

# Critical Literature?

## Context and Criticism in A Level English Literature

Carol Atherton argues that we have underestimated the significance of literary criticism in A Level English Literature.

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People have some odd ideas about studying literature. They're not really sure what it involves – or even if there's any point. Every November, when I speak to prospective sixth-formers about A Level English Literature, there are always some faces in the crowd whose scepticism is all too plain. One year, a worried father stayed behind to speak to me afterwards. His daughter was torn between English Literature and something that seemed a bit more worthwhile, like Business Studies or Economics: she'd filled all her other choices, and there was only one space left. As far as he was concerned, English just didn't seem to be teaching anything. If it was all just a matter of reading books and having opinions about them, then couldn't his daughter do that at home?

As English teachers ourselves, steeped in the rhetoric of the subject and armed with any number of arguments about its purpose and value, it can be easy for us to forget that there's a world outside: a world where other subjects seem just that bit more important, more relevant to a particular career, or even just more hard-edged. Yet Martin Amis, in the foreword to *The War Against Cliché*, reminds us that 'one of the historical vulnerabilities of literature, as a subject of study, is that it has never seemed difficult enough ...

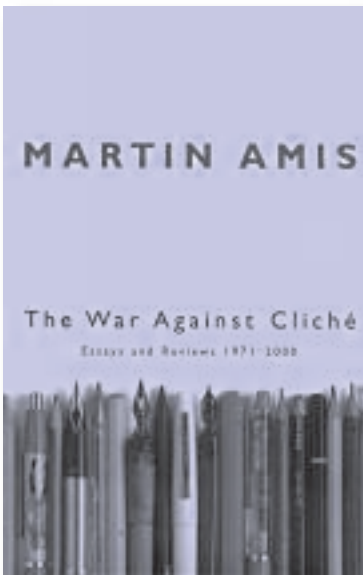
Interacting with literature is easy. Anyone can join in, because words (unlike palettes and pianos) lead a double life: we all have a competence'.<sup>1</sup> It's a fair bet that most English teachers have at some point

been embroiled in arguments about whether their subject has any intellectual validity, or whether it's all just about reading things into texts and making them mean whatever you want them to. It often seems that I've spent most of my professional life trying to prove that English is indeed difficult.

This problem is nothing new. When English Literature

first became a university subject, many people questioned its right to be considered a 'proper' academic discipline: English was, after all, simply a question of 'chatter about Shelley'. One detractor, E.A. Freeman, commented that the study of literature was 'all very well in its own way, perhaps amusing, perhaps even instructive, but ... not quite of that solid character which we were used to look for in any branch of a University course'.<sup>2</sup> As a result, supporters of academic English had to prove that their subject was difficult enough to gain parity with disciplines such as History and the sciences. Yet one of the tensions that English Literature has had to endure is that its supporters have, historically, been unable to agree on the precise nature of the 'difficulty' to which English can – or should – lay claim. And some critics and teachers have argued that the very notion of 'difficulty' is elitist – that English is one subject that should allow everyone to join in, posing challenges that test personal understanding rather than academic knowledge. Consequently, the specialist knowledge associated with English can easily seem something that the subject is almost afraid to recognise: a source of embarrassment, rather than the grounds on which the discipline is founded. Since the introduction of Curriculum 2000, and the subsequent reform of English Literature at A Level, this tension has resurfaced – encompassing questions of contexts, critics, and what exactly it is that A Level English should be aiming to do.

It's easy to answer questions about the nature of literary study by drawing on arguments about the subject's beneficial qualities. Liberal humanists would refer to the Arnoldian desire to bring about harmony by promoting 'the best that has been known and thought'; devotees of a more radical stance – Bethan Marshall's 'critical dissenters' – might point to the need to question accepted viewpoints and challenge the primacy of the traditional canon. Yet in focusing on what the subject can do, such arguments tend to ignore the more fundamental issue of what the subject actually is: in more sophisticated terms, the epistemological question of what it is that makes English Literature a discipline of knowledge. In their book *Politics and Value in English Studies*, Josephine Guy and Ian Small ask two questions that are



'at the heart of the problems concerning the disciplinary status of English', namely, 'what body of knowledge does English teach; and how is that body of knowledge authorized, taught and examined?'<sup>3</sup> The difficulty of achieving any final answer to these questions is partly to blame for the problems of identity from which English literature suffers: as Cox's multiple subject models, Marshall's *Rough Guide to English Teachers* and any number of introductions to literary theory all attest, one of the most striking features of English is its plurality.

