

HOW TO STUDY
LITERATURE

How to Study a Shakespeare Play

John Peck and Martin Coyle

HOW TO STUDY A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

John Peck
and
Martin Coyle

2561.073

PJ


MACMILLAN

© John Peck and Martin Coyle 1985

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended).

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1985

Reprinted 1986

Published by

MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London

Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Typeset by Wessex Typesetters

Frome, Somerset

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Peck, John, 1947-

How to study a Shakespeare play. — (How to
study literature)

1. Shakespeare, William—Study and teaching

I. Title II. Coyle, Martin III. Series

822'.3'3 PR2987

ISBN 0-333-38977-8

HOW TO STUDY LITERATURE

General Editors: John Peck and Martin Coyle

HOW TO STUDY A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

IN THE SAME SERIES

How to Study a Novel *John Peck*

Literary Terms and Criticism *John Peck and Martin Coyle*

IN PREPARATION

How to Study English Literature

How to Study a Play

How to Study Poetry

How to Study a Jane Austen Novel

How to Study Chaucer

How to Study a Thomas Hardy Novel

How to Study Marlowe, Jonson and Webster

General Editors' Preface

Everybody who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck
Martin Coyle

Acknowledgements

WE are very grateful to Michael Quinn for his close reading of the final draft and his many suggestions for improvements, and also to Sheila Morgan for her excellent typing and many words of encouragement.

*For Matthew
and
Penny and Steven*

Contents

<i>General editors' preface</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
1 How to approach a Shakespeare play	1
2 Studying a history play	16
The English history plays	16
<i>Richard II</i>	16
<i>Henry IV Part One</i>	32
The Roman history plays	41
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	42
A note on <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> and <i>Coriolanus</i>	49
3 Studying a tragedy	53
The tragedies	53
<i>Hamlet</i>	56
<i>King Lear</i>	71
<i>Othello</i>	79
<i>Macbeth</i>	85
4 Studying a comedy	92
The romantic comedies	92
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	95
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	109
The problem comedies	119
The romances	122
5 Discussing an extract from a Shakespeare play	130
Examinations	130
Context questions	132
Writing about a longer extract	138
6 Writing an essay	149
Essay-writing	149
The question	149
Your answer	154
<i>Further reading</i>	163
<i>A list of Shakespeare's plays</i>	167
<i>Index</i>	169

How to approach a Shakespeare play

What problems am I likely to encounter when I study Shakespeare for the first time?

SHAKESPEARE is often the first dramatist people study. You might have read, seen, and even acted in plays, but Shakespeare could well be the first writer whose plays you are expected to analyse and discuss. Consequently, when you start to study Shakespeare you might have little idea about what you are supposed to look for or say. You might sense that criticism must amount to something more than just retelling the story, but nobody expects you to have an instinctive awareness of how to discuss a play. The principal aim of this book is to provide the kind of guidance you are likely to need, showing you how to make an appropriate and valid response.

There is, however, a problem that precedes this question of how to discuss a play. This is the basic problem of reading the text. You will not be alone if you find it very difficult just trying to follow the story of a Shakespeare play. Part of the problem is the language: you will have to read a great many speeches, mainly in verse, where the characters seem to be saying far more, and in a far more peculiar way, than if they were involved in similar situations in real life. The language is not only old-fashioned but also complex and dense. The meaning of much of what is said is likely to escape you. Coming to terms with Shakespeare must obviously include coming to terms with his language, but at the outset the best tactic is to slide over the speeches you do not understand, ignoring the difficulties. Concentrate on trying to follow the action on the simple basis of who is involved and what happens next. Indeed, reading a Shakespeare play for the first time, it is a considerable

achievement if you can grasp the broad outline of the story, even if there are many parts of the play that you cannot understand and even if you have no idea of the significance of what you have read. Following and understanding the story of a play does, however, become a lot easier if you have some ideas about what you might or should be looking for. In other words, knowing something about how to make a critical response can actually help you in your initial reading of a play.

How do I start to shape a critical response?

We must stress that the way of studying Shakespeare described in this book is only one of many possible approaches. One approach, for example, is to produce and act the play as a group, so that the play begins to make sense from the experience of performing it. This is a way of approaching the play from the inside, but such an approach is not always possible or practical. What we are more concerned with is how, as an individual, you can develop your own ideas about a play, and the best starting-point for this is probably from the outside, with some ideas about drama in general. What we mean by this is seeing how much all plays have in common, in terms of both structure and theme. Shakespeare is obviously an uniquely gifted writer, but if we know what he has in common with other dramatists this will give us something solid to hold on to which can help shape our response. Our starting-point, therefore, is the shared conventions of drama.

What does Shakespeare have in common with other dramatists?

All plays by all dramatists have a great deal in common. This becomes apparent if we consider the structure of a play, or even the structure of an episode from a television series. Every play can be said to fall into three stages, generally referred to as exposition, complication and resolution. The play begins with the exposition stage, where we are introduced to the characters and the situation they find themselves in. At the outset the characters might not seem to have any particular problems, but there would not be much to interest us if we were simply confronted with characters who were living happily, continued to live happily, and lived happily ever after. Very soon, often in

the first scene, a problem develops: something happens which looks as if it is going to disrupt the characters' lives. One way of putting this is to say that a kind of order prevails at the beginning of the play but that very soon this ordered life is thrown into disarray.

