

Literary Appreciation

A practical guide to
the understanding and enjoyment
of literature in English

H.L.B. Moody

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of literature in English*

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Longman

LONGMAN GROUP LTD

London

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First published 1968

Sixth impression 1978

ISBN 0 582 60838 4

**Printed in Great Britain by
Lowe & Brydone Printers Limited, Thetford**

Acknowledgements

I must first attribute the genesis of this book to Mallam Mohammed Awwal Ibrahim, whose poem *The Problem of Understanding Poetry*, written when he was a first-year student, originally gave me the idea of writing it. I am grateful for his permission to reprint it in this book (Appendix 1) although he himself has long ago, I believe, overcome the difficulties which it records.

I also wish to acknowledge encouragement and advice in the planning of the book given by Mr David Mallick, English Master at St Thomas' Secondary School, Kano; and, especially, by Mr F. O. Oridota, Senior English Master at Abeokuta Grammar School, Abeokuta, Western Nigeria – who would in fact have been a co-author had he not been whisked off for a year's British Council course in Edinburgh at a critical stage. I am grateful also to Mr Neil Bray, English Language Officer of the British Council, Kano, and to my publishers, for their discerning interest in this modest educational aid; and, last but not least, to Mr Ade Ojo, secretary of the English Department, Abdullahi Bayero College, Kano, for his devoted assistance as typist.

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Foreword

This book has been planned for use by students taking courses in higher education in parts of the world where English is a Second Language.

It is extremely cumbersome continually to be using an expression such as 'the student who uses English as a Second Language', and this is abbreviated throughout to 'the student'.

If any students whose first language is English also find the book useful, we shall not be dismayed: indeed, this will seem to bring closer together the world-wide community of English-speaking peoples.

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Introduction

TWO AIMS

This book has both a specific aim, and a more general aim. It has been produced, in the first place, to help students who are candidates in English for various Advanced Level or Higher Certificate Examinations (as, for example, that of the West African Examinations Council – or, as a part of the compulsory General Paper). It is even more specifically intended to help with the paper which calls for the appreciation of ‘unseen’ passages of verse and prose. But we do not in the least think of this as a mere ‘cram’ book, for its more general aim is to develop the art of literary appreciation, as the title indicates, and this cannot be done by any short-lived tricks (if indeed such things are ever really useful for examination candidates) but only by developing the powers of understanding, imagination and reflection, which is certainly part of any truly educational process. We do not altogether agree with the thesis of a book which has been recently published in England called *English versus Examinations* which implies that examinations in English are always hostile to the kinds of education which teachers of English aim at. If the teaching of English is concerned with the development of students’ capacities of observation, memory, thought and feeling, examinations, and *preparation* for examinations, sensibly considered, can only call forth the best, most relevant response from students.

BACKGROUND

It is important for every student to have some background knowledge of the reasons for the inclusion of the ‘appreciation’ paper, and this will be found in the following pages, together with the outline of a method of procedure when dealing with unseen passages. No great originality is claimed for the theoretical part of this book, though an effort has been made to ensure that the essentials of this matter are clearly and helpfully set out. We do hope, however, that

the practical applications of this book will be found useful, and give confidence in a field where at present much bewilderment prevails. In order to learn any technique, the student needs not only to learn the theory of that activity, but to practise it himself. Moreover, if he is to acquire any real proficiency in that technique, he must begin to practise it, as an apprentice, under the guidance of an expert, who will guide him through the early stages until he is able to take over for himself. Hence the three parts of this book:

EXPOSITION;

DEMONSTRATION;

PRACTICE.

Let us first consider the problem of 'literary appreciation' in its broadest aspects. Any intelligent student will wish to know how every one of his tasks fits into the general scheme of knowledge and education, and into each particular subject in the curriculum.

WHAT IS LITERATURE?

Literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspect of our human experience. It is usually set down in printed characters for us to read, though some forms of it are performed on certain social occasions. There are a number of different branches such as Drama, Poetry, the Novel, the Short Story; all these are works of the imagination or the capacity for invention. The primary aim of literature is to give pleasure, to entertain those who voluntarily attend to it. There are, of course, many different ways of giving pleasure or entertainment, ranging from the most trivial and sensational to the most philosophical and profound. It is important to notice that the writer of literature is not tied to fact in quite the same way as the historian, the economist or the scientist, whose studies are absolutely based on what has actually happened, or on what actually does happen, in the world of reality.

