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Mastering

English Literature

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Richard Gill

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Preface

I hope that this book will help you to enjoy English literature and be successful in public exams. I don't think those aims are incompatible; I've always found that the more I think about a book, the more I see in it and the more I enjoy and value it. I hope that this will also be your experience.

This isn't a course-book. The books studied at GCSE, A-level and at university differ according to syllabus and institution, so I can't rely on a common list of books that everyone will be studying. Moreover, each book is different from every other, and therefore it needs to be thought about in its own way. One of the themes of this book is that there is not a set of ready-made formulae which can be 'applied' to every work. As Kent says to Oswald in *King Lear*, 'I'll teach you differences'. That is what we have to learn; each book is different and must therefore be thought about in a way distinctive to itself.

In the light of the above, you might want to ask: 'How can a book help?' My answer is: 'In three ways'.

First, it can give you some questions to ask. Often when we are studying, we need help with our thinking. It is very difficult studying anything unless you have some idea of what you are 'looking for'. Questions can help you in this. They can open up areas of a book and they might alert us to some important features. Of course, there is no guarantee that they will. One of the things we learn about study is what approaches are or are not helpful. In fact, even when an approach proves to be unhelpful, it might tell us something. Sometimes, we see an important feature of a text when we realise that it doesn't work in a particular way. For instance, many novels work by showing us how the central character changes, but in *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain has produced a central character who is effective precisely because he does not.

Secondly, a book can provide you with examples. What I've tried to do is refer to many of the books that frequently appear on syllabuses. Altogether, there are references to over a hundred authors. You are unlikely to know all of them, but I think that many of the examples are intelligible, even if you are unfamiliar with the book. For readers who are looking for ideas about their set works, I suggest a glance at the index. I hope that what I say about individual works will be helpful; I have been partly guided by the kind of things examiners ask students to write about.

Thirdly, a book can give you help on how to write about literature. For a lot of the time, writing about books requires what we might call a general vocabulary; you might need to write about feelings of love or hope or discuss how a character is fired by revenge. Such topics don't require you to use a specialist language. But there are aspects of literature that do need to be talked about in a special way; for instance, how a poem is formed or the way a story is told. What I hope to do is to introduce you to some useful terms. I also hope I won't bring

in too many; writing about literature that is studded with lots of specialist words (some of jaw-cracking difficulty) is intimidating to students (if it is that difficult, why should they bother to study?) and is quite frankly off-putting (and, after a time, boring) to readers.

The book is organised according to the types of literature you are likely to encounter in public examinations. At A-level, for instance, you are now required to study works of poetry, prose, drama, Shakespeare and at least one work written before 1900. I don't intend this to be just of use to A-level students; I have tried to cover the range of work required by GCSE and I am confident that it can also act as an introduction to the study of literature at university level.

We start with poetry, largely because that is the area that many students have problems with. Also, some of the things that are said about poetry, in particular about its language, are relevant to both novels and plays. The sections on novels and drama also introduce ideas that are useful in discussing other areas of literature. The final sections are practical; they deal with how to prepare for examinations. The glossary may come in useful when you are trying to be clear about what certain terms mean.

I shall close with a repetition of the hope I mentioned at the start. I have taught literature now for over 25 years and I have had as pupils students from the first year of secondary school to the first year at university. I have found teaching literature immensely enjoyable. I hope that you will also find a similar enjoyment in studying it.

RICHARD GILL

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RICHARD GILL