

POETRY AND PROSE APPRECIATION FOR OVERSEAS STUDENTS



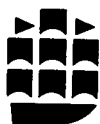
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L. G. Alexander

Longman

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A NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Literary Appreciation and the Student

No subject can be more bewildering to the advanced learner of English than 'Literary Appreciation'. Even when the student is writing in his mother-tongue and reading literature by authors whose work may be familiar to him, appreciation is often a difficult task. When the student is faced with literature in a foreign language the problem becomes all the more acute. He is in command of a relatively limited vocabulary and yet is required to comment intelligently on works which may tax his powers of comprehension to the utmost. Furthermore, a certain vagueness surrounds the whole subject: the student frequently does not know what to say about a piece of writing he has read. He may succeed in enjoying and understanding a poem or a prose-passage, but the necessity to explain *why* he has enjoyed it is usually far beyond his powers.

This book may be found to supply the answer to precisely this sort of problem since it sets out to provide the student with a clear, well-defined method for appreciating poetry and prose. If the student is trained along the lines suggested in this book he should be better equipped to get the most out of what he reads and should have little difficulty in writing in an interesting way about pieces he has enjoyed.

How to use this book

Poetry and Prose Appreciation should be used over a period of two years with adult students or with senior pupils in secondary schools preparing for the English literature paper

of the Cambridge Proficiency in English examination or for G.C.E. 'O' level. Examinations apart, the book may be found useful as an introduction to the appreciation of literature with any class of more advanced students who need to be given the opportunity to read original texts. When this is the case, however, the book should never be used as a short-cut to literature or as a substitute, but as an *aid to reading*, a stepping-stone to more complete works.

The inclusion of the word *Appreciation* as distinct from *Criticism* in the title of this book has been deliberate. Teachers sometimes give their students the impression that they are in a position to 'criticize' fine creative writing in the belief that this makes appreciation 'exciting'. For a beginner, no approach could be more misleading, for in this way the student is led to assume that in order to be original he must find 'something wrong' with everything he reads. It is hardly necessary to point out that a student must learn to *appreciate* long before he can *criticize*. Only then will we be saved the embarrassment of being informed by our students that, say, a sonnet by Shakespeare is 'quite a nice poem'.

The Enjoyment of Literature

The key to true appreciation is, of course, enjoyment and this depends largely on the teacher's own attitude to literature in general. It is just as easy to be carried away by your own enthusiasm and to race through dozens of pieces (leaving the class far behind you) as it is to work too slowly and too seriously, treating every passage as a potential examination text. This book is not meant to be a handy anthology for the over-enthusiastic teacher, but neither is it intended to be a dry-as-dust textbook. It may not prove necessary for the teacher to plod solidly through every exercise provided and he may easily adapt the book to suit

the needs of his class, always bearing in mind that enjoyment is the first step to understanding and appreciating. A class will often readily respond to material which, at first glance, seems unpromising. A good example of this occurs in Browning's 'Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister'. The poem looks long and formidable and is written in a difficult style. But it is surprising how much enjoyment a lively reading of it will afford a class even if they have only a general idea of what it is about. Good reading is important and should not be considered as an irksome duty. Apart from reading aloud occasionally, the teacher may supply the class with a little background information about the author and his work where possible. This gives added interest to the lesson and helps the class to become receptive so that appreciation becomes a pleasure.

The Stages of Learning

Much the same pattern is followed in both parts of the book. In the first instance, the student is taught how to read and understand. In the case of poetry this is often very difficult and the teacher should do all he can to discourage his pupils from reading carelessly and arriving at hasty, ill-informed conclusions. Once the student has learnt to make sense out of what he is reading, he is, as it were, taken into the author's workshop and is taught how to recognize some of the main techniques that writers employ. Only when he has fully grasped how a writer works is he in a position to write appreciation on his own. A simple key summing up all that has been learned precedes each selection of pieces.

