

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

THE AIM OF THIS BOOK

Progressive teachers are no longer satisfied with teaching English literature either as a mass of facts or as a series of isolated masterpieces. The course in the history of English literature from which so much was once expected is now felt by many teachers to be useless, unless students have a far greater background of reading than most high school students can have. The teaching of unrelated masterpieces is no longer defensible on any ground. The comprehensive type of college examination no longer stresses mere fact and mechanical analysis, and all experience has shown that the old-fashioned dissection of the "classics" kills the very thing it is supposed to stimulate, a living interest and love for literature.

Progressive teachers have come to believe that literature ought to be taught as *literature*, the revelation in artistic form of an author's vision of life, be that vision expressed in prose or poetry, lyric or epic, drama or essay, novel or satire. When students leave school they do not read bits of English literature or "classics" with notes and introductions. They read literature as they find it and where they find it. What they need for an understanding of literature, an appreciation of literature, an impulse toward good literature, is a knowledge of the literary forms as they will meet them outside the schoolroom. An interest in the history of literature, in the biographies of authors, and in the other impedimenta of scholarship is indispensable to the scholar, but of secondary importance to the man or woman who reads for what is commonly called the pleasure of reading.

This book has been prepared to meet the needs of progressive teachers of English who desire to place in the hands of their students a book which tries to teach how to read with understanding and appreciation, and which relates literature to the normal interests of young people. We have subordinated literary history and technical facts to an informal analysis of the common forms. We have provided a large variety of exercises and reading lists, so that the student may be encouraged to work for himself. We have, in general, confined our illustrative material to literature which is well known and commonly studied, in order that the book may build up on the foundation which the student is likely to possess.

Our fundamental ideas are that literature itself is the important thing, not individual works; and that a student best comes to appreciate literature if he realizes what the author is trying to do, and how he is trying to do it.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book may be used as a text in a direct course in appreciation. Regular assignments may be given and illustrative reading may be outlined as in any course.

This book may be used for collateral reading in the regular course. When *Macbeth*, for example, is being studied, the chapter on drama may be read for direct application to *Macbeth*. Or portions of the book which bear directly upon the matter in hand may be assigned. If the question of suspense arises, for example, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, helpful material will be found in the chapter on prose fiction. In studying the *Idylls of the King*, the question of sound in poetry, or images, or tone color may arise. Material may easily be found on these points in the chapter on poetry.

The book may be used as a review in the senior year after

the regular list of reading has been completed. Such review will be found useful for coördinating and reëstablishing what otherwise might be random impressions or half-shaped memories. Such a review will be found particularly valuable in preparation for college examinations which now stress power of generalization and variety of information rather than minute knowledge of minute facts.

The book may be used as a source for exercises since all the exercises either are directly based upon the books commonly read in schools or may be readily adapted to them. Used in this way, the book may help to solve the problem of outside reading, since many of the exercises may be used for reporting on books read by the student in his own time. Incidentally, the large number of quotations both in text and in exercises may be found useful for memorizing.

Finally, this book may be used to replace the regular text in the history of English literature, since it gives in compact form the essentials of such work. Time thus saved may be used for work directly with the types of literature.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

LITERATURE IN GENERAL

THE SOURCES OF INTEREST IN LITERATURE

Many people cannot understand why men and women spend time, money, and energy on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*, or Dickens's *David Copperfield*. These works are old; the facts which they contain are long out of date. Modern histories give a more accurate account of Scottish history than *Macbeth*, guide books give more definite information about the Scottish highlands than *The Lady of the Lake*, and special accounts of English social life contain more information about Englishmen than *David Copperfield*. Yet these books are bought, read, and studied by thousands of men and women, boys and girls, and, in addition, *Macbeth* still draws large audiences at the theater. Books of fact which were written in the time of Shakespeare, Scott, and Dickens have long since been forgotten. Who would study seriously a book on medicine written in 1600, or an encyclopedia compiled in 1800, or a book on electricity published in 1850?

Why do people read literature? Why do students spend years in school and college in the study of the great masters of literature? Why do publishing houses publish each year thousands of novels, plays, essays, and poems? Why do

magazines give so much space to short stories and poems? Why do people read volumes of literary criticism and literary biography?

