Since 1996, Literature Online has been one of the most substantial resources available for scholars and students of English and American literature. In addition to over a third of a million full-text works of poetry, prose and drama in English, Literature Online also contains resources for over 17,500 authors, more than 4000 biographies, and the full text of well over 200 specialist literature journals. The vast depth and range of content in Literature Online enables academics to both review and revisit traditional areas of scholarly study, as well as exploring completely new themes, ideas and subjects.

Literature Online contains not only canonical texts in their original format (all Literature Online’s texts are accurate reproductions of authoritative printed texts; full publication and pagination details of the print original are given for accurate academic citation) but also more than 100,000 contemporary works of literature, from an extensive range of authors and publishers.

In such a huge database – described by the poet Edwin Morgan as a “Shelleyan universal anthology” – how can a researcher be sure they are finding all the relevant information they need? Professor Steven Connor compares searching Literature Online to dropping a fishing line in a wildly-populated literary ocean: ‘almost every search throws up a writer or text with some kind of local excellence or originality that you have never encountered before’. Navigating this plethora of resources is made easy by Literature Online’s sophisticated search functionality, which ‘allows you to spot connections, contingencies and adjacencies’ avoiding the dangers of ‘keyhole surgery […] where results are stripped from their context’.

Over the course of his career ‘fishing’ through Literature Online, Professor Connor has used the database to identify many new objects and themes to study, including greasiness, spots, flies, corridors, bags, ‘the vapours’, and, more recently, ‘sobbing’. As he says, ‘Literature Online helps you break free from the ways in which the landscape of cultural history has been mapped – allowing you to go far off-piste and to generate alternate topographies for that landscape, even whole new territories.’

‘Literature Online is preeminent among a number of database resources that are transforming the nature of literary study and the ways in which it relates to other disciplines’
Professor Steven Connor

Fly, London: Reaktion, 2006
‘This is a compact work of scholarship,
well researched and well referenced both
from entomological and literary
standpoints. I commend it to any reader
whose view is broader than a microscope
tube.’ British Journal of Entomology and
Natural History

Fly traces the history of the fly in poetry,
painting, religion and science. Connor
found that the perception of the fly went
through a radical shift in the late
nineteenth century, a period in which the
fly was viewed as a source of infection.
However, earlier texts in Literature Online
point to a very different perspective,
where the fly might be seen as the ‘figure
of fleeting and ephemeral joy’ or even
more surprisingly as ‘sexy’. Connor cites
a speech in Romeo and Juliet where
Romeo imagines the fly can access the
‘white wonder of dear Juliet’s hand/ And
steal immortal blessing from her lips’
where he cannot. This reassessment of
the much maligned fly has been very
pleasing for entomologists.

In plotting the course of the fly through
English poetry, Connor was able to
develop a taxonomy of fly poems –
including, for instance, ‘fly-idyll, which
celebrates the careless life of the fly; the
fly-fable, in which the fly is used to point
up moral lessons about the transitoriness
of life and the vanity of corporal
pleasures, the fly love-poem’ and so on.
He says that ‘the literary texts that
Literature Online made it possible for me
to convene helped immeasurably to sieve
the subtle feeling-tone attached to the fly
– the ironic mixture of triviality and
weightiness involved in thinking and
writing about such an insignificant thing’.

Tracing thematic subjects across time in
this manner requires an in-depth analysis
of literature across a wide range of texts,
from the traditional to the marginal, in
order to gain an understanding of ‘the
transmissions and subtle transformations
of poetic and metaphorical formulae’.
Before the development of electronic
resources such as Literature Online, a
study such as Connor’s Fly would have
been a laborious, painstaking process of
ploughing through archives and
footnotes, ‘an affair largely of hunch and
hazard’. What’s more, this painstaking
process could also be without
satisfaction: ‘I would never actually have
known how much of the available
material I had actually located – whether
I was aware of most of the relevant texts,
half of them, or hardly any’. With
Literature Online, however, the scholar
can quickly and easily ‘get through a
lifetime of reading’ and ‘make your own
scholarly luck’.

Since 2001, ProQuest has sponsored the annual Filming Literature competition,
run by the Learning Technologies Group at the University of Oxford. Every year,
students at the University are invited to submit short films on digital video inspired
by literary texts that are included in Literature Online.

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/marketing/academics/filmlit.jsp

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