The central and longest stage of a play is the complication stage. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can provide an illustration of what happens here. In *Romeo and Juliet* there are two families, the Montagues and Capulets, who are sworn enemies. There are brawls between the members of the two families, but for the most part there is an uneasy calm so long as they keep their distance. But then Romeo, a Montague, falls in love with Juliet, a Capulet, and so a complication has arisen. The consequence is that the established state of affairs that exists at the opening of the play breaks down, and we get a long sequence of scenes in which social disorder takes over, with family set against family, and child against parent. What Shakespeare is looking at are those human passions, feelings and instincts that make life complicated. In doing this he does what all dramatists do: he takes a situation where things are relatively peaceful at the outset, but then shows how the actions of people disrupt that established social order. If we think about a conventional detective series on television we find a similar pattern: characters are going about their normal business when a crime takes place. Often the crime is violent: what we see are the anti-social tendencies of certain characters shaking the established order of society. A detective series presents this disruption of order in extreme and simple terms, in that the villains are obviously acting in an unacceptable manner, but the dramatist does not have to present overtly anti-social behaviour. As in *Romeo and Juliet*, he can present natural instincts in people that challenge, or react against, the pressures and expectations of the society in which they live. Nor does the dramatist have to treat his subject seriously: in comedy, for example, he can present an irrational quality in people that undermines any possibility of a rational order in society. In all plays, however, what happens is that the behaviour of the characters creates confusion and social disarray.

This leads us on to the third stage in a play, the resolution stage. In a detective series, the crime is solved, the villains are brought to justice, and a sense of social order is reassuringly

re-established at the end of the episode. Stage plays can end as neatly as this, particularly comedies, but often the ending of the play is far less tidy. Sometimes, for example, as in tragedy, the social order is so thoroughly destroyed that civilised behaviour yields to violence, and the play ends with the death of the principal characters. The situation is thus in a way resolved, but what we are principally left with is an impression of the precariousness of the whole idea of social order.

What we hope has become clear here is that not only do all plays follow the same structure of exposition, complication and resolution, but also that, at least in the broadest terms, all plays have a lot in common thematically. Plays deal with threats to or disruption of the established order of society. That might sound very abstract, but what makes plays interesting is that they present these problems in human terms: they present and explore the experiences of characters caught in problematic situations brought about by their own or other people's behaviour.

How can I make use of what I now know about plays in general?

We have argued that in all plays we see some threat to or disruption of the established order of society. Passions, instincts, forces, and feelings are unleashed that undermine any established order. Such ideas are, however, only valuable if you can start making use of them to help you in your reading of specific plays. One immediate use of these ideas is that they can help you follow the story of a Shakespeare play when you are reading it for the first time. You know that at the outset you will be introduced to various characters and that soon a problem will begin to define itself. Some act, or series of acts, will take place that alters the way of life that has existed. During the course of the play things will become more and more chaotic, so that by the central point of the play life will have become completely topsy-turvy. At the end, however, things will sort themselves out in some way: order might be re-established, or there might be a feeling of temporary peace and taking stock of what has happened, but it could be that the chain of events leads to the death of one or more of the characters. If you know that this is the standard pattern of a Shakespeare play you then have a framework which can help you see the shape of the story

in the particular play you are studying. Whole sections of the play might continue to baffle you, but the thing to do in a first reading is to ignore the complications and look for the broad pattern in the text.

These general ideas about drama do not, however, just help you follow the story of a play. They can also provide a framework for your entire critical analysis of a play. A common mistake students make is that they put a tremendous effort into studying every aspect of a play, so that they are able to comment in detail on every character, every scene, and every theme, but all too often they fail to see the play as a whole. They fail to see how everything holds together. The point we are making is that, if you can see the broad pattern of the text, you have a framework which can help you make sense of and interpret every local complication and detail. In the simplest terms, it can be argued that every play is built upon a tension between an idea of order and the reality of disorder in society. If you can grasp this, you have a framework for making sense of every detail in the play – the actions that take place, the characters, their speeches, the language used, and the range of themes explored – for every detail must reflect the tension between the idea of order and the reality of social disorder.

Isn't this approach too simple?

The advice given here might seem limiting, for we seem to be saying that plays always deal with the same issues. And to some extent they do, for they deal with those problems that affect us all as human beings who have to live with other human beings. We must all be aware that we live in a world that is far from peaceful and ordered. There are always tensions, disagreements and conflicts that create discord, yet the aspiration towards a better state of affairs is one that most people share. What the dramatist does is to explore and re-explore this perennial problem that confronts mankind. While the broad pattern in all plays might be the same, however, it is developed and presented in a different way in every play. The general ideas outlined so far should help you get a purchase on a play, but for the most part criticism is concerned with the particular way in which the issues are developed in a specific play. What we are saying is that the broad significance of a play is easy to

see – how plays are concerned with the reality of living in a disordered world where man's unruly instincts repeatedly create discord – but the real skill in criticism lies in seeing how this theme is brought to life and made distinctive in the play you are studying. It is to this question of how to start building a full critical response that we turn now.

