

# **MASTERING ENGLISH LITERATURE**

**RICHARD GILL**

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RICHARD GILL

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MACMILLAN

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# PREFACE

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I hope that this book will help you to enjoy English literature and be successful in public examinations. That is to say, I hope that reading it will help you think about the pleasures and values you find in English literature, and also that you will learn to write about poems, novels and plays in an appropriate way. Because all books are different from each other, studying English literature can never be a matter of learning a method which can be applied to every poem, novel or play. Each book, because it is different from any other, needs to be read, enjoyed, thought and written about in its own particular way. Nevertheless, an introductory book like this can help you in three ways: it can give you some questions to ask, it can provide you with examples, and it can offer hints about writing.

It is very difficult to study anything unless you know what you are looking for. By 'looking for' I mean finding what is important in the thing you are studying. The question is the best way of finding that. Therefore, in the chapters that follow, you will be provided with a number of questions that you can ask about English literature. The questions given are not the only ones that can be asked (this book is only an introduction) and, of course, some are not going to apply to the books you are studying. One of the things you learn during study is whether or not it is wise to ask a particular question. The fact remains, however, that the way into most books is through a question. My aim is to give you the basic ones. Your aim must be to master their use.

It is always much easier to understand a point about literature if you are given an example. In the following chapters you will find general discussion about how to read and think, but wherever possible I have provided examples. These examples are drawn from the books that are set at 'O' level, 'A' level, and other public examinations. Although some of them will be unknown to you, I hope that somewhere in the book you will find an example taken from one of the books you are studying. In addition to the examples I discuss, there are, where appropriate, exercises at the end of sections. These are to help you practise writing about books.

When you write about books, you will discover that you need to master a set of terms that describe certain literary effects. In addition, you will find that you need to master a wider vocabulary which deals with the thoughts, experiences and feelings with which literature is concerned. To help you do this I have included hints on how to write about poems,

## PREFACE

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novels and plays. I have also explained some terms in the chapters and have provided a glossary which discusses the meanings of those terms. Some of the terms in the glossary are explained elsewhere in the book, whilst others are not. In some cases I have also tried to give some hints and warnings about how to use the terms. The glossary, therefore, is a guide as well as a source of explanation.

Once you have mastered the right questions, learned from the examples and exercises, and picked up some hints about how to write, you still have to face the examination. The last chapter aims to help you do this. It gives you advice about re-reading, interpretation, judging the effectiveness of literature, the kind of questions you face, and how to organise yourself in the examination room. I hope that the prospect of the examination will not dull the pleasure of the books you study. Quite often a book is enjoyed and valued more because you have looked at it in great detail. I hope this will be your experience, too.

RICHARD GILL

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# **PART I**

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## **STUDYING POETRY**

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# READING, THINKING

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# AND WRITING

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## 1.1 WHERE YOU START: THE POEM ON THE PAGE

When you open a book of poetry, you may be struck by the thought that poems are odd things. Before you will be words organised into fixed lines. In some poems these lines will be further organised into regular units called stanzas. Moreover, some of the lines will be rhythmical, and words at the end of the lines might rhyme. People don't usually speak or write like that. Now, it is important to understand that this is not a silly reaction. Poetry is not like ordinary speech or writing, it is a specially made object in words. The word 'poetry', in fact, comes from a Greek verb which means to make.

When you take an examination in English Literature, you will probably study poetry. This means that you will have to learn to read, think, and write about it. Because poetry is not just like ordinary speech, you will have to learn to think and write about it in a special way. It would be wrong to write about it as if it were a letter to a friend, because you would be ignoring the special way in which it is made. On the other hand, poems are written by people for people, so you must not ignore the fact that it is a form of communication.

Each poem is different from every other poem. This point might seem too obvious to mention, but there is an important lesson to be learnt from it: because every poem is different, no two poems can be thought and written about in *exactly* the same way. Even if you are studying a number of poems by one author, each poem will make its own points in its own particular way. It would be wrong, therefore, to suggest that there can be a fixed method of studying a poem. What suits one poem will not suit another.

But this does not mean that no advice can be given. What this chapter sets out to do is introduce you to a way of reading and thinking about poetry that is broad enough to apply to every poem you read. It is not a fixed method but a general approach. Once you have mastered this