



# ENGLISH LITERATURE

A SURVEY FOR STUDENTS

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TO  
LYNNE

## Foreword

THIS work is not intended as an intensive examination of the progress of English Literature: such a project would require thousands of pages, and, indeed, it has been fulfilled admirably in certain works addressed to scholars or to advanced students of the subject. My aim is merely to give a general account of the main trends in English Literature, from the very beginning up to this year in which I write, and I address myself to students in Sixth Forms and Training Colleges who wish to have a book which will give them a chronological placing in the general picture of the significant figures of English Literature. In particular, I have had in mind the needs of overseas students: my own students in a Malayan Training College expressed frequently their desire for a book which would give them a minimal background of literary history, against which they could set the authors they were studying for examinations.

In compiling this book, I have been grateful for the work of historians more scholarly than I—the great Cambridge History of English Literature, for example, and the compacter History by Legouis and Cazamian. (In writing of early English Literature I have sometimes leaned heavily on Legouis' scholarship.) In dealing with early drama I have received much assistance from the specialist writings of Chambers, Pollard, and Boas. Throughout the work there will be evidence of help from the Oxford Companions to Classical Literature, English Literature, and the Theatre. And, in making critical comments, I have been stimulated by such works as William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, T. S. Eliot's *Selected Essays*, and George Orwell's *Critical Essays*.

Finally, I acknowledge with gratitude the help and forbearance of my wife. Discussions with her, specialist information drawn from her about the historical background and the writings of certain philosophical authors, above all her good humour and patience during the writing of this book—for all, my gratitude. As also for help with the compilation of the Chronological Table and the Index.

J. B. W.

*Kelantan, Malaya—Leicester, England*  
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## CHAPTER ONE

# What is Literature ?

THE subjects we study at school can be divided roughly into two groups—the sciences and the arts. The sciences include mathematics, geography, chemistry, physics, and so on. Among the arts are drawing, painting, modelling, needle-work, drama, music, literature. (The purpose of education is to fit us for life in a civilised community,) and it seems to follow from the subjects we study that the two most important things in civilised life are Art and Science.

⌞ Is this really true? If we take an average day in the life of the average man we seem to see very little evidence of concern with the sciences and the arts. The average man gets up, goes to work, eats his meals, reads the newspapers, listens to the radio, goes to the cinema, goes to bed, sleeps, wakes up, starts all over again. Unless we happen to be professional scientists, laboratory experiments and formulae have ceased to have any meaning for most of us; unless we happen to be poets or painters or musicians—or teachers of literature, painting, and music—the arts seem to us to be only the concern of school-children. And yet people have said, and people still say, that the great glories of our civilisation are the scientists and artists. Ancient Greece is remembered because of mathematicians like Euclid and Pythagoras, because of poets like Homer and dramatists like Sophocles. In two thousand years Nehru and Eisenhower and Churchill may be forgotten, but Einstein and Madame Curie and Bernard Shaw and Sibelius will keep the memory of our age alive. >

Why then are the arts and sciences important? I suppose with the sciences you would say that the answer is obvious: we have radium, penicillin, television and recorded sound,

motor-cars and aircraft, air-conditioning and central heating. But these achievements have never been the primary intention of science; they are a sort of by-product, the things that emerge only when the scientist has done his main job. That main job is simply stated: to be curious, to keep on asking the question 'Why?' and not to be satisfied till an answer has been found. The scientist is curious about the universe: he wants to know why water boils at one temperature and freezes at another; why cheese is different from chalk; why one person behaves differently from another. Not only 'Why?' but 'What?' What is salt made of? What are the stars? What is the constitution of all matter? The answers to these questions do not necessarily make our lives any easier. The answer to one question—'Can the atom be split?'—has made our lives somewhat harder. But the questions have to be asked. It is man's job to be curious; it is man's job to try to find out the truth about the world about us, to answer the big question 'What is the world really like?'

'The truth about the world about us.' Think over the word 'truth' for a moment. It is a word used in many different ways—'You're not telling the truth.' 'The truth about conditions in Russia.' 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.' I want to use it here in the sense of *what lies behind an outward show*. Let me hasten to explain by giving an example. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. That is what we see; that is the 'outward show'. In the past the outward show was regarded as the truth. But then a scientist came along to question it and then to announce that the truth was quite different from the appearance: the truth was that the earth revolved and the sun remained still—the outward show was telling a lie. The curious thing about scientific truths like this is that they often seem so useless. It makes no difference to the average man whether the sun moves or the earth moves. He

still has to rise at dawn and stop work at dusk. But because a thing is useless it does not mean that it is *valueless*. Scientists still think it worthwhile to pursue truth. They do not expect that laws of gravitation and relativity are going to make much difference to everyday life, but they think it is a *valuable* activity to ask their eternal questions about the universe. And so we say that truth—the thing they are looking for—is a *value*.

