

**AN
INTRODUCTION
TO
THE STUDY OF
LANGUAGE
AND
LITERATURE**

A.C.HOOPER

An Introduction to the Study of Language and Literature

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FOREWORD

THROUGHOUT the English-speaking world today there are complaints of the low standard of English. Probably there always have been such complaints, and it is even possible that the standard today is no lower than it was in comparable groups some twenty-five, fifty, or more years ago. But that does not mean there are no grounds for complaint.

Some of those who complain are sometimes even teachers themselves, though of other subjects. When we remember that the child has only some half-dozen classes in English per week, i.e. he is subject to the influence of the English used outside his English class to a far greater extent than he is inside it, then teachers of other subjects who allow pupils to get away with careless and sloppy expression undermine the work of the English teacher and help to create in the pupils the impression that, since the English teacher is in some schools—at least in South Africa—the only one who demands clarity and accuracy of expression, he is being unreasonably fussy. Such a situation also leads pupils to believe that when they are called upon to write ‘compositions’, a special kind of language is required, and it leads some, and often the best, pupils to expression that is artificial, stilted, and pretentious. If the general standard of English is to be raised, amongst the first things needed are the co-operation and support of all teachers of other subjects.

Complaints come, however, from all sections of the community, from businessmen to the universities, though such complaints must necessarily be about different groups of pupils. But since universities presumably receive some of the best material from the schools, and since universities are

among the complainants, what they find is true of their material is probably true of most pupils nowadays. After some ten years or more of schooling they are perhaps able to pick out a main clause, a noun clause, an adjectival clause, or an adverbial clause, but unable to write English simply and clearly and correctly; they are perhaps able to pick out a metaphor or an example of personification but unable to read and understand the significance of a passage in which they occur, or to say what the effect of the metaphor or personification is; they are perhaps able to spell *harass* and *embarrass* or to give the collective noun for a group of lions or geese or porpoises, and produce such information as may win prizes in a quiz programme, but are unable to think for themselves; they may leave school having been taught quite unnecessarily to avoid ending sentences with prepositions, but unable to distinguish between questions of fact and questions of opinion, or to distinguish between good and bad writing, in fact preferring cheap novels, the misnamed comic strips, and the Cinderella stories and crude serials of commercial radio to their prescribed books.

One must conclude that a system that produces such results cannot be a system that gives the best education for citizenship. And one must conclude that in the teaching and the examining in schools the emphasis is put on the wrong things.

It is clear enough by now that there is no significant correlation between the ability to do grammatical exercises and the ability to write and read well. People learnt, spoke, and wrote English well before it was ever taught in grammar lessons. I am not arguing that the teaching of grammar is unnecessary; I believe it should be taught, but in relation to problems of meaning and interpretation, as a help in avoiding ambiguity, and as a form of social protection: for example, there is a prejudice against *ain't*, and the child must be warned.

I agree with the senior inspector in South Africa who said that pupils can learn such grammatical rules as are necessary, and can get a sense of the structure of the language, by the time they have finished standard seven.¹ I also agree with him when he said that the use of books of old-fashioned exercises keeps our children from a course of reading. The time usually given in at least the last two years at school to old-fashioned exercises in grammar, vocabulary, and idiom would be better given to encouraging pupils to read extensively, and to teaching them to read intensively. They should be led to read widely in the best fields only, and shown also how to read carefully, with close attention to the words of a passage.

This book, based on a series of articles written for *Ons Eie Boek* in 1952 and 1953, is intended to help pupils to do the second. It is, of course, impossible in class time to examine carefully the meaning of words in their context all through a novel; but it is essential to do so in shorter poems and in key passages in novels and plays.

Examinations in literature as well as language (and indeed in other subjects) too often encourage mere memory work. Examinations in literature that ask only for facts create a false impression of literature. Ask school-leaving pupils what a relatively straightforward poem such as Rex Warner's 'Mallard' is about, and almost all will say, 'It's about four mallard that fly up . . . and they do this . . . and they do that . . .', i.e., all they can do is 'tell the story'. And they are apparently quite unable to see that the poem is an expression of admiration for the birds' machine-like precision and perfect co-operation, their efficiency and power, perfection of design, beauty of pattern and movement, and economy of effort. Or ask what a poem like Milton's sonnet 'On His Blindness' is about, and almost all will say 'He says . . .' and proceed to give what must inevitably be an inadequate

¹ I.e. aged 14 or 15

paraphrase. And they are apparently quite unable to see that the poem is not about blindness, but about Milton's reaction to it: that it is a dramatic expression, in direct speech and the present tense, of his conflict which is worked out in all its immediacy before the reader, an expression of his despair, feeling of injustice, bitterness and rebelliousness, all of which are courageously faced and a solution of his problem found—in patience, self-restraint, and a quiet, humble but dignified resignation.

Examinations and exercises which encourage mere memory work inhibit thought, and thus defeat one of the main purposes of education: to encourage pupils to think for themselves. We need to ask ourselves more often: do I ask my pupils to think, or do I expect them merely to absorb facts?

This book is intended to encourage people to think, and to think specifically about language and literature. The hints given in chapters 2 to 7 are meant to be only starting-points, points of approach, and are not to be applied mechanically or insisted on rigidly. They are meant to be aids, they are means to an end, and are not important in themselves any more than grammar is. But if pupils have some idea of what else to look for when they read, they will not stick at the story level.

Teachers are kept far too busy, I know, to be able to give much time to the invention of exercises. I have therefore included a very large number so that teachers will have enough for more than one year without repeating them. There is, therefore, no suggestion that it is necessary to work through all the exercises: each teacher can select and use as many as he finds necessary in practice to illustrate a point. Many of those labelled 'Preliminary Exercises' may in fact be dealt with quickly as oral work.