Vocabulary Lists

The vocabulary lists appended to each poem or prose-passage are intended to help the student who is working on

his own. In some instances these lists may be found to be inadequate since at this stage there is no real way of gauging difficulty. By and large, however, explanations have been given for archaic expressions, especially difficult words, phrases or idioms, and in places where the syntax is distorted. A great many of these words and phrases need not be added to the student's active vocabulary. The differentiation between essential and inessential words has been left entirely to the teacher's discretion.

PART I POETRY

No attempt has been made to confine the selection to any particular period or to poems which the student will never have seen before. It is no accident that some of the best-known poems in the English language have been included. While learning to appreciate poetry, the student will also have before him a sample of the work of some of the greatest poets who have written in the English language.

Teachers may find it useful to conduct the simple test suggested on page 3 as a way of introducing students to poetry appreciation. The test consists in allowing students to express in writing and anonymously their own interpretation of a poem and then having their views read back to them by the teacher. This test is of value as it enables students to understand immediately that it is very easy to misread a poem completely. At the same time the student may perceive that a poem sometimes communicates at various levels and no single meaning can be attached to it. The poem by Blake which has been chosen is highly suitable for this purpose. It is short, relatively easy to read and has both a simple and a complex meaning. Occasionally the teacher may devote a lesson to conducting similar tests with other poems in the book as students often find it enjoyable to work in this way.

PART II PROSE

Although, naturally enough for a student, prose is easier to understand than poetry, it is far more difficult to appreciate because the means a writer uses are less obvious. Furthermore, no prose-extract can ever be as complete and self-contained as a poem. For this reason it has been found necessary to alter the general arrangement of Part II slightly without, however, changing the basic pattern which is followed in the poetry section. Chapter I of Part II is devoted to distinguishing types of prose because it is absolutely essential for students to understand how Narrative and Description differ from Argument. Only when they have done so will they be able to appreciate what they are reading. Whereas in the poetry section all four chapters follow on logically from each other so that it is necessary to work through the first three chapters before coming on to appreciation, in the prose section each chapter is treated as a complete unit. Thus it is possible for the teacher to begin with any chapter he wishes after he has completed the first one. It is inadvisable, however, to begin with the last chapter ('Argument') as this is likely to be found difficult. Also, the method for appreciation differs in many important respects from that learned in all the other sections of the book.

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Part I

POETRY

I

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

READING A POEM

You may have found from your reading of poetry in your own language that you can often enjoy a poem without fully understanding its meaning. It is possible to pay more attention to the *way* a poet says something rather than to *what* he actually has to say. Enjoyment, however, must not be confused with appreciation. It is one thing to gain pleasure from a poem and quite another to be able to say why you liked it. Before you can say why you like a poem, it is first necessary to understand its meaning well. This is not always easy, as a simple experiment in class will show.

Read the poem below as carefully as you can and then write briefly on a piece of paper what you think it means. When you have finished, hand the paper to your teacher. The teacher will then read aloud the answers that have been given by every member of the class. Later, you may discuss the meaning of the poem.

O rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

Vocabulary

howling: crying out as if in pain.

crimson: deep red.

The answers you heard may have helped you to understand how a single poem may have different meanings for different people. Some of the answers given may have been quite wrong. But you must have noticed that none of the 'right' answers were exactly the same.

This does not mean, of course, that all poems can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways. Quite often a poem may have a meaning which is simple and obvious: it may just tell a story or describe a scene. A piece of writing need not always have a 'deep' meaning simply because it happens to be a poem.

To understand a poem you must read it carefully and should observe three important rules:

1. Do not read lazily so that you misread the poem altogether.
2. Always look for a simple explanation and do not be afraid to express it.
3. As far as you can, avoid putting your own ideas and feelings into the poem. Examine closely what the poet has actually written.

Let us see how these rules apply to the following poem:

[1] *Break, Break, Break*

Break, break, break,
On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.

O well for the fisherman's boy,
That he shouts with his sister at play!
O well for the sailor lad,
That he sings in his boat on the bay!

5

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;
But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!

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