A value is something that raises our lives above the purely animal level—the level of getting our food and drink, producing children, sleeping, and dying. This world of getting a living and getting children is sometimes called the world of *subsistence*. A value is something added to the world of subsistence. Some people say that our lives are unsatisfactory because they are mostly concerned with things that are impermanent—things that decay and change. Sitting here now, a degree or so above the equator, I look round my hot room and see nothing that will last. It won't be long before my house collapses, eaten by white ants, eroded by rain and wind. The flowers in front of me will be dead to-morrow. (So, of course, may I!) My typewriter is already rusty. And so I hunger for something that is permanent, something that will last forever. Truth, I am told, is a thing that will last forever.

Truth is one value. Another is beauty. And here, having talked about the scientist, I turn to the artist. The scientist's concern is truth, the artist's concern is beauty. Now some people—those clever thinkers called philosophers—tell us that beauty and truth are the same thing. They say there is only one value, one eternal thing which we can call  $x$ , and that truth is the name given to it by the scientist and beauty the name given to it by the artist. Let us try to make this clear. There is a substance called salt. If I am a blind man I have to rely on my sense of taste to describe it: salt to me is a substance with a taste which we can only call 'salty'. If I have my

eyesight but no sense of taste I have to describe salt as a white crystalline substance. Now both descriptions are correct, but neither is complete in itself. Each description concentrates on *one way of examining salt*. It is possible to say that the scientist examines  $x$  in one way, the artist examines it in another. Beauty is one aspect of  $x$ , truth is another. But what *is*  $x$ ? Some people call it ultimate reality—the thing that is left when the universe of appearances, of outward show, is removed. Other people call it God, and they say that beauty and truth are two of the qualities of God.

Anyway, both the artist and the scientist are seeking something which they think is real. Their methods are different. The scientist sets his brain to work and, by a slow process of trial and error, after long experiment and enquiry, he finds his answer. This is usually an exciting moment. You remember the story of Archimedes finding his famous principle in the bath and rushing out naked, shouting 'Eureka!' ('I've got it!') The artist wants to make something which will produce just that sort of excitement in the minds of other people—the excitement of discovering something new about  $x$ , about reality. He may make a picture, a play, a poem, or a palace, but he wants to make the people who see or hear or read his creation feel very excited and say about his creation, 'That is beautiful.' Beauty, then, you could define as the quality you find in any object which produces in your mind a special kind of excitement, an excitement somehow tied up with a sense of discovery. It need not be something made by man; a sunset or a bunch of flowers or a tree may make you feel this excitement and utter the word 'Beautiful!' But the primary task of natural things like flowers and trees and the sun is perhaps not to be beautiful but just to exist. The primary task of the artist's creations is to be beautiful.

Let us try to understand a little more about this 'artistic

excitement'. First of all, it is what is known as a *static* excitement. It does not make you want to *do* anything. If you call me a fool and various other bad names, I shall get very excited and possibly want to fight you. But the excitement of experiencing beauty leaves one content, as though one has just achieved something. The achievement, as I have already suggested, is the achievement of a discovery. But a discovery of what? I would say the discovery of a *pattern* or the realisation of *order*. Again I must hasten to explain. Life to most of us is just a jumble of sensations, like a very bad film with no plot, no real beginning and end. We are also confused by a great number of contradictions: life is ugly, because people are always trying to kill one another; life is beautiful, because we see plenty of evidence of people trying to be kind to one another. Hitler and Gandhi were both human beings. We see the ugliness of a diseased body and the comeliness of a healthy one; sometimes we say, 'Life is good'; sometimes we say, 'Life is bad'. Which is the true statement? Because we can find no single answer we become confused. A work of art seems to give us the single answer by seeming to show that there is order or pattern in life. Let me show how this works.

The artist takes raw material and forces or coaxes it into a pattern. If he is a painter he may choose from the world about us various single objects—an apple, a wine-bottle, a table-napkin, a newspaper—and arrange them into a single composition on canvas—what is called a 'still-life'. All these different objects are seen to be part of one pattern, a pattern bounded by the four sides of the picture-frame, and we get satisfaction out of seeing this unity, a unity created out of objects which previously seemed to have nothing in common with each other at all. A sculptor will take hard, shapeless stone and force it into the resemblance of a human figure; there unity has been established between completely different

things: soft flesh and hard stone, and also between the shapely human figure and the shapeless inhuman rock. The musician takes the sounds produced by scraping a string and blowing down a tube, and he creates order out of them by forcing on them the *shape* of a tune or the order of harmony. The novelist takes incidents from human life and gives them a plot, a beginning and an end—another pattern.

Unity, order, and pattern may be created in other ways too. The poet may bring two completely different things together and make them into a unity by creating a metaphor or simile. T. S. Eliot, a modern poet, takes two completely different pictures—one of the autumn evening, one of a patient in a hospital awaiting an operation—and joins them together like this:

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is laid out against the sky,  
Like a patient etherised upon a table.