WHY IS LITERATURE IMPORTANT?

We soon discover, however, that the literature which entertains us best does not keep us for long in the other-world of fantasy or unreality. The greatest pleasure and satisfaction to be found in

literature occurs where (as it so often does) it brings us back to the realities of human situations, problems, feelings and relationships. The writers of literature, being less tied to fact than the historian or the scientist, have more scope to comment on the facts, to arrange them in unusual ways, and to speculate not only what *is*, but on what *ought to be*, or what *might be* (for better or worse). Writers are sometimes, therefore, people with visionary or prophetic insights into human life: Shelley wrote that poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. In fact, with only a moderate knowledge of world history, we can easily acknowledge the vital part played in human affairs by writers. And all of us who read works of literature will find our knowledge of human affairs broadened and deepened, whether in the individual, the social, the racial or the international sphere; we shall understand the possibilities of human life, both for good and evil; we shall understand how we came to live at a particular time and place, with all its pleasures and vexations and problems; we shall understand the ways onwards which are open to us, and we shall perhaps be able to make right rather than wrong choices.

ITS VALUE IN EDUCATION

There is another value of an important kind which arises during the course of our education. Let us not underestimate the element of pleasure and enjoyment which comes from the reading of literature; this is surely in itself one of the great benefits which comes from being an educated person. But, over and above that, let us recognize that certain other fundamental skills and capacities are developed through the reading of literature, which are important to us all as educated people, not only in our private pleasures or our personal philosophies, but in the day-to-day exercise of the responsibilities which come to us in the modern world as a result of the educational qualifications we obtain. These skills include the capacities for discrimination, judgement and decision.

DISCRIMINATION

We have already said that the first motive for the reading of literature is pleasure or entertainment. True enough, but this is not the

whole situation. Sooner or later, we begin to realize that we enjoy some things more than others, and that some of our reading experiences seem positively distasteful while others become more and more deeply absorbing. One way of explaining this would be to say that we are beginning to develop a taste for some things rather than for others. But this does not really go deep enough. What in fact is happening is that we are beginning to discriminate, to appreciate and feel the difference between what is really important, really first class, and what is trivial or easily dispensable. Human life is short, and human affairs are always moving on in ever increasing complexity: obviously the more surely we can give our attention to the important things rather than the trivial ones, the more we shall benefit, both in ourselves individually and in the contributions we shall be able to make to the world at large.

JUDGEMENT

As we continue to gain experience in discrimination, to compare our discrimination with other people's, particularly more experienced people; as we reflect upon our discriminations and discover on what factors they are based, we come towards a state of mind in which we feel a capacity for judgement; that is, for delivering an opinion about the rights and wrongs of a situation or a problem, which we find other people accept and agree to, which is not subsequently overturned, and which forms the best basis for many kinds of practical action. It is, indeed, quite realistic to suggest that the qualities developed in the thoughtful study of literature are of the greatest use in later years, for example to the employer who has to decide on the best applicant from amongst a number who have sent in written applications; to the publisher, who has to choose from amongst numerous manuscripts he receives those that are most worth publishing; and to the Minister, who has to weigh up the various courses of action which are recommended to him by his supporters, his leaders, possibly even by his opponents, and decide upon the best course of policy in the field of his particular responsibility.

THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

The previous paragraph may seem, to the student at the beginning of his Sixth Form course, to be looking impossibly far ahead into the future. We do not think so, however, and we are sure that the more realistically a student sets about his tasks in the Sixth Form, the better he will do them, the more he will enjoy them, the more he will see their significance, and the more effective a person he will become. We are not, in fact, claiming anything very new or revolutionary. In most of the great civilizations of the world, the training of the key members of the community has to a considerable extent been carried out through the medium of literary study, sometimes of the indigenous culture, sometimes (as in Renaissance Europe) that of another culture (i.e. the Greek and Roman Classics). There is no doubt, however, that in the latter part of the twentieth century, students of the literature written in the English language (which includes the literature of America and the Commonwealth) have an amply adequate body of material upon which a complete intellectual training can be based (especially if, in the later stages, an attempt is made to follow up some of the links which exist between literature in English and the literature of other cultures, European, African or Asian).

