

# **THE ANATOMY OF LITERARY STUDIES**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY  
OF ENGLISH LITERATURE**

**MARJORIE BOULTON**

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study of English Literature

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## PREFACE

Like Roger Ascham in his *Scholemaster*, ‘in this litle booke I purpose to teach a yong scholer to go, not to daunce: to speake, not to sing . . . and after in good order and dew tyme to be brought forth to the singing and dauncing schole’; I have tried to write a simple, elementary and, I hope, sympathetically companionable guidebook for the student who is wondering whether to apply for a university course, or some other tertiary course, in English Language and Literature; or has been accepted for one; or has embarked on one. To some, it will all seem obvious; but I believe there are many others for whom it may fulfil a need. I hope I may help some students to achieve higher standards, and more satisfaction, in their studies; the two aims are not contradictory, but complementary.

This seems the place to mention two trifles. Whenever I refer to a hypothetical student as *he*, I refer to the species, not the sex; *he or she*, or such contrived suggestions as *besb* or *bse*, over and over again, would be irritating; but I must make it clear that the implied *sbes* are exactly as important as the explicit *bes*. Second, to avoid any appearance of unseemly complacency in my commendations of university teachers, let me add that I am not myself one, only grateful to many.

Finally, I must here express my specific gratitude to several scholars who have given me help in relation to this book: to Andrew Harvey, Daphne Hereward, Vincent Knowles, Sally Purcell, Humphrey and Julie Tonkin; to Georgina Warrilow and all the ever courteous and patient staff of the

*Preface*

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**M. B.  
Oxford.**

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# I

## WHY STUDY LITERATURE?

There is a great deal of difference between the eager man who wants to read a book, and the tired man who wants a book to read.

G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*<sup>1</sup>

*Ils sont là, hauts de cent coudées,  
Christ en tête, Homère au milieu,  
Tous les combattants des idées,  
Tous les gladiateurs de Dieu.*

Victor Hugo, *Les Mages*<sup>2</sup>

The most incontrovertibly useful function of the printed word is the storage and spread of information, as in a manual of navigation or nursing. A course in 'Literature' deals almost entirely with the more mysterious and ambiguous functions of the printed word: fictive creations of various kinds; attempts to communicate emotions and value judgments; devices of rhetoric, symbolism, imagery, evocation; wit, humour, fantasy, speculation: that vast and varied field which we may define as 'imaginative literature' as opposed to 'information', so long as we remember that we can have neither a perfect definition nor a rigidly exclusive delimitation of either.

It is mostly 'imaginative literature' that makes 'reading' one of the best pastimes known to man. Reading as a form of cheap, quiet entertainment has kept millions of people out of

mischievous and given them millions of hours of largely harmless pleasure: useful effects that may be achieved equally well by television, gardening or stamp collecting. A mere fondness for 'reading', while obviously a basic requisite for taking a degree course in English Literature (or any other adult course, as for instance in a college of education), no more fits anyone for entry to such a course than a good appetite qualifies anyone to embark upon a *Cordon Bleu* course in cookery.

Someone may hugely enjoy reading, yet have no interest whatever in literature as one of the great arts. Such a reader may not necessarily relish nothing above the level of thrillers, detective stories, westerns, 'romantic novels' in the commercial sense, newspapers and magazines. Some novels of acknowledged literary merit may be enjoyed: *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, *Heart of Midlothian*; possibly some Shakespeare – perhaps *Romeo and Juliet*, probably not *Timon of Athens* or *Measure for Measure*; possibly some poetry – *The Highwayman*, *Lays of Ancient Rome*, even *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; hardly Donne or Milton, Dryden or Auden; Wordsworth's rainbow and Tennyson's bugle, but hardly *The Prelude* or the whole of *In Memoriam*.

This innocent reader is soothed or thrilled probably most of all by *stories* – sequences of events with suspense and surprises; then probably by characters with whom he can in some way relate emotionally; by bits of vicarious living and gratifying fantasy; by happy expressions of his own sentiments, or noble, comforting, encouraging thoughts about life; even by ignoble thoughts that he finds comforting. He wants excitement, emotions, amusement, consolation. For him books, whether the shoddiest trash or the most complex productions of subtle art, minister to fairly obvious and perhaps almost universal psychological wants.