In the first place, though one does not use literature to secure a knowledge of facts, one can use it to find how, in a certain period, men looked at facts. *Macbeth* is not a text-book of Scottish history, but it shows how Shakespeare used facts from Scottish history to interpret life for the men of Elizabethan England. *Paradise Lost* is not an authentic account of the creation of the earth, but it shows how a great Puritan of the seventeenth century who tried to

“assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to man”

looked upon the problem of the origin of sin. *A Tale of Two Cities* may not satisfy students of history as an account of the French Revolution, but it is highly interesting as Dickens's interpretation of human nature under the old French régime and during the storm and stress of the Reign of Terror. Literature, then, though it is not the best source from which to secure a knowledge of facts, is our best source for a vivid and interesting interpretation of facts as they affect people's lives. When we wish to catch the spirit of '76, we read *Paul Revere's Ride*; when we wish to understand the complexities of society in England in the mid-nineteenth century, we read Thackeray's *The Newcomes*; when we wish to understand the qualities which have made heroes of English sailors, we read Tennyson's *The Revenge*.

Perhaps the primary instinct which leads men to literature, however, is the natural human love of a story. From primitive man crouching about a fire in a cave listening with delight to the story of the killing of the hairy mammoth with stone-tipped arrows to the boy curled in an armchair by the fireplace reading with delight the story of Custer's last

stand as the Redskins circled ever nearer and nearer—from that day to this a good story has been able “to hold children from play and old men from the chimney corner.” Robert Louis Stevenson, himself a master of story-telling, says:

“The desire for knowledge, I had almost added the desire for meat, is not more deeply seated than this demand for fit and striking incident. . . . A friend of mine, a Welsh blacksmith, was twenty-five years old and could neither read nor write, when he heard a chapter of *Robinson Crusoe* read aloud in a farm kitchen. Up to that moment he had sat content, huddled in his ignorance, but he left that farm another man. There were day-dreams, it appeared, divine day-dreams, written and printed and bound, and to be bought for money and enjoyed at pleasure. Down he sat that day, painfully learned to read Welsh, and returned to borrow the book. It had been lost, nor could he find another copy but one that was in English. Down he sat once more, learned English, and at length, and with entire delight, read *Robinson*. It is like the story of a love-chase.”

The satisfaction of this desire for “fit and striking incident” is one of the most delightful results of literary study. The well-read man knows a world which never grows old, a world where he can choose his own friends, where he can see the life he would like to lead, where he can travel at will without trouble or expense. The reader never has “nothing to do.” Life is all too short, time all too scant for reading all the books he would like to read.

Delightful as literature is, however, it has more lasting values than as a source of pleasure, amusement, and relaxation. It is, especially for the young reader, the most important source of ideas and ideals. Literature is the record of what men have thought and felt about life, and from that record the modern reader can enrich his own meager experience with the thoughts and emotions of the past. Espe-

cially important in this respect is contemporary literature, for as our modern life becomes more complex and diverse no single person can hope himself to experience all life. Yet every man wants to know more of life than lies within his grasp. The eternal spirit of youth is eagerness for experience, a great curiosity about life in the past and in the present. Three hundred and fifty years ago Christopher Marlowe expressed this spirit of youth:

"Nature that framed us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds;
Our souls whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world,
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Will us to wear ourselves and never rest."

For this eagerness for knowledge, this "divine discontent" of youth, there is no better satisfaction than the quest for and understanding of the ideas and ideals expressed in literature of the past and of the present.

Still another value of literature lies in the fact that it is, for the ordinary man, the most accessible source of beauty. A picture may be found only in a museum, a statue may be found only in a foreign city, but a book can be multiplied indefinitely and bought by anybody. In literature shines

"The light that never was on sea or land"
through

" . . . magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."

One may never look upon the perfect form of a Grecian urn, but he can see the clear beauty that Keats pictured in his ode:

"Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return."

The appreciation of beauty in literature is cumulative. One impression of beauty leads to another and often the familiar and the commonplace

"suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange."

Finally, literature offers to the initiated the craftsman's interest, the pleasure which one takes in good work well done. The love of literature is, for many people, the love of self-expression. They would like to express in the web of words, their thoughts and moods. To see how men of genius have expressed themselves, working at their art with care and pains, is to lovers of literature a real delight, for they see in the technique of the artist the power of creation which they would like to have. The perfect phrase, the exact word, the apt image move their admiration, because, having perhaps tried themselves to write, they know how difficult good writing is. For readers with the craftsman's interest the study of such technical elements as the plot of a novel or the style of an essay stimulates the pleasure in perfection which is the mark of the creative mind which works for "the joy of the working," finding in the consciousness of achievement life's greatest reward.