## Curriculum 2000

The new specifications introduced in September 2000 initially seemed to offer a way of solving these problems. Their use of the now-infamous Assessment Objectives, and their emphasis on the contexts of production and reception, established an 'official' version of English Literature that was intended to close the gap between A Level and higher education, introducing students to the theoretical ideas that inform the study of English at degree level. Some of the initial reactions were very positive. Robert Eaglestone commented that 'A Level is very far from matching – in an appropriate way – the shape of the discipline in HE ... However the new (specifications) do seem to have been designed to bridge this gap'.<sup>4</sup> Pamela Bickley noted that the new specifications would allow far less scope for indulging in 'the "This poem makes me feel sad" school of literary criticism'.<sup>5</sup> It was hoped that students would be encouraged to see texts as the products of very specific cultural formations, and to interrogate their own stance as readers. All this would constitute a radical break with the past: Peter Buckroyd of NEAB warned English teachers that A-grade students would fail if schools continued to approach the subject in 'conventional' ways.<sup>6</sup>

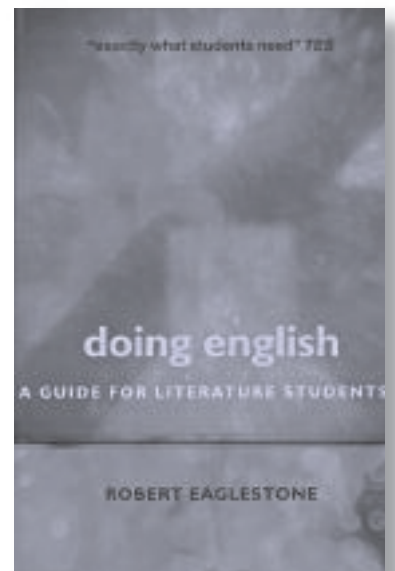
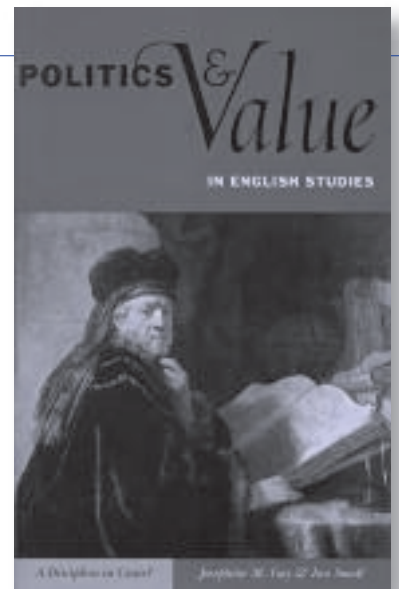
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Yet the new specifications have also had their opponents. Many of these critics have focused on Assessment Objectives 4 and 5, which demand, respectively, that students should make judgements that are 'informed by different interpretations of literary texts by other readers' and show an understanding of the 'cultural, historical and other contextual influences on literary texts and study' (at A2, students should also be able to 'evaluate the significance' of these contexts). Inevitably, these objectives became associated with two

