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PRACTICAL CRITICISM

John Peck
and
Martin Coyle

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To Alison and Pam

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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

Preface

AT the heart of the study of English Literature lies practical criticism. Every student needs to be able to do it, and to do it with confidence and skill. Far too often, however, students find themselves confronting a poem or a passage from a novel or an extract from a play and having nothing to say. Or they find themselves producing a very poor piece of writing, full of short paragraphs, with no sense of purpose behind the writing. It doesn't have to be like that. Once you realise that there are some quite straightforward rules and procedures for coming to terms with a text and building an analysis, then the whole exercise takes on a different meaning.

Central to the rules for practical criticism is the point that your essay method for practical criticism should be exactly the same as your essay method for all other papers. This is something we explain in greater detail in the following pages where we set out, in as clear a fashion as possible, the method for practical criticism – or at least the method we recommend to our students, three of whom have agreed to allow us to print one of their practical criticism analyses. The students are all in their first year at university, but the book is very much aimed at every student: it sets out the basic moves to make sense of a poem or novel or play, how to build a response and how to write an essay. In a sequence of short chapters we try to anticipate the sort of questions and problems you might have, all the time emphasising the way in which you can use a few simple controlling ideas to organise and develop your analyses. At the same time, where appropriate, we try to show you how you can take your ideas further and extend your critical skills.

Practical criticism underlies everything else you do as a student of English Literature. It is a way of reading the text closely, but with a grasp of the larger issues involved. It is a challenging way of reading that actually allows you to see things for yourself and to read the text with intelligence, with a sense of adventure and even with a certain playfulness. Certainly one of the things we wish to get across in this

book is how, by following some simple steps, practical criticism becomes a way of opening up the text to different readings, with different emphases and different ideas. And this is because there is no single, correct reading of a text: there are only the readings that we construct. Which is what this book is about – how to construct your own reading and, as a result, do really well in English Literature exams.

Finally, we would like to thank our first year students at Cardiff for contributing so much to the discussions behind this book. In particular, we would like to thank: Neil Abram, Leanne Allen, Louise Bassett, Helen Cadman, Joy Cann, Louise Cooper, Clair Drayton, Karen John, Rupal Joshi, Ceri Ann Lowe, Joanna McCathie, Louise Meeson, Sarah Platts, Ben Tisdall, Kerry Thomason and Kirsten Wilcock.

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