What then are the sources of interest in literature? First, literature is our best means of finding out how, in any given

historical period men looked at facts, how they interpreted the world about them; second, literature best satisfies the love which all men have for good stories well told; third, literature is our most important source for a wide knowledge of the ideas and ideals which have influenced the world; fourth, literature is, for the average man, the most accessible source of beauty; and fifth, literature is a never-ending delight to those who possess the craftsman's interest.

WHAT IS GOOD LITERATURE?

Every reader is to some degree a judge. He distinguishes between a dull story and an interesting one. He has his favorite authors. Usually, however, his judgment rests upon no very intelligent basis. He seldom thinks of the reason for his likes and dislikes. He knows that there is such a thing as "good literature," that some books are usually regarded as more valuable than others, more worthy of preservation, more profitable to study, but he is content to leave to critics the definition of good literature.

It must be admitted that such a definition is extremely difficult because, after all, there is no impartial authority to tell us what is good literature and what is not. We must be our own court of judgment, trusting to our own taste, supported by the opinion of those whose discrimination we respect.

Yet there have been numerous standards maintained in the centuries of European civilization.

It has been maintained, in the first place, that good literature is that literature which is written by one who "sees life steadily and sees it whole," who tries to interpret the truth about life in as dignified and as beautiful form as possible. Such a standard emphasizes dignity, power, and beauty of subject and form. It assumes that certain master-

pieces of literary art are "classic"; that is, that they are standards of the highest achievement of literary art, and that the best method of testing a work of literature is by comparison with the "classics," these universally accepted masterpieces.¹

A second standard of good literature, which was highly popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but is now almost completely out of fashion, is the standard of "correctness." The critics of those centuries maintained that there are certain principles or "rules" such as proportion, probability, dignity of subject matter, fidelity to the accepted beliefs of cultivated people, adherence to which, provided a writer had genius, would infallibly produce great literature. Such critics were likely to disdain any great use of the imagination or any great individuality in the application of the rules, and to approve works which were imitative of generally accepted classics, particularly the works of the ancient Greek and Roman writers.²

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a violent reaction from such standards. Critics began to emphasize the value of the imagination in literature, and to pay small heed to the mechanical virtues of order, proportion, correctness, and fidelity to approved models. They sought for originality, power, beauty, freshness, and an avoidance of the conventional. They relied upon enthusiasm for literature rather than upon judgment, and they felt that literature ought to be enjoyed rather than analyzed.³

In our own day the usual standard of judgment is slightly different. Like the people of the nineteenth century we are inclined to stress the imagination as the chief quality in good literature and to admire originality, power, beauty,

¹ See Arnold, Matthew: *The Study of Poetry*.

² See Pope, Alexander: *Essay on Criticism*.

³ See Hazlitt, William: *On Poetry in General*.

and freshness. But we pay more attention than they did to novelty and immediate interest and we are likely to regard literature which is surprising, startling, striking, or strange as necessarily better than that which follows beaten paths.

Students who are wise will not spend much time trying to formulate definite standards until they have a solid basis of reading. All argument aside, it is clear that there exists a large body of literature which gives pleasure to thoughtful, intelligent, and cultivated men and women and that this is good literature because the pleasure which it gives is thoughtful pleasure, not mere excitement. Good literature is not necessarily hard to read or to understand, but it does require more thought and study than that literature which has a momentary popularity because it puts the intelligence to sleep.

WHAT THE STUDY OF LITERATURE REQUIRES

The first and most important requirement in the study of literature is the ability to read more than mere words, that is, the ability to secure from the printed page the exact idea which the author wished to convey. To know just what the author meant requires, of course, a knowledge of the exact meaning of his words. Walter Pater in his essay, *Style*, says:

“Since all progress of mind consists for the most part in differentiation, in the resolution of an obscure and complex object into its component aspects, it is surely the stupidest of losses to confuse things which right reason has put asunder, to lose the sense of achieved distinctions, the distinction between poetry and prose, for instance, or, to speak more exactly, between the laws and characteristic excellencies of verse and prose composition.”

It is impossible to understand this passage unless one knows exactly what Pater meant by *differentiation*, *component*