What should I be trying to do in a critical response?

This is a summary of the critical method illustrated in the following chapters. The first step, as already discussed, is **look for the broad pattern of the play**. Look for the action or actions that trigger off the complications of the play: almost invariably one of the characters acts in a headstrong, or foolish, or ill-conceived, or possibly evil way. The act that takes place creates discord; the alteration in the established state of affairs throws life into disarray. Order yields to disorder. The greater part of the play will then be devoted to presenting scenes in which people are at odds with each other, and in which conflicts and disagreements or confusion and misunderstandings dominate. As the following chapters on histories, tragedies and comedies show, these initial moves which enable you to get a hold on a play are likely to prove even more productive if you **have some ideas about the particular characteristics of the kind of play you are studying**. If you know what to look for in a tragedy, for example, you can make additional advances in getting hold of the pattern of the play you are concerned with.

So far, however, your critical analysis is relying on the assumptions you can bring to a play. This means that you are likely to be stressing what the play has in common with plays in general and other plays of its kind. **The real task of criticism, however, is to capture the distinctive qualities of the play you are studying**. You want to explore and convey something of the unique nature of this play. A sense of what is special about a play will, in fact, begin to become clear the moment you **start looking in more detail at the plot**. The danger here is that you might lapse into just retelling the story. What you have to remember is that you are not only interested in what happens but also in the significance of what happens. There are, fortunately, two fairly straightforward ways of organising and disciplining your discussion of the plot. One is to remember

that the general framework we have used, which helps you see the overall pattern of the story, can also be used as a key to help you interpret any part of the story. This means that you always have at hand a way of commenting on the significance of what is happening. The other point to bear in mind is that if you attempt to discuss too many scenes you are likely to lapse into merely summarising the action without commenting on its significance. It is far better to **concentrate on a few scenes**, working on the assumption that those scenes on their own are bound to tell you a lot about the play as a whole. To illustrate these points: you might have chosen a scene from around the middle of one of Shakespeare's plays. As you start to describe what is happening you are putting together a set of perhaps rather confused impressions. What can help you organise these impressions is if you call upon the idea that the scene is presenting a picture of social disorder, as it inevitably will be. But your abstract idea will come to life as a result of describing concrete and specific details in the scene. Remember, though, that a play is likely to maintain a constant tension between order and disorder. Look for evidence that the characters feel there is something wrong with the disorderly state of affairs: implicit in every scene will be the idea that life should be more orderly and rational, even though it is in the nature of mankind to disrupt harmony. As you use these large controlling ideas to illuminate small areas of the text you will begin to move towards a sense of what is distinctive about a particular play.

Our critical method has so far gone through two steps: it starts with ideas about plays in general, and then, on the basis of analysis of a few scenes, moves towards a sense of what a particular play is about. But there is more to a play than the overall significance and meaning of the plot, and as you look at individual scenes you are likely to be noticing a number of things of interest. It helps if you are aware of the kind of **things you can focus on**. The six areas of interest in a play were first listed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle: these are **plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle**. What we have been talking about so far is the significance that can be found in the plot, but in studying a play your attention is also likely to be caught by the other elements Aristotle mentions (with the exception of music: music is important in some of Shakespeare's plays, but it is not of primary importance in his

work as a whole). You are bound to respond to the characters, and if you analyse a scene, as suggested above, you will almost inevitably find yourself talking about them. The problem with talking about characters, however, is that you might just have a vague, ill-defined feeling that they are interesting or complex. What you need is a way of focusing and disciplining your impressions, and again the large ideas we have been working with provide a way of organising your response. It can be shown how **the main characters are caught between opposite impulses**, how they are attracted by an idea of orderly and reasonable behaviour yet often find themselves acting illogically and irrationally. The broad pattern of the plot reproduces itself in the experiences and personalities of the major characters, so that there is a constant tension both in the play as a whole and in the central characters between orderly and disorderly behaviour. It can also be shown that the minor characters play an important dramatic function in this pattern, as they often serve to comment on or draw attention to the gap between how things ought to be in an orderly world and the disorderly state of affairs that prevails in the play.

The same tension is reflected in the language of a play (the element Aristotle refers to as diction), where **images of order are constantly set against images of disorder**, and in the thought of a play, which we more commonly refer to as a play's themes. All manner of themes can be identified in a Shakespeare play, but they can all be said to come under the more general heading of a tension between order and disorder. In addition, what we see on the stage, the spectacle, will reflect the same tension, for the action will either be violent or chaotic, or more disciplined and organised. In the chapters that follow we discuss these elements of drama as and when they seem appropriate for discussion, mixing them in with our broader comments on the plot, but we also make the point that a critical response can concentrate on one element if you want to construct a more rigorous scrutiny of one aspect of a play.

This discussion of how to construct a critical response is obviously very abstract, but the method should become easy to understand in the following chapters as we discuss specific plays. We do hope, though, that our main point has come across, which is that a few simple controlling ideas – primarily