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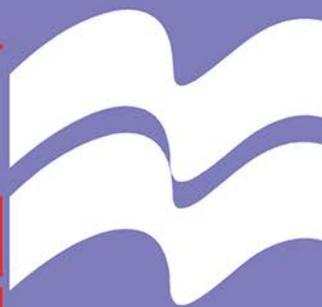
NICHOLAS MARSH

HOW TO BEGIN

STUDYING ENGLISH

LITERATURE

SECOND EDITION



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HOW TO BEGIN STUDYING ENGLISH LITERATURE

Second Edition

Nicholas Marsh



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For Simon

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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

Finding a theme

MAKING A START

THE first problem every student of literature faces is a feeling of blankness. I have read the text, now I am supposed to study it: how do I start? Teachers and critics sometimes make this stage more difficult by pretending that literature is a special subject which only experts can understand. Nothing could be more misleading. Great writers and poets write because they want to communicate with ordinary readers like you and me: they do not write for experts. They are not writing on a specialised subject, either. Literature is about the same things you and I are concerned with: life and living. Be confident, therefore. Every student finds the first step in studying literature difficult, but there is nothing mysterious or specialised about it. The difficulty you face at the beginning is simply one of choosing what to focus on out of the rich mass of details, characters, events and so on, which you have met in reading the text. You are faced with the intricate complexity of a literary work: as soon as you can decide what to study first, and where to start, you can make a start.

What will obviously help you is if you have a method which tells you how and where to start. The method I will be explaining in this book can be applied to any of the texts you have to study, whether they are novels, plays or poems. I shall be showing how you can think about the text, and go on to study important passages, so your understanding develops fruitfully and is supported by the detailed analysis you need when you come to write essays or examinations. The way to overcome the first difficulty is really quite straightforward: you can make a start by finding a theme.

WHAT IS A THEME?

A theme is simply this: a subject which interests the writer, and which is discussed in the text or portrayed in it in some way. Finding a 'subject' in a book may sound difficult, but when you know the kind of subject you are looking for you will see that it is quite easy. A theme is not a summary of the story: that is not what the text is 'about'; nor is it a special subject you have to search for. Literature is about ordinary life, so the big themes in literature are the important subjects and experiences of our public and private lives: they are the ordinary and common words in our everyday thoughts and conversations, like love, death, marriage, freedom, hope, despair, power, war, revenge, evil, and so on. This list of the big common experiences of life could go on and on, because anything which is a subject in life can become a theme in literature. The first thing you can say about a text is that it is about one of these common subjects, so the first thing you say is startlingly simple. You might think it even too obvious, but it is a very important step forward because you have left the feeling of blankness behind: you simply say 'There is a lot in it about love', or 'It is about hope and despair'. Then you have made a start.

There is one more point to make about themes. They are big ordinary subjects, but they are complex. The texts you study focus on the problems people face, their contradictory feelings, and the complex moral and social entanglements which confront people and make our experience of living so complex. So the big ideas in a text are not simple opinions: they are full of complexity like our experience of life itself.

CHOOSING A PASSAGE TO STUDY

The writer weaves his themes into every aspect of the life of the text. Because these major concerns are portrayed throughout the text, you still have the problem of choosing a part to look at more closely. What is more, the part you choose must be short enough for you to think about without confusion; at the same time, it must be important enough to reveal something significant about the text when you study it. How can you be sure of choosing an important passage, which will be really revealing to study? The answer is to look for a *crisis* in the text. A crisis is a place where there is a sudden event like a murder or

a wedding or a confession or a quarrel or a battle. In a crisis there is sudden action or change. It shakes up the life of the text, so the feelings, ideas and important issues are thrown into particularly sharp relief. In a crisis, then, the big issues are portrayed most openly and forcefully, so choosing a crisis to study will tell you a lot about the text as a whole.

It is worth pausing at this stage to gain a clearer idea of how the crises in life and literature happen. All the big labels we use for themes or feelings stand for complex experiences: they are made up of many different elements. For example, the big label 'love' may stand for a mixture of feelings including admiration, lust, or even fear or hatred. These different feelings and ideas manage to rub along together most of the time, so our lives are usually fairly calm. In a crisis, however, something puts the complex mixture under pressure, upsetting its balance and making its different elements struggle against each other in conflict. The tensions and worries which are usually kept under control are therefore brought to the surface in a crisis. In a novel, for example, a character might have feelings of love and jealousy about his wife, but they live happily together because his jealousy is under control. Suddenly he has to go away without his wife, and the pressure of separation makes his jealousy grow out of proportion. When he comes home he questions her suspiciously, they argue and he hits her. Their life will never be the same again. Notice that this character had complex jealous feelings all the time, but it was the extra pressure of being away which brought about a crisis, making his feelings lose balance and explode into sudden and revealing action.

Look for the crises in the text you have to study, then, because the crises are places where the themes and everything else about the text come out into the open. Again, however, try to make your choice logically: look for the kind of crisis that will tell you about the theme you have already found. Think about the theme and choose a crisis which is bound to be about that theme. For example, if you have found a theme of love, look for a crisis about love. What are the sudden and drastic things that happen to lovers? Look for proposals of marriage, weddings, quarrels, separations, the death of a loved one, betrayals of love. If you have found a theme of war, look for the most important or shattering things that happen in war: battles, an armistice, a character's first experience of action, or a character being wounded or killed. Choose a theme first, then think about it so you can choose what sort of crisis is likely to bring out that big issue most directly and forcefully.