
Further reading

As I said in the last chapter, an enormous number of critical books and essays have been written about every author or text you are likely to study. I discussed the question: are these critical books worth reading? The answer is, yes, they often are, but be very careful how you handle them. There are three cardinal points which will have come across clearly from the whole of this book, and my discussion in Chapter 9. The first is that there is no substitute for doing your own work on a text. If you simply borrow ideas from critical books your essays will appear sterile and second-hand, and of course you will be no better at reading the literature itself afterwards than you were before. The second point is that there must be a direct link between your views and the evidence which supports them in all your essays, as I stressed in Chapter 7. Doing your own work on the text is the surest way to prepare for writing convincing, successful essays. Finally, studying the text for yourself makes you the professional critic's equal: you can compare his or her views with your own. For these reasons I recommend that you take it as a rule not to read any critical books about the text you are studying until you have finished studying it for yourself.

The warning about evidence in essays applies particularly to 'study-guides' on set authors and texts. Some of these merely summarise the text and give potted, unexplained views of the main themes and characters. 'Potted' views are no use in an essay because they are not supported by your analysis of the text, so if you rely on such guides your essays will be unconvincing and out of touch. Finally, not all critics are good at their work. Some quite ridiculous views are published. It really is simpler, safer and much more rewarding to select passages from a text yourself and get down to the business of analysing those passages and relating them to the text as a whole. That is the way that anyone who is good at English goes about it, and there is really no alternative approach. It is also, as I pointed out in Chapter 9, the easiest and most natural way to gain an understanding of the text, and will keep you clear of the distortions and confusions some critics and 'expert' information could cause.

I do want to recommend some reading in this final section, however. It should hardly need saying that the best way to find out about literature is to read a lot of books, but it is also true to say that students beginning to develop an interest in books and who are keen to read often find the sheer volume and variety of English Literature baffling and daunting. It may prove useful, then, if I provide a short list. As regards novels I suggest you try Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Obviously you can add to this list quite easily, as you can to the following list of plays: Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, R. B. Sheridan's *The Rivals*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*.

Poetry presents a special problem. If I simply list poets you will face volumes of verse, and each volume will contain upwards of a hundred poems. Instead I have chosen some actual poems which you can try. I think these are good examples which represent the particular poet's work, but of course I hope you will read more afterwards. Try John Donne's 'The Sunne Rising' and 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock', Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner', Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Windhover', Thomas Hardy's 'The Voice' and 'The Darkling Thrush', and Yeats's 'The Wild Swans at Coole' and 'Sailing to Byzantium'. You could perhaps read more widely in twentieth-century poetry, and try poems by T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Graves, Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes.

Looking back over my list I can see that it is already quite daunting, and at the same time I am aware of the large number of authors I have left out. However, if you look on this list as a sort of companion and not as a programme, and if you start reading for enjoyment and not as a duty, you will find that you will begin to establish a confident sense of the nature of English Literature and also that you may well have found a new source of pleasure in life.