

*HOW TO STUDY  
LITERATURE*

How to  
Study a  
Poet

John Peck

HOW TO STUDY LITERATURE

*General Editors:* John Peck and Martin Coyle

HOW TO STUDY A POET

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# HOW TO STUDY A POET

John Peck

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## General Editors' Preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck  
Martin Coyle

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*For Alison*

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## First steps

THE two poets I studied in most detail at school were John Donne and John Keats. Donne, I discovered, was a seventeenth-century clergyman who wrote difficult poems about his love of God and equally difficult poems about his love for women. They certainly were difficult poems; I am not exaggerating when I say that I did not understand any of them. I must have managed to stumble out a satisfactory examination answer on Donne, however, as I did go on to study English at university (where, I might add, Donne remained just about as much of a mystery to me as he had at school). I imagine that in the examination I must have waffled about the intensity of Donne's love, and thrown in a quotation whenever I got stuck. I might have managed to convince the examiner that I knew something about Donne, but I knew that I was totally lost with this writer.

My response to Keats, another writer new to me at the time, was far more positive. In most of the poems we studied, I could actually see what he was concerned about. My understanding might have been limited, but, compared to my understanding of Donne, my grasp of Keats was first-rate. The problems began when I had to write an essay about Keats, as I did not really know what to say about poetry. I seem to remember that my usual approach was to tell the 'story' of a poem and then say what I thought it meant, but such an approach did strike me as clumsy. I felt there must be a better way of doing it. Part of the difficulty was that I genuinely liked Keats's poetry, but did not have a method adequate to expressing my enjoyment of it.

The problems I experienced with these writers are, I think, the difficulties a lot of people experience with poetry. A great deal of poetry is hard to understand, and then, if you do understand a writer, there is the question of what to say about the poems you have read. This book tries to provide answers to these problems: it shows you how to understand a poet's works, and then shows you

how to talk about his or her verse. What has to be said at the beginning of a book such as this, however, is that the suggestions offered here do not represent the only way of tackling an author. These are methods I have found useful and which I like to think some of the people I have taught have found useful. I did eventually get to understand Donne's poetry, or at least to understand it sufficiently to enable me to enjoy it, and I am no longer tongue-tied when it comes to discussing Keats. What has helped me sort out my view of these writers is the way of looking at poetry that I describe in this book. The same approach should help you with the poet or poets you are studying. It might be that the particular poet you are interested in is not referred to here, but try to see how I present an approach that should work with any poet. You might, therefore, find it useful to persevere all the way through this book, even if you are studying none of the writers discussed. That, however, is for you to decide: what follows is a method for tackling poetry which should not only help you in examinations but also, I hope, increase your understanding and enjoyment of poetry.

*Seeing what a poem is about*

Our starting-point has got to be the fact that it is possible to read a poem and have very little idea what it is about. In some cases this is because the poem is deliberately difficult, but often the problem is more basic. There are many poems that are easy to read but at the end of which you can feel at a total loss as to what they amount to. Rather than discuss the issue any further in general terms, let me provide an example: a poem by a Victorian writer, Matthew Arnold, entitled 'Dover Beach':

The sea is calm to-night.  
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
 Upon the straits; – on the French coast the light  
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!  
 Only, from the long line of spray  
 Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
 Listen! you hear the grating roar  
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
 At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
 The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago  
 Heard it on the Ægæan, and it brought  
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
 Of human misery; we  
 Find also in the sound a thought,  
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
 To one another! for the world, which seems  
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
 So various, so beautiful, so new,  
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
 And we are here as on a darkling plain  
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

This could be described as a fairly straightforward poem, but you will not be alone if you soon lost any sense of its meaning. Most readers would probably be able to grasp that the poet is in a room at Dover looking out of the window and describing the view, but what could prove confusing is the sudden appearance of Sophocles and then the talk about 'The Sea of Faith'. What is the poem doing or saying? At first it seems to be a description of the view, but at these points it goes off in quite unexpected directions. It might be the case, of course, that you have no difficulty in understanding this particular poem, but I am sure you are familiar with the problem I am describing here of finding it hard to grasp the basic sense of a poem.

