted between literary theory/theory of literature on the one hand and interdisciplinary studies or interdisciplinarity on the other.

As Roberta Frank argues (1988:100), the term *interdisciplinarity* pleases everyone, hinting at the fact that knowledge is a developing thing, starting from its etymological origin: *inter* and *discipline;* from this we can infer that the term provides the possibility to transcend disciplines. The term as such emerged within the context of the critique of the academic disciplines as limited and confining.

According to de Zepetnek (1998: 79) the notion of interdisciplinarity contains two basic principles: 1) it postulates that literature may (or should) be studied by attention to conceptually related fields such as history, psychology, or other areas of artistic expression such as film, music, the visual arts etc.; 2) it postulates the principle of method, that is, the application of theoretical framework and methodologies used in other disciplines for the acquisition of knowledge in the analysis of literature and/or the literary text.

Following Joe Moran's approach to interdisciplinarity (Moran 2001: 14) as a subject for study, it can be stated that its meaning may be at times ambiguous since it can suggest "forging connections across different disciplines," and, at the same time "it can establish a kind of undisciplined space." Nonetheless, the value of the term lies in its flexibility and indeterminacy, and that there are potentially as many forms of



**BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Piteşti**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)**

interdisciplinarity as there are disciplines. Another stand comes from Roland Barthes who suggests that "interdisciplinarity is always *transformative* in some way, *producing* new forms of knowledge in its engagement with discrete disciplines." (my emphasis) (Barthes 1977: 155).

At an in-depth analysis or look into the works on interdisciplinary studies we may be surprised at the amount of overlap of theories, conceptual frameworks, terminologies and texts between different subjects. In a way, all things are blurred but at the same time more light is shed onto a certain piece of literary text, as far as our aim is concerned, when approaching a text from different perspectives, on account of the different disciplinary interpretations.

As I have mentioned before there is to be noted an overlap in terminology. Thus, the field of *cultural studies* which draws variously on sociology, anthropology, history, linguistics, philosophy, textual criticism, visual culture, the philosophy of science, geography, politics, economics and psychology, could be said to be synonymous with interdisciplinarity itself. Moran (2001: 50) was concerned to challenge the disciplinary identity of literary studies by dissolving the category of "literature" into the more inclusive notion of "culture". While fields such as women's studies or ethnic studies have always been intrinsically interdisciplinary, scholars working in national literatures have also begun to focus on this approach in scholarship.

Sociologically speaking, and bearing in mind such a concept as ideology, literary texts are also interesting ideologically because they often fulfil several functions which coexist or conflict with each other. While they can be used to disseminate official ideologies or to make a profit for their authors and publishers, they also feed into the wider circulation of meanings and signification in the culture as a whole.

In his influential work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau expands the interdisciplinary possibilities of cultural studies by aiming to "bring scientific practices and languages back toward their native land, everyday life." (de Certeau, qtd. in Moran 2001: 66) He sees the activity of reading a book, as a means in which the reader can transform and create meanings never intended by the writer and the novel as an open field for all kinds of *undisciplined material*. In other words, the novel is such a spacious, heterogeneous form, which brings together many modes of writing and types of human experience. Following this path, we can add that literary texts are worthy to be studied because they provide the basis for a transformative practice of reading.

**Linguistics and Literariness/ Structuralist Approaches**

The derivation of structuralism in linguistics opens up a number of interdisciplinary possibilities for literary studies. In structuralist analyses, literary texts tend to be positioned as part of the overall sphere of language and discourse, and thus as one type of text among many including non-linguistics forms such as cinema, photography, music and fashion. These texts are then analyzed 'structurally', emphasizing the form that they share with other texts rather than their specific content. In this way, interdisciplinary study creates a new object, which belongs to none of the sciences around it. In other words, structuralist approaches regard the text as a literary system, and aim to clarify how that system produces meaning.

**Narratology** is one area of structuralist criticism that has provided a particularly fruitful area of interdisciplinary textual study. In this sense, critics have taken narratives apart and shown how they work in extraordinary detail by examining



BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)

such elements as: temporal order, duration, frequency, perspective, point of view. Nonetheless, Mark Currie (in Wolfryes, Baker (eds.) 1996: 58) submits Narratology to the post-structuralist theory. In this sense, we note that the post-structuralist tends to work from the view that the object-text can be construed in an almost infinite number of ways. Thus post-structuralist is concerned with structuration.

