# Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

**Welcome from Philipp Schweighauser**

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER:

Welcome to Reading Literature in the Digital Age. My name is Philipp Schweighauser, and this is where I work. Well not exactly here in the courtyard, but in this building. We are here at the Department of English of the University of Basel where I teach American and General Literatures. Founded in 1460, the University of Basel is Switzerland's oldest university, but the venue we find ourselves in here is even older than that. The rear building was first mentioned in a document in 1294 because of its wealth and decorative splendour. For centuries this was the home of rich citizens, and from 1431 to '49 it hosted church dignitaries during the Council of Basel.

These rich citizens, church dignitaries, and nobles entertained guests in one of this building's largest rooms. Let's have a look at it.

We call this the Great Lecture Hall, but when Pope Pius II, the founder of the University of Basel, described this room in 1434 he noted that only the most beautiful women danced here. And he added that the common folk were denied access.

As I teach literature in this room I'm taken back to times where very few people could read. Sure, the church dignitaries, rich citizens, and nobles that entertained guests in this hall, they could read, or at least most of them could read. As could the spice merchants that sold their wares just across the street. But the common folk that Pope Pius II mentions, the vast majority of them, could not read.

So, between the first centuries of this building's existence and today a great revolution in reading has taken place. Today Switzerland has a literacy rate of 99%, but between 1294 and today another revolution in reading has taken place. And to talk about that second revolution in reading let me take you to another room of this building.

We find ourselves here in the Department of English's theatre cellar. For many evenings of the week this is a place of bustling activity. We have several semi-professional and amateur theatre groups performing their plays here. We even have our utterly delightful theatre group named the Gay Beggars. Founded in

1941, the Gay Beggars are named after John Gay's Beggar's Opera, and they first performed on this stage in 1969. This brings me to the second revolution in reading that has taken place. When the Gay Beggars first entered this stage in 1969 none of the actors possessed a computer, and none of them were hooked up to the internet.

True, the ARPANET, the internet's precursor built by the US Department of Defence, was first put to use in 1969, the very same year that the Gay Beggars entered this stage. But personal computers only began to be introduced on a large scale into households and campus dorms in the mid 1970s. And the internet only became a force to be reckoned with in the late 1980s. Clearly then much has changed in the last 50 years. Today my students do all of their writing on personal computers, or computers provided by the University of Basel. And they also do most of their reading on personal computers, be it laptops, desktop computers, or smartphones.

I'm not only talking about Facebook and Twitter, I'm also talking about course reading, the critical texts they read, the theoretical texts they read, and quite a few of the literary texts they read for my courses. Not only that, my students do a lot of their reading online. And that comes with all the benefits and the distracting potential of hyper-reading. Novels seem to be an exception, though. To this day students still prefer to read print novels over e-books, but that may, too, change in the next 10 years or so. Clearly then something has changed. As a teacher of literature, I have a sustained interest in trying to understand how my students' reading practices have changed.

And I also want to understand how my own reading practices have changed. And I'm pretty sure that your reading practices have changed, too. And this is precisely what we'll explore in this course, how we read literature in the digital age.