What we need is a way of confidently getting hold of this or indeed of any poem and of moving decisively beyond that first feeling of confusion. We need a method for getting at the essence of a poem, so that we can state immediately, 'This is the main thing this poem is about.' Fortunately, it is easy to grasp a poem as a whole in this way. The thing to do is to look for a contrast or opposition in the poem, a contrast which is at the heart of and which informs the whole poem. What helps in the search for this contrast is the fact that remarkably similar oppositions are at the heart of most poems. To understand this, think about life and ask yourself what the main things are that worry and distress people. I am sure that you will agree that it is things such as death and suffering, and the awareness that the lives of many people are far from happy. We worry about the state of society and about violence and cruelty, and on a more personal level we worry about the things that cause stress in our lives, such as school and work and emotional relationships. In short, we worry about a great many things all of which seem to suggest some disorder in our lives or in the world. What makes us happy is even easier to describe: we enjoy security, the security of being healthy and well-fed, of having a role in life, and relating positively to other people. We do not like to feel lost in a cruel, chaotic world; we do like to feel safe and secure in a friendly and reassuring world.

There is a sense in which every poem ever written deals with such issues. The central opposition at the heart of just about any poem is a tension between some idea of security and happiness, on the one hand, and things that are worrying, on the other. The poet confronts what can appear a baffling or frightening or depressing world and searches for something positive, something to celebrate, some sense of security. What, then, can help us with this Arnold poem, or any poem, is the confident expectation we can bring to the work that some kind of opposition on the lines described above will be at its centre. Let us see how this is the case in 'Dover Beach'. I started my discussion of the poem by saying that the speaker in his room at Dover looks out at the view. There is something secure about the narrator's position just as there is something reassuring about the calm scene he describes. As the poem goes on, however, the sea becomes turbulent and ideas come into the poem that suggest unhappiness and misery: this is particularly evident in phrases such as 'human misery' and 'we are here as on a darkling plain'. What we can say, therefore, is that the

poem is built on a contrast between a sense of security and a sense of the misery of experience.

Obviously not every poem deals with the same issue as 'Dover Beach', but the point is that some such contrast between an orderly sense of experience and a disorderly sense of experience will be at the heart of most poems. Knowing this allows us to get hold of a poem very quickly; it helps us get behind the surface of a poem and see its real theme. 'Dover Beach', to return to our example, is clearly not just a piece of nature description. It is a poem about living in an insecure and frightening world, a world where, in particular, the security of religious faith has been lost. This is a big issue to explore in a short poem, but often a short poem seems weighty precisely because it is confronting these large questions about happiness and unhappiness in life. You will find it hard to grasp such matters, however, if you fail to make sensible initial moves with a poem. Begin by trying to see how a poem is built on an opposition. If you can spot a tension, between order and disorder, or between happiness and unhappiness, or between something attractive and something unattractive, then you will be well on the way towards understanding the poem.

### *Building a response*

One implication of what I have been saying so far is that interpretation should start with being able to see almost at a glance what a poem is about. The secret lies in searching for a central opposition. Once you have spotted this, the poem as a whole should start to make sense quickly. In 'Dover Beach', once the sense of security and insecurity has been spotted, it is a direct journey towards realising how the poem deals with the loss of religious faith. The same will be true in the case of all poems: once you have spotted the opposition, you will only be a step away from beginning to appreciate the poem's theme.

The usefulness of the idea of an opposition does not stop at this point, however, for it can help us organise our discussion of every aspect of a poem's structure and use of language. To illustrate this, let us return to 'Dover Beach', and start with the fact that some parts of the poem suggest security whereas other parts convey a sense of insecurity. The simplest way in which this is evident is that the poem opens with some very neat sentences, with lines breaking neatly into two balanced halves; the symmetry of this is orderly