Beethoven, in his Ninth Symphony, makes the chorus sing about the starry heavens, and accompanies their song with a comic march on bassoons and piccolos. Again, two completely opposed ideas—the sublime and the grotesque—have been brought together and fused into a unity. You see, then, that this excitement we derive from a work of art is mostly the excitement of seeing connections that did not exist before, of seeing quite different aspects of life unified through a pattern.

That is the highest kind of artistic experience. The lowest kind is pure sensation: 'What a beautiful sunset!' means we are overwhelmed by the colour; 'What a beautiful apple-pie!' means that our sense of taste—either now in the act of eating or else in anticipation—is being pleased. Between this kind of experience and the experience of 'patterns' comes another kind: the pleasure of finding an artist able to *express* our feel-

ings for us. The artist finds a means of setting down our emotions—joy, passion, sorrow, regret—and, as it were, helps us to *separate* those emotions from ourselves. Let me make this clear. Any strong emotion has to be relieved. When we are happy we shout or dance, when we feel sorrow we want to weep. But the emotion has to be expressed (i.e. pressed out, like juice from a lime). Poets and musicians are especially expert at expressing emotions for us. A death in the family, the loss of money and other calamities are soothed by music and poetry, which seem to find in words or sounds a means of getting the sorrow out of our systems. But, on a higher level, our personal troubles are relieved when we can be made to see them as part of a pattern, so that here again we have the discovery of unity, of one personal experience being part of a greater whole. We feel that we do not have to bear this sorrow on our own: our sorrow is part of a huge organisation—the universe—and a necessary part of it. And when we discover that a thing is necessary we no longer complain about it.

Our concern is with literature, but the student of literature should try to maintain a live interest also in music and painting, sculpture, architecture, film, and theatre. All the arts try to perform the same sort of task, differing only in their methods. Methods are dictated by the sort of material used. There are *spatial* materials—paint, stone, clay—and there are *temporal* materials—words, sounds, dance-steps, stage movements. In other words, some arts work in terms of space, others in terms of time. You can take in a painting or building or piece of sculpture almost immediately, but to listen to a symphony or read a poem takes time—often a lot of time. Thus music and literature have a great deal in common: they both use the temporal material of sounds. Music uses meaningless sounds as raw material; literature uses those meaningful sounds we call words.

Now there are two ways of using words, one artistic, one non-artistic. This means that words themselves can be viewed in two different ways. There is, in fact, the meaning that a word has in the dictionary (what is called the *lexical* meaning or the *denotation*) and the associations that the word has gained through constant use (the *connotations* of the word). Take the word 'mother', for instance. The dictionary definition is designed only to make you *understand* what the word means. It means the female parent of an animal. That is the denotation. But the word, because we first use it in connection with our own mothers, carries many associations—warmth, security, comfort, love. We feel strongly about our mothers. Because of these associations 'mother' is used in connection with other things about which we are expected to feel strongly—our country, our school (thus 'motherland' and 'alma mater', which means 'dear mother'). We say then that 'mother' is rich in connotations. Connotations appeal to the feelings, denotations to the brain. Thus various activities which involve the use of words and are concerned with giving orders or information—the framing of club rules, for instance—will try to restrict words to denotation only. The writer of a science book, the creators of a new constitution for a country—these do not want to appeal to the emotions of the reader, only to his brain, his understanding. They are not writing literature. (The writer of literature is much more concerned with the connotations, the ways in which he can make his words move or excite you, the ways in which he can suggest colour or movement or character. The poet, whose work is said to represent the highest form of literature, is most of all concerned with the connotations of words.)

Connotations can be likened to the clusters of sounds you hear when you strike a single note on the piano. Strike middle C forcefully and you will hear far more than that one note.



You will hear fainter notes rising out of it, notes called harmonics. The note itself is the denotation, the harmonics the connotations.

The writer of literature, especially the poet, differs from the scientist or lawyer in *not restricting* his words. The scientist has to make his word mean one thing and one thing only, so does the lawyer. But once the word—like our note on the piano—is allowed to vibrate freely, it not only calls up associations but also, at times, suggests other completely different meanings and perhaps even other words. Here are two examples:

Action calls like a bugle and my heart  
Buckles . . .<sup>1</sup>

Now what does 'buckle' mean there? We use it to denote the fastening of a belt and also the collapsing of any solid body—sheet metal, a bicycle wheel. Now in a piece of scientific or legal writing the word must have one meaning or the other. But in this fragment of verse we are not so restricted. The word can carry two meanings, can suggest two different things at the same time. So that this passage means: 'I am called to action and I get ready for it: I buckle on my military equipment. But at the same time I am afraid; my heart seems to collapse inside me, like a wheel collapsing when it meets an obstacle.'

A second example:

She has gone and my arms are empty. I survey  
Only a waste of wasted years ahead.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Compare a similar use of the word 'buckle' in 'The Windhover' by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and also William Empson's discussion of the poem in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the analysis of the Shakespeare sonnet 'The expense of spirit in a waste of shame' in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* by Laura Riding and Robert Graves.