**Post-structuralism and Deconstruction**

Post-structuralism, by contrast to structuralism, does not derive from linguistics, but rather from philosophy, which emphasizes the difficulty of achieving secure knowledge about things. A figure associated with post-structuralism is Jacques Derrida who announced the death of the author, which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by any notion of what the author might have intended into the work. (Barry 1995: 66) Derrida's method of the 'deconstructive' reading has been borrowed by literary critics and used in the reading of literary works, a 'reading of the text against itself', with the purpose of 'knowing the text as it cannot know itself.' In psychoanalytic terms we can say that 'deconstructive reading uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text.' (Barry 1995: 71) Another revelatory definition of 'deconstruction' is provided by J.A. Cuddon (1991) who asserts that 'a text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying… it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance(…).' Post-structuralist critics look for evidence of gaps, breaks, fissures and discontinuities of all kinds.

The three stages of the deconstructive process described by Barry (1995: 74-77) are: the verbal, the textual, and the linguistic. The 'verbal' stage involves looking in the text for paradoxes and contradictions. The second stage applies itself at the level of shifts in focus, time, tone or point of view, or attitude, or page, or vocabulary. Finally, the 'linguistic' stage involves the unreliability or untrustworthiness of language.

**Psychoanalysis, Language and Culture**

Within a literary context, psychoanalysis, from a critic's point of view, is based on the insights of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. Although Freud saw himself primarily as a scientist, his work has been vastly more influential in the non-scientific disciplines, with a special emphasis on literature. Psychoanalysis as such is concerned with everything that the unconscious produces, and the way it influences all forms of human thought, feeling and behavior. Inevitably, it encompasses an interest in literature because, as Freud puts it, our basic instinctual impulses 'make (valuable – o.n.) contributions (…) to the highest cultural, artistic and social creations of the human spirit.'(qtd. in Moran 2001: 97) Moreover psychoanalysis is, like literary criticism, a fundamentally hermeneutic activity: because the unconscious is repressed, it cannot be clinically discovered, but only interpreted. However, Freud's many essays of literary criticism tend to use literature simply as the raw material for psychoanalytical case studies. Most commonly, early psychoanalytic criticism treats the text as a sublimation of the author's unconscious desires, instinctual needs or neuroses.

Freudian psychoanalytic critics give central importance, in literary interpretation, to the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. They associate the literary work's 'overt' content with the former, and the 'covert' content with the latter, privileging the latter as being what the work is 'really' about. They also demonstrate the presence in the literary work of classic psychoanalytic symptoms,



BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)

conditions of phases, such as the oral, anal, and phallic stages of emotional and sexual development in infants. (Barry 1995: 105)

Barry asserts the existence of another type of psychoanalytic critics, namely the Lacanian critics who, instead of delving for the authors' or characters' unconscious motives and feelings, they search out those of the text itself, since in Lacan terms the unconscious is structured like a language, the very unconscious being the ultimate sovereign.

Psychology, on the other hand, comes into criticism in two ways: in the investigation of the act of creation and in the psychological study of particular authors to show the relation between their attitudes and states of mind and the special qualities of their work. (Daiches 1956: 340) We can look at the behavior of characters in a novel in the light of modern psychological knowledge and, if their behavior confirms what we know about the subtleties of the human mind, we can use modern theories as a means of elucidating and interpreting the work. (Daiches 1956: 348)

**Criticism and Sociology**

In modern criticism, investigation of a writer's social origins and of the effect which social factors had on his work has been at least as common as psychological studies of a writer's state of mind, and the two have often gone together. We witness a genetic approach, by means of which the work is considered in terms of its origins, whether individual or social or both.

**Feminism and Literature**

The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. Feminist critics revalue women's experience in the literary field and raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different. The representation of women in literature may be said to be one of the most important forms of 'socialization', since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men. From the 1980s one can notice a shift of focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook. More than that, feminist criticism became much more eclectic, having a good deal in common with the procedures and assumptions of the liberal humanist approach, although feminists also place considerable emphasis on the use of historical data and non-literary material (such as diaries, memoirs, social and medical history) in understanding the literary text.