There are many far worse ways of passing the time. Some civilizing influences often rub off on the habitual lazy escapist



reader: a stock of miscellaneous information; a little tolerance, a few broader sympathies and maturer insights; an improved articulateness; at least some possibility of conversation going beyond grievances and greeds. We see more by gazing idly through the window than by staring at the wall.

However, a degree course in English cannot be an opportunity for three years of cosy, relaxed, desultory reading in which the reader is almost passive. No one can be happy in any British university course unless he is willing to read a great deal that no one would read purely for relaxation; to study literary techniques and make or discuss critical appraisals; to consider books in relation to their historical contexts; to extend his mind to see books in the perspective of a time-scale covering thirteen centuries and also to concentrate his attention at times on the minutely close examination of single works, single pages, sometimes even single words.

(Personal responses will remain important) to parrot some critic with no attempt to arrive at one's own defensible opinion of a book is insincere as well as dishonest; but personal responses on the level of 'I like that!' or 'This is a bore!', however sincere, will be useless. (Raw initial reactions will often have to be corrected by more knowledge, closer analysis, discussion, even processes of personal maturing.) Mental activity on this level is interesting, probably inexhaustibly so; easy or cosy it is not.

Furthermore, any single-subject honours course in English will require considerable study not only of 'Literature' but of 'Language'. In rather more than half the British universities this includes some Old English, which is more remote from our previous linguistic experience than Latin and has to be learned rapidly, as a foreign language, without the elaborate aids and plentiful jam on the pill normally used in teaching, say, French at school. In at least 75 per cent of British universities Middle English as such is obligatory; not all of it is as immediately rewarding as Chaucer. Some of the alterna-

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tives may be even more demanding; anything, for instance, called 'Linguistics', or 'Stylistics', or 'History of Language', may often prove as unfamiliar and exacting to many students as Old English would have been. So the total programme will at times seem daunting even to someone who passionately wanted to read English.

Therefore, someone who does not in any sense passionately want to read English – though such a passion will usually be patchy and fluctuating, as all our loves are imperfect – is wiser not to apply for such a course. A degree course in English is intended to be just as rigorous, in its way, as a course in mathematics or philosophy: a matter of ratiocination, system, discipline.

In a world in which a majority are underfed, various obscurantisms are enforced by sophisticated techniques of power and multitudes remain debarred from bare literacy, it is an extraordinary privilege to have some years of guided advanced study, with a modicum of comfort and privacy, where free enquiry is taken for granted. Few things can be better for society than a thick layer of people who have enjoyed a training at least aimed at inculcating intellectual honesty, exactness, mature sensibility and some awareness of the multiplicity, elusiveness and importance of truth. But such a training should have a severity to match its luxury.

The boy or girl thinking of reading English should also realize that a degree certificate will not be an oyster-knife for opening the world. Some arts students graduate into unemployment. There is fierce competition for entry to relevant professions felt by many to be alluring: the stage, publishing, broadcasting, journalism, and the entrant is likely to have a long slog before coming within sight of the big part, the signed column or the exciting responsibility. Devoted students prepared to take dons' modest salaries for the happiness of continuing in the studies they love may also be disappointed in the competition. School-teaching can be

corroding misery for precisely those graduates who most truly love literature, an unremitting exposure to the brutalities of immature philistines, unless the love of learning is supplemented by an unsentimental love for even aggressively unwilling learners that not all of us can achieve. Many graduates in English have eventually to do work not much related to their field of study. Paradoxically, this is an additional reason why the course should be rigorous: a tough course demanding versatility, adaptability, perseverance and hard thinking should produce a mind pretty well trained for mastering other reasonably kindred skills; a too cosy course would produce a mushier, less adaptable mind.

Whether a course in English is the best vocational training for the aspiring serious writer is uncertain. We do not yet have massive evidence, since it was not possible to take a degree in English until nearly the end of the nineteenth century; until then most university-trained writers had studied classics. However, writers who graduated in English have already included: Kingsley Amis, W. H. Auden, William Golding, Aldous Huxley, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, C. S. Lewis, Malcolm Lowry, V. S. Naipaul and John Wain; Robert Graves, with a research degree; William Empson and J. B. Priestley with degrees partly in English; so such studies evidently need not frighten the Muse away; and a lifelong dedication to English scholarship did not prevent J. R. R. Tolkien from writing what was not only a most unusual work of imaginative fiction, but has already sold over three million copies.