particular types of secondary text: literary criticism, and historical backgrounds. Shortly after QCA's new subject criteria were published, the English teacher Richard Hoyes complained, in an article in the *Times Educational Supplement*, that students would spend so much time reading 'books about books' that they would forget about the books themselves.<sup>7</sup> Another teacher, Mike Craddock, has contended that the new specifications betray a need on the part of QCA to 'control too much and quantify in too specific ways a subject that ought to hold its special place in the curriculum because of its very independence'.<sup>8</sup> Craddock equates the reading of literary criticism with spoon-feeding: if our students are to be engaged in 'the search for something more than a materialistic world and consumerist age offers them', then we must 'get them involved in that search so that they can find their own meanings and identities, not just tell them what to think'.<sup>9</sup> There are a number of problems with this view of English, and what it entails for a subject whose claim to disciplinary status has always been contested. In Craddock's article, A Level English Literature appears less an academic discipline than a process of personal discovery: the scholarly knowledge that helps constitute the subject (in the manner specified very clearly by AOs 4 and 5) is downgraded in favour of an understanding of the 'meanings, dreams, identities, realities, truths of one sort or another that we care about and need' (although Craddock does not specify exactly who 'we' are).<sup>10</sup> Secondary reading, whether in the form of criticism or historical contexts, provides 'ready-made answers' which 'pop up in essays' as 'mangled critical truisms': it substitutes for the authentic experience of literature an artificial process that is dominated by the demands of QCA.<sup>11</sup>

## Is English different?

Yet this vision of English seems, to me, to be asking too much. In seeking to exempt English from the requirements of secondary reading, it demands that the subject should be treated as a special case, set apart from those other A Levels that involve the use of such sources. Of course, the reading of literary criticism and the use of historical contexts presents us – and our students – with a number of problems. Students need to be introduced to ways of handling this material, and to the process of playing arguments off against each other: they need to sift out what is relevant, and find their own critical voice.





But in this respect English Literature is no different from a whole range of other subjects. The AQA specification for A Level History aims to enable candidates to 'understand the nature of historical evidence and the methods used by historians in analysis and evaluation'. It expects that students will develop the ability to read primary and secondary sources – including academic monographs – in a 'discriminating and evaluative manner'.<sup>12</sup> The same board's A Level in Religious Studies aims 'to treat the subject as an academic discipline by

developing knowledge and understanding appropriate to a specialist study of religion'. This knowledge includes an awareness of 'the contribution of modern scholarship' to an understanding of the set topics, and of how different critical approaches – such as redaction and narrative criticism – can be applied to Biblical sources.<sup>13</sup> And I've been struck, over the last few years, by the depth of theoretical sophistication required of my English Language students: one AS question on gender and conversational styles could only be answered adequately if the candidate had studied three specific pieces of research on turn-taking and interruptions. It's hard to think of an English Literature question that would demand a similar level of specialist knowledge, where not having read the right bit of criticism would leave the candidate stumped.

### *It's a curious system when what students worry about is not knowing too little, but too much.*

In this age of transferable skills, it seems odd that students who can demonstrate such knowledge comfortably in other subjects are expected not to be able to do so in English Literature. Yet since the new specifications were introduced, the awarding bodies have been strikingly ambivalent – and inconsistent – in their implementation of AOs 4 and 5. AQA Specification A, for instance, has warned teachers that they should not set tasks that 'directly encourage critical reading and background reading' for their AS Shakespeare coursework, on the grounds that candidates are not expected to be able to assimilate such material at this stage.<sup>14</sup> Yet AQA Specification B's AS Shakespeare coursework explicitly demands an engagement with such material: its Examiners' Report of June 2002 praised some candidates for their 'subtle awareness of historicist criticism'.<sup>15</sup> Specification A's avoidance of any direct engagement with AOs 4 and 5 is also apparent at A2,

where its 'Texts in Time' paper – initially presented as a study of Romantic poets in their cultural and historical context, and pre-1770 drama in its critical context – requires, in practice, very little direct study of contextual material. A circular distributed in March 2002 informed schools that the reading of literary criticism, for example, should be treated as an option and reserved for only the most able: the majority of candidates could fulfil AO4 by referring to discussions in class.<sup>16</sup> Specification A's treatment of these AOs seems to be driven by an assumption that the handling of secondary sources is somehow inappropriate – either intellectually, because it represents a level of knowledge that should not be expected of A Level candidates, or philosophically, because it impinges on ways of learning that are considered more 'genuine'. It's almost as if the specialist knowledge such sources involve is something our students should be discouraged from acquiring.