Teachers of English are traditionally referred to as lan-

guage teachers. They should be regarded as teachers of language *and literature*.

In these days of moon-rockets there are many people who ask: why waste time on literature? Will it help us to conquer outer space, will it help us to produce more gold, better fruit or wool? Behind all such questions there is a mistaken idea about the purpose of education and about standards of value. The primary purpose of education is not utilitarian. The main function of education is not to give training for a job, but to produce balanced citizens, not human sponges; to make better and wiser and happier citizens, not automatons with press-button reactions. The greatest writers are continually concerned with these universal problems. Therefore let pupils read extensively as well as intensively. For the reading of great literature is valuable in itself and needs no apology or explanation that it is at the same time educational. The aim of literature is to delight, as many critics have said. The poet is a 'maker', a creator, and the sensitive and intelligent reader recreates in his imagination the experience of the writer—poet, novelist, or playwright—and has the delight of discovery, of the discovery of a universal truth brought home through concrete example and personal experience instead of in a general and abstract way; or the discovery of the inevitable rightness of the judgment of the writer, so that the experience of reading becomes a personal illumination.

All this has been said before and often; but in these days when the prestige of the sciences tends to reinforce the materialistic standards of a business world, it needs to be said again and often.

We need, therefore, to ask ourselves periodically another awkward question: for how many of our pupils is the reading of literature a delight or an illumination? And if it is not, why isn't it?

I am very much aware that in the following pages I am greatly indebted to many who have written on the subjects of language and literature before. The debt of which I am most conscious is to Professor J. Y. T. Greig (under whom I had the privilege of working at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, from 1935 to 1944) and to his book *Language at Work*, University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1943.

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1960

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I

INTRODUCTORY

IF a dozen people were asked to write a description of, say, the classroom in an old building in which they were sitting, no two accounts would be the same. Why?

Some would probably write something like this: 'The room is about 20 feet by 16, and as I sit facing the desk at the front, there is a door on my right and there are two large windows on my left.' (A)

But some would say something of this sort: 'The room is small, gloomy, depressing, and uncomfortable. The desks are hard, and in winter the door barely manages to keep out the draught, and the windows barely manage to let in enough light.' (B)

Still others would produce something along these lines: 'The desk at which I am sitting is covered with the initials of former students, and looks as if it was part of the original equipment of the building. The electrical fittings are of a kind no longer used, and were obviously installed many years ago. The wall above one of the windows is stained: at some time the roof must have leaked.' (C)

What is the difference between these three kinds of 'description'? The writer of (A) makes factual statements of a kind that any observer might make, and merely records what he observes through his senses.

All our experience of the world outside ourselves comes to us through our senses; and what we perceive through our senses produces in us various feelings and emotions, opinions

and attitudes. The writer of (B) records his 'impression' of the room, the way the facts perceived through his senses made him feel, and made him judge them (for example, 'small, gloomy, depressing, and uncomfortable').

The senses of the writer of (C) were also at work; but when he says 'looks as if', 'obviously', and the roof 'must have' leaked, he is deducing something from what he observed, that is, he is drawing inferences from the facts.

The three descriptions thus include facts, judgments or opinions, and inferences. Some descriptions might remain factual throughout if the writers made a special effort to exclude opinions and inferences. Most tend to be a mixture of the three.

It should now begin to be clear why no two descriptions are ever the same. Even factual accounts will differ, for no two people perceive the same things—because no two people can sit in the same seat at the same time and have the same viewpoint, no two see with the same eyes, hear with the same ears, taste with the same tongue, smell with the same nose, touch with the same hands, or move with the same muscles, and no two interpret what they perceive with the same brain. And since no one can say all about anything, everyone has to select, has to decide for himself what seems to *him* most significant, has to decide what to put in and what to leave out.

The quality of a piece of writing, then, depends upon the quality of the observer, on his powers of observation, on his sensitiveness, and on the intelligence that interprets and draws inferences from what he perceives through his senses.

On occasions it may be very important to be able to recognize how much of any account is fact, opinion, or inference. On the other hand, it does not follow that any one of the three kinds of description is always better or worse than the

others. Which is better or worse is determined by the circumstances, which are to be considered in the next chapter.

EXERCISES

Which of the following are statements of fact, which judgment or opinion, and which inference?

1. (a) John is six feet tall and weighs 240 lb.
(b) John is big.
(c) John must be awfully strong.
2. (a) The Smiths' car is parked outside the vet's.
(b) The Smiths' dog must be ill.
3. (a) The writer of this book cannot know very much about music or real life.
(b) This book is very unrealistic.
(c) This book is about a poor country girl who becomes a great singer.
4. This film, which is one of the best I have seen this week, tells the story of a lad who runs away and joins a circus. The scenes of the circus performances are wonderful, and will be appreciated by all who have ever seen one.
5. They have a lovely house, but I think they're getting into financial difficulties: yesterday they sold their car.
6. (a) There was a good woman who came from near Bath,
But she was rather deaf, and that was a pity.

CHAUCER: Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*

(b) We read of St Germain of Auxerre that, when he had left Rome, on departing from Milan, he asked one of his deacons if he had any silver, and he answered that he had only three pence, for St Germain had given it all to the poor. Then he told him to give the three pence to the poor, for God had enough goods wherewith to feed them for that day. The deacon with great grief and great reluctance gave two pence, and withheld the third. The servitor of a rich knight brought him on

his lord's behalf two hundred pence. Then he called his deacon, and told him he had deprived the poor of one penny, and if he had given the third penny to the poor, the knight would have sent him three hundred pence.

MICHEL OF NORTHGATE: *The Prick of Conscience*, 1340