On the other hand, the writer with no university education whatever need not worry unduly in the company of Blake, the Brontës, Bunyan, Burns, Conrad, Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy, Edwin Muir, Pope, Shaw, Yeats – and Shakespeare. Obviously the close study of literature should teach a young author much about technique and standards. It might over-encourage imitation, but that can be a useful stage

in development. It might inhibit a writer by reminders of how much has already been written, or by the pressure of achievements he cannot hope to equal; but an uninformed complacency about our own inferior work is not an unmixed blessing.

Because there is some element of luxury in English Studies in a world full of crying needs, and because such studies are not as clearly vocational as, say, engineering, the student of English is sometimes challenged to defend his choice. The vulgarly aggressive enquirer merely making dismissive assertions about 'your useless subject' has no more right to a courteous, considered answer than has any other rude oaf who wants a wince, not an answer, such as the one who sneers at someone's sweetheart, home, or religion; though it may do him good to receive an answer as gentle and reasoned as his question was offensive. Yet, in fairness, there is a genuine question that can be asked with decency. Why is the study of literature worth while?

There is no real consensus on this. Different religious or philosophical commitments, different varieties of subjective experience, will inevitably produce varying points of view. Not everyone even takes it for granted, as I do, that the arts are one of the things that make life itself meaningful and worth having, that give the human species its awful and ambiguous uniqueness. Bigots have rejected culture as worldly; barbarians have scorned it; and totalitarians try to cast it in rigid moulds and make projectiles of it.

We may reasonably hope that a course of careful attention to linguistic techniques will tend to counter the corruptions of language that are among our moral corruptions: our own deceptions and self-deceptions; the tricks of politicians, agitators, advertisers, assorted axe-grinders; those slovenly expressions of imprecise thinking that fill our lives with untruths and insincerities when we are not consciously willing any falsehood. We may hope, too, that the content of good

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literature is for the most part a good influence.

Unhappily, we cannot be as confident about the civilizing powers of literature as we could wish. William Joyce, hanged in 1946 as a British traitor after a peculiarly odious career of lying, bullying, gloating broadcasts, and recruiting more excusable traitors from prisoners-of-war under pressure, in the service of the Nazi German government, took first-class honours in English at London University.<sup>3</sup> How anyone, knowing some of the things Joyce must have known to achieve this, could ally himself wilfully with some of the most unmitigated wickedness in history, leaves us wailing with Lear, 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?'<sup>4</sup> We who love literature know the philistines are wrong, but a moral disaster so total warns us not to be smug; and a glance into our own hearts should set off the same warning, though not so clangorously. It is fair to say that Joyce seems to have shown his best self in relation to literary studies: as a teacher he was not only capable, but kind and patient.<sup>5</sup>

Any definition I can offer of the function and value of literature can be only elementary, eclectic and tentative; no more than a basis for discussion, a preliminary sketch-map for anyone who wishes to start exploring.

Literature gives us four Rs.

### I RECREATION

Poetry may have had remote origins partly in magic, prose in annals, or drama in religious ritual; but for centuries recreation has been the most general and obvious function of imaginative literature. It has brought variety, interest, excitement, to drab lives; assisted consolatory fantasies; distracted people from their troubles; made them laugh. A play may give purpose to an evening out, a novel give savour to an

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evening in; we enjoy the experiences, and may later enjoy chatting about them. Shakespeare put so much of a broad, deep and compassionate mind into his plays, that they are virtually inexhaustible; but they were, in the first place, entertainments.

Mere entertainment, relaxation, amusement, are important, not only because pleasure is desirable unless it is an obstacle to something more important, but because most of us, without some unwinding mechanism, would go mad; most of us become at least unreasonable under stress alarmingly soon.

If literature were not in part entertainment, there could be no literary trade. Commercialism may, obviously, lower standards; it may pay to produce volumes of pappy sentimentality or over-seasoned sensationalism; but if there had not been monetary rewards for writers, we should probably not have the works of Shakespeare, Johnson, Dickens, Trollope, Tennyson, Conrad, Hardy, even perhaps Eliot or Auden. It is largely because of the recreational function of literature that books can be widely distributed and authors rewarded.

Recreation is the bait that first attracts us to reading. Professor of Literature D. J. Enright reminds us:<sup>6</sup>

that in the Twenties  
and later our staple diet was *Red Letter*  
And Ethel M. Dell and *Old Moore's Almanac*,

And that if you can escape for a moment  
And a moment's escape is all you can manage,  
No-one has the right to forbid you.