### Doublethink

The problem with Specification A's approach is that it involves both teachers and students in a bizarre form of 'doublethink'. I know, because I've taught it for the last three years. As a teacher, I feel that gaining an understanding of the contexts of production and reception – and, crucially, of how to express this understanding – is simply part of the subject. I worry about how students embarking on English degrees will cope if they do not have the beginnings of such skills, and even question whether they should be applying for such courses if they do not know what the academic discipline of English (as opposed to Craddock's model of English as personal discovery) actually involves. Yet I also worry whether my students' exploration of critics and contexts will take them so far beyond what AQA wants that it will ultimately handicap them. As a result, my enthusiastic, switched-on and intellectually inquisitive Upper Sixth – one of the best A Level groups I could ever hope to teach – feel that their discussions of critical perspectives on *The Merchant of Venice*, comparing excerpts from critics as diverse as A.C. Bradley and Catherine Belsey, are somewhat improper, their extracts and notes a kind of samizdat text that they should be careful not to quote too closely in the exam. It's a curious system when what students worry about is not knowing too little, but too much.

I'm not suggesting here that we should forget about the affective power of English Literature: its capacity to move, to challenge, and to enlarge. Yet we should, perhaps, be more willing to look to other subjects for examples of how this affective function can be accommodated without any concomitant denial of the importance of academic knowledge. The AQA Specification for Religious Studies, for example, outlines very clearly the opportunities the course gives for students to 'address human experiences of transcendence, awe, wonder and mystery', and to 'explore their own beliefs, creative abilities, insights, self-identity, and self-worth'.<sup>17</sup> Yet interestingly, this specification sees no apparent contradiction between

such aims and the desire for students to take part in a 'rigorous study of religion'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Religious Studies does not seem to have suffered from the same clash of interests as English – a clash described by Stefan Collini as the 'tension between, on the one hand, being simply one specialized activity alongside other specialisms... and, on the other hand, still carrying the burden of being a kind of residual cultural space within which general existential and ethical questions can be addressed'.<sup>19</sup> In English, such tension appears to have created a highly volatile situation, where the mere mention of specialist academic knowledge attracts charges of elitism. Yet if we deny the importance of such knowledge, we risk allowing English to be seen as a 'soft option': a charge that undeniably, the subject can well do without.

Perhaps the time has come, then, for us to be more rigorous in our thinking about what English Literature involves, what gives it its intellectual (as opposed to its moral or personal) authority, and what place it occupies alongside other, comparable subjects. This will involve a willingness to acknowledge that our subject does possess a set of specialist skills and a body of specialist knowledge – factors which enable the student of English to be distinguished from the lay reader. When my student's concerned father stated that he could see no difference between studying English Literature at A Level and reading for pleasure at home, he was unwittingly drawing on a very old set of arguments that were used, in the 1880s, to deny English Literature's claim to a place in the universities: it was maintained that the cultural and spiritual benefits of literature could be accessed just as readily through what was called 'home-reading'. For the subject to be taken seriously, its supporters had to prove that this was not the case. This is a battle that English Literature has never really succeeded in winning – and a battle in which it will not be helped if it is allowed to continue in its present ambivalent form.

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It's true that we need to think about how our students learn the craft of literary criticism. We need to consider how we introduce them to the reading of secondary sources, and how they develop the skills of interpretation, analysis and synthesis that lie at the heart of our subject. And in doing this, we need to be dynamic, proactive and creative. Yet we must also try to challenge the two popular stereotypes of English that I've alluded to in this article: the beliefs, in short, that the specialist knowledge pertaining to English Literature is either dry, dusty and stultifying, or that it is simply nonexistent. This is a matter on which we need both a greater consistency from the boards, and a greater willingness to implement AOs 4 and 5 in a way that is genuinely challenging. Only then will we be able to claim that English Literature is a subject like any other – and only then will we be able to stop being embarrassed about the knowledge it involves.

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