No educator who knows his way about the world of education would claim that the study of English literature is the *only* way by which we can train educated and effective members of the community. Undoubtedly all the other academic subjects or 'disciplines' can, if rightly taught and rightly studied, produce admirable results. Nevertheless, the study and appreciation of English literature offers special possibilities in a particularly convenient and concentrated way, and this brings us back to the specific aim of this book. We should like to give a brief account of the origin of, and the reasons behind, the kind of examination paper usually described as 'Passages of Verse and Prose for Appreciation'.

PRACTICAL CRITICISM

About thirty-five years ago, the field of English literary studies received an important new impetus. Until that time, training in literature had been very much based on what we should call 'comprehension' work, memory, exact translation and paraphrase, a

a certain amount of analysis of character and motive, a certain amount of rather clumsy literary theorizing,¹ a certain amount of exchanging of literary opinions.² In 1929 there was published Dr. I. A. Richards' book *Practical Criticism*, which reported on some experiments he had carried out, and gave certain suggestions for teaching techniques, which have had a pronounced effect on English studies throughout the world. Dr Richards' 'experiments' have now developed into standard practice. He used to prepare anonymous extracts of poetry or poems, which he called protocols, and distribute them to his students who, without any hints or guidance from outside sources, had to digest, 'appreciate', and give their opinions on the 'protocols' week by week. After he had received the students' written opinions, he was able to analyze and compare them and make suggestions about his students' habits of reading and reasoning, and the way that these could be improved. Richards realized that, up to that time, an enormous part was played in literary studies by the generally accepted reputation of a writer, and that even 'those ... who have worthily occupied Chairs of Poetry (i.e. Professors) and taken their part in handing on the torch of tradition retrimmed, would probably admit in their secret souls that they have not read many poems with the care and attention that these anonymous items invite'.³ By throwing his students entirely upon their own resources, he was aiming to bring out all their powers of observation, concentration, discrimination and judgement. He did not suggest that this was an easy matter, indeed the reverse: but the rewards were great.

The critical reading of poetry is an arduous discipline; few exercises reveal to us more clearly the limitations under which, from moment to moment, we suffer. But, equally, the immense extension of our capacities that follows a

¹ One reads now, with a certain amazement such formulations as 'Poetry is a spirit' (Bradley); or 'Poetry is a continuous substance or energy whose progress is immortal' (Mackail).

² 'Give the plot of one or two of Crabbe's stories with any criticisms that may occur to you,' reads a question on an Honours Degree Examination in London in 1905.

³ *Practical Criticism*, p. 316.

summoning of our resources is made plain. The lesson of all criticism is that we have nothing to rely upon in making our choices but ourselves.

These are the concluding words of his book, a book which should certainly be read by any teachers and students who are at all concerned with this study.

From the experiments which formed the basis of *Practical Criticism* the practice has gradually spread of asking students of English whether University Honours students, Sixth Formers, or even students at earlier stages in the educational pyramid, to pit themselves unaided against anonymous passages of verse and prose. This practice has been introduced into the system of examinations, but it has also been a feature of regular training. In Richards' book, it will be noted, his experiments were all centred on passages of poetry. Nowadays, the practice is usually extended to include passages of prose; and this seems entirely reasonable, for, as Wordsworth once said, 'There neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose.'

CRITERIA

We need to fill in the picture a little more before we can begin consideration of practical procedures. If we are to undertake a course involving discrimination and judgement, it is most helpful if we have some kind of criteria, or general principles, to guide us. And these are available. The theory used almost universally was formulated by I. A. Richards also, in his companion volume, *The Principles of Literary Criticism*. Until he wrote that book there was, as he put it, a 'chaos of critical theory'. He suggested that literature, as well as the other arts, can best be thought of as a process of *communication*, between the writer or the artist and his public, and this theory of communication has everywhere been found useful by writers and critics.

COMMUNICATION

With this idea at the back of our minds, we are in a position to judge any piece of writing, great or small. The test we apply is a double one:

- 1) Do we receive the impression that the particular poem or piece of prose effectively communicates what it sets out to do?