Many readers never go beyond recreation. The student must.

'How true!' is a relishing remark. Much of our enjoyment of literature comes from recognizing, like Pope, 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd . . .'.<sup>7</sup> One reason why we can greatly enjoy *Otello*, although the story is almost unrelievedly painful, is of course the poetry – musical, evocative, rich in images; but we also find a kind of pleasure in recognizing the truth of these fictive representations when we compare them with everyday observation (and newspaper reading): what the dreadful destructiveness of sexual jealousy can do to a man of tenderness, dignity, courage and intelligence; how the most sweet and generous love may fail if it confronts something too far outside its understanding; how plausible and even pleasant a destructive cynic can be when he presents his fake realism as helpful worldly advice to the inexperienced; how the sight of happiness, success and excellence arouses in some people the craving to spoil and poison. Unhappy human relations of the less spectacular kind are nearly as painful, but in *Middlemarch* we enjoy the skilled portrayal of misunderstandings and incompatibilities between Dorothea and Casaubon, Rosamond and Lydgate and others; the awkward conversations are brilliantly authentic and we admire the truth to experience. Loquacious, digressive rambling bores us in real life, but we love Miss Bates in *Emma* precisely because we still meet people who talk just as she does.

We enjoy, too, recognizing the truth of little details:

And icicles, that fret at noon,  
Will eke their icy tails at night  
Beneath the chilly stars and moon.  
John Clare, *February*<sup>8</sup>

The blue way of the canal wound softly between the autumn hedges, on towards the greenness of a small hill. On

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the left was the whole black agitation of colliery and railway and the town which rose on its hill, the church tower topping all. The round white dot of the clock on the tower was distinct in the evening light.

D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*<sup>9</sup>

Such aesthetic satisfaction as we get from the better type of detective story comes, obviously, in part from the well constructed plot; but I think some comes from a similar recognition of truth in particulars:

One or two of the pieces fitted firmly into place, but so many wouldn't fit at all. It was like doing the light-blue sky at the top of a jigsaw, with no clouds, not even a solitary sea-gull to break the boundless monochrome.

Colin Dexter, *Last Seen Wearing*<sup>10</sup>

Often this pleasure of conscious recognition is a beginning of literary criticism; when we relish the exact conveying of some truth, trivial or tremendous, we are, even if unaware of that as such, appreciating style. When we instantly savour the perfection of

Arthur Clennam came to a squeezed house . . .<sup>11</sup>

we feel how that *squeezed* for the house in Mews Street catches at once an appearance, an economic status and a moral atmosphere, and we admire genius for choosing a word so concentratedly apt.

### 3 REVELATION

When we *recognize* in literature what we already know from experience, we do not merely receive an identical echo of our experience. As John Wain puts it, 'we are seeing our experience through the lens of another mind, offering us its per-



ceptions and its ordering pattern . . .'<sup>12</sup> – a new lens, not just a mirror. Reading George Eliot, I instantly *recognize* some of my own mechanisms of selfish self-deception; but I *see* them with a new clarity that helps me to combat them better.

However, if we feel a need to find moral justifications for literature, we shall probably find them mostly in the function I call Revelation: literature extends our experience.

We enjoy scraps of new information: Ian Fleming's details of what the affluent and knowing may eat abroad; Ben Traven's horrifying details of stokehold work in *The Death Ship*. More important, through books we can gain some slight notion of experiences far removed from our own: the comfortable learn something of poverty and its effects; someone of one race, of the culture of another; the sedentary, something of the life of action; the comparatively free, of the extra miseries of life under any totalitarian régime. Rather rational, cerebral people can learn more about the primal passions; all of us can travel in time as well as space; we may learn a little of the special motives of an artist, an inventor, an explorer; even of a saint, a criminal or a madman. The celibate or childless may learn a little about sex, marriage and parenthood. Men may learn much about women's experience of life, and women about men's.

Nothing in even the greatest literature can be regarded as wholly reliable; all writers have in some measure all the handicaps the rest of us have: no one can make perfectly accurate observations about everything; we all have our prejudices; and our powers of expression probably always fall short of our experience. Notably, males writing about females and females writing about males have inevitable limitations, though the greatest writers come near to transcending even these.

Someone might argue, not absurdly, that obvious fantasy does not enlarge our experience of life: that the fictions of Wells or Asimov, Tolkien or Ballard, Lewis Carroll, Alan