



Doing English - Literary Critical Practices

Professor Robert Eaglestone discusses what the discipline of English involves and what it means to adopt its practices.

To answer the question, 'Why read criticism in English Literature A Level?', compare English with other subjects. In maths, you don't learn off by heart the answers to all the problems (that would be mad and impossible): you learn methods to solve problems. Similarly, in geography, you don't learn everything on a map: you learn to think like a Geographer. At school, you learn not so much facts as ways of thinking about things in the world. And to think in a certain way is to be in a certain way, so really you are learning an identity as a something: as a Geographer, as a Historian. Or, as some year 13s said to me, as an 'Englisher'. Although it's a surprisingly controversial name, you are learning to think as, to be, a literary critic. So if it's not about just knowing facts about literature, what does it mean to think as, to be, a literary critic?

Actually, as soon as you walked through the door of the A Level classroom you became a literary critic.

All educational disciplines grew from very basic human activities. Geometry means 'measuring the earth', presumably vital for early farming societies. Chemistry grew from cooking and making clothes (dyes and suchlike). Literary criticism comes from listening to stories and poems or watching dramas and then asking questions and talking about them.

One of the things that's weird about English, and unlike other subjects, is that while I've read that poem a hundred times, and you've read it for the first time today, we've both got interesting things to say about it. In a discussion, one person can't just bulldoze another with knowledge (because knowing about a poem doesn't really mean 'knowing facts about a poem').

Every subject is made up of the questions it asks of the material it has chosen as its subject: originally practical questions (chemistry: what to mix together to make red dye) then, slowly, more abstract questions. And thinking as a literary critic involves just that: knowing what sort of questions to ask, what sort of ideas to use. But just as chemistry has changed and developed over the ages, so has literary criticism. However, its modern form is only just over three or four generations old, so even though it has changed, it's still about engaging with texts and asking questions.

I'm not going to tell you precisely what questions literary critics ask. It's not as simple as a checklist, and finding out yourself means you'll understand and own the questions more fully. I can do something