Julian Wolfreys and William Baker (qtd. in Wolfryes 1996: 15) state that 'feminism is never merely an aesthetic, evaluative, academic exercise; it is also profoundly political', since 'gender and sexuality' are central themes in literature. Once again supporting the idea of interdisciplinarity, mention should be made that 'feminism' draws on the insights of structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and deconstruction.

**New Historicist Thinking**

The New Historicist type of reading is heavily influenced by Marxist analyses, distinguishing from it by Michel Foucault's influence by means of the notions of 'power' and 'discourse.' 'Power', in Foucault's work, is the fundamental force which drives all human experience, the desire to dominate and control. Derived from Nietzsche's 'will to power', it expresses the interest with social hierarchies and colonialism. (Branigan, qtd. in Wolfryes 1996: 159)

**Science as Culture**



BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)

Many of the scientific developments have been taken on board by literary and cultural critics to develop interdisciplinary approaches. For instance, Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection quickly entered wide circulation in the culture as a whole, becoming a part of a whole series of interconnecting narratives. These ideas were variously used to justify the colonial domination of "savage" peoples, the eugenics movement, racial segregation.

**Modernism under the Spell of Einstein**

While the natural sciences had been revolutionised by Darwin, physics and astronomy were turned around by Max Planck's work on quantum theory (1900 to 1919) and Einstein's relativity theory (1905 to 1915), to which could be added Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle of 1923, which undermined the claim to know anything absolutely about the material universe. This compounded Einstein's assertion that no physical law is entirely reliable, but that the observer's position will always affect the result, will make the result relative and contingent. Relativity was widely and excitedly debated in artistic circles as writers fondly embraced what they took to be the scientific backing for their ideas of individual perspective. The tendency towards narrative relativity, before and after Einstein, is perhaps the most striking aspect to Modernist fiction, from Conrad and James to Proust and Woolf, in its use of perspective, unreliability, anti-absolutism, instability, individuality and subjective perceptions. The Uncertainty Principle seemed to describe the stance taken by several authors: Forster's on religion in *A Passage to India*, for example. (Childs 2001: 66) Also, from a philosophical and aesthetic perspective the idea of relativity cannot be underestimated in its impact on the way the world was viewed from multiple, overlapping, intercut or synthesised perspectives by art. Mikhail Bakhtin used Einstein's ideas of space-time to coin the term 'chronotope' to refer to his theory of the distinctive use of chronology and topology in particular genres of fiction.

A Newtonian universe found its reflection in the realist novel: reliable, objective narrators encompassed the single perspective of a world governed by consistent, dependable scientific laws. Time was linear and narrative moved along chronological lines. By contrast, Modernism expressed time moving in arcs, flashbacks, jumps, repetitions and, above all, subjective leaps and swerves. Space was compressed, oppressive, threatening and subjectively perceived. Einstein's four-dimensional space-time continuum echoed the use of montage and collage in art. The physical universe under Einstein's theory had an ambiguity and flexibility that seemed to free experience from Newton's laws in a way that the Modernist writers attempted to free their characters from social conventions and challenge the propriety, homogeneity and absolutism of the social and aesthetic guidelines laid down for them by a previous generation. (Ibid.: 67)

For Baudelaire, the modern individual had to embrace the transformations brought about by changes in physics, optics, chemistry and engineering, and the modern artist had to re-enact the new technological processes and energies: to bring them to life. This was an idea perhaps not fully realized until the early-twentieth-century revolutions in cinema, painting and literature, represented through collage, montage, free verse and stream of consciousness (Ibid.: 65). At the same time as these early-twentieth-century upheavals in art, a scientific revolution complemented the radical forms and



BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)

perspectives offered by writers and painters, and indeed appeared to serve as a perfect analogy for many avant-garde opinions about social relations.

**Art Movements and Literature**

*Impressionism and after*

Most Impressionists shared the general view that all life contained a vision of beauty: cafés, villages, boulevards, salons, bedrooms and theatres all expressed a joy of life, a wholeness and a radiance.

Impressionism's unit of color was the brush stroke, which was challenged by Georges Seurat. His paintings are composed of discrete points of color, but as the viewer stands further back the eye fills in the gaps and mixes the colors to create a total image. Seurat has often been credited with anticipating the fractured, divided sensibilities of the Modernist period, thus predicting the way that art would become more self-referential, more concerned with form. His holistic approach through the assembly of atoms in a fragmented world is reflected in much Modernist writing, where individuals, like Woolf's heroine in *Mrs Dalloway,* compose their selves from many parts. (Ibid.: 109-110)

From Monet and Seurat has been taken into Modernist writing the idea that there is a mist or halo to what the individual perceives. Seurat saw a point surrounded by a halo of colour, Monet painted his views as though seen through fogs and mists. There is here a suggestion of Woolf's description above of consciousness as an 'incessant shower of innumerable atoms', a 'luminous halo' or 'semi-transparent envelope'. Conrad, sometimes considered an Impressionist writer, also seems to render a parallel view of 'meaning' in *Heart of Darkness.* (Ibid.: 111)

*Cubism*

For many Modernists, what was painted and what was written about became in some ways less important, and how it was written or painted became the key question. Much of this, as Stein suggests, was part of a drive to move away from the devaluation of art and writing that Modernists perceived to have taken place in the Victorian period. Cubism, or rather the ideas of collage and multiple perspective, suggested to writers new ways of constructing both narrative and 'character' as composites, as not singular but an assembly of fragments. (Ibid.: 114)

*Expressionism*

Expressionism has many roots in the work of another post-Impressionist, Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90). In Van Gogh's self-portraits, the self is always apparently trying to escape, to flee itself in search of a new way of expression. In this desire not to represent but (self-)express or project, Van Gogh anticipates the dark world of Expressionism. (Ibid.: 118)

Unlike the Impressionists, Expressionist painters concentrated more on shadows than light, on the sinister effects of shade and dark, the qualities of nightmare and alienation, in opposition to the celebration of incandescence and beauty found in the work of a painter such as Renoir. Where the Impressionists showed the uniqueness of an object in a moment of time, the Expressionists did the same with the human subject. This is why they are considered Modernists and the Impressionists are not; because painters like Munch projected an alienated self onto the environment, painting the way reality felt, not the way it looked.

Passages of Joyce's *Ulysses,* especially the 'Nighttown' section, and of Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) are reminiscent of Expressionist techniques, but Franz Kafka



BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)

(1883-1924) is the most famous European Expressionist novelist. Wyndham Lewis is probably the best-known British writer and artist, but another author who began as a Modernist and later used Expressionist techniques to convey the feeling of Nazi Germany (the country most associated with Expressionism, in film, art and painting) is Christopher Isherwood. (Ibid.: 119)

Ilse Dusoir Lindt (in Harrington, Abadie (eds.) 1979: 127)states the existence of some analogies between the visual medium present in painting and the literary medium, taking as an example Faulkner's works. In order to support her ideas she tried to pursue the relationship that exists between Faulkner's fiction and the visual arts, taking into consideration the paintings of Cezane, Gaugin and others. This enterprise opens the path for further interdisciplinary analysis at this level, showing that the fact that writers of fiction have seen or read about a certain painting may reflect itself in his/her fiction, by means of some visual patterns.

**Film and Literature**

By the 1920s, film, which itself drew both subject matter and techniques from fiction, was having an enormous cultural impact on Euroamerican art and literature. Many of the Modernist writers were influenced by cinema as much as by art, and many more wrote in a cinematic style. In Expressionist films, as in Modernist narratives, point of view is crucial. A roving camera that can move anywhere is used and can take the perspective of different actors so that the audience can understand their 'expression'. Not only are inner and outer worlds synchronised but the type of treatment conveys the quality of the feelings involved. Similarly, action can be repeated or replayed in slow-motion to suggest a subjective experience of time and a vividness or intensity of sensory perception. Many writers used Expressionist film techniques, especially shadow and distortion, as a way of superimposing their inner complexes on the outside world. As quoted in Childs (2001: 125) Eisenstein explains the influence of Cubism's use of multiple viewpoints on film, and the new techniques in art to alter perceptions and create ambiguity. In fiction, which often represents thought by overlaying images, something like montage can be seen in the closing pages of *Mrs Dalloway*, especially in the climax of the story as Clarissa's mind ranges over her party, Septimus's death, a phrase from Shakespeare, and her own actions and perceptions. (ibid.:126)

The relations between literature and film can be said to be very difficult to sort out, since writing has a lasting tradition of four thousand years, and film, only a century or so. The means and methods used to transmit the message or to set up a work as such are also different: a word unites a sound and a concept, while an image unites reflected light and an object. This approach of literature next to film, and of film next to literature could be touched out of the following reason: in the early twentieth century the arts of literature, painting and film went through the modernist crisis at approximately the same time. Nonetheless, it is difficult to establish what influence exerted on what, but we may be entitled to say, in the manner of Andre Bazin that 'novelists have been influenced not by the specific films made in their times but by the idea of cinema' (qtd. in Harrington, Abadie (eds.) 1979:105)

One of the authors whose work can be approached on the background of the art of film is William Faulkner, who was said to be thinking not in terms of movies, but in tropes that are most convincingly explicated in cinematic terms. (Kawin in Harrington, Abadie (eds.) 1979:105) In this respect let us mention the 'montage', a trope that is useful because it is probably impossible to photograph an idea, and the repetition, which



BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)

are the two central linguistic and structural devices in Faulkner's fiction. The varieties of montage take five basic and sometimes overlapping forms: the oxymoron, dynamic unresolution, parallel plotting, rapid shifts in time and place, and multiple narration.

**A Theological Case Study on Steinbeck's Novels – A Biblical Perspective**

During the second half of the twentieth century the attitude of the literary community in what the Bible was concerned underwent a marked change. Consequently, the Bible was recognized as the source and inspiration of many themes, symbols and types found in contemporary literature. Robert Alert and Frank Kermode (1978:15) attempted to clarify and elaborate the allusive connections between the Bible and contemporary literature and culture. Also, the literary approaches advocated by Northrop Frye and Kenneth Burke highlighted the Biblical references and themes which are common in twentieth-century literature.

Steinbeck quotes Biblical texts, subtly or significantly changes phrases, employs *direct* or *inverted* images, and consciously or unconsciously narrates a parallel story. So fundamental and so extensive is the Biblical imagery that it cannot be regarded as either accidental or incidental. (Bevan 1993: 80) By *direct* imagery is meant the invocation of a Biblical text or incident to have roughly the same significance in the novel as it has in the Bible. So in Exodus we read of the Ten Commandments and various laws without which the children of Israel would be moving in a state of anarchy; in *The Grapes of Wrath* we have a description of community rules worked out by the migrants. By *inverted* Biblical imagery we mean the use of part of a scriptural incident or narrative in an ironic manner or to make an opposite point in the novel. The most obvious example of inverted imagery is seen in the fact that the children of Israel wanted to escape from Egypt and begin their journey to the Promised Land, whereas the only thing the Joads and their neighbours wanted was to be left alone and not driven out by the obvious remote decision of bankers.

All in all, the key feature of successful interdisciplinary practice is not the disparity of the chosen disciplines. What demonstrates real interdisciplinary thinking is the use of each discipline as a valid source of knowledge in its own right and a valuable contribution to the intended discussion.

**Bibliography**


Alert, Robert & Kermode, Frank. *The Literary Guide to the Bible.* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1987.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory.* Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York, 1995.

Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text.* Trans. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana, 1977.

Bevan, David. *Literature and the Bible.* Editions Rodopi, Amsterdam: Atlanta, 1993.

Childs, Peter. *Modernism.* Routledge: London, 2000.

Cuddon, J.A.. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* Blackwell, 3rd edition, 1991.

Daiches, David. *Critical Approaches to Literature.* W.W. Norton Company: New York, 1956.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Trans. Steven F. Rendall, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

de Zepetnek, Tötösy Steven. *Comparative Literature. Theory, Method, Application.* Amsterdam: Atlanta, GA, 1998.

Frank, Roberta. *'"Interdisciplinarity": The First Half Century'***.** In E.G. Stanley and T.F. Hoad (eds), Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988.

Harrington, Evans, Abadie, Ann. J (eds.). *Faulkner, Modernism, and Film: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1978*, University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 1979.




**BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)**

Moran, Joe. *Interdisciplinarity***.** Routledge: New York, 2001.
Wolfryes, Julian, Baker, William (eds.). *Literary Theories: A Case Study in Critical Performance.* Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996



**BDD-A5635 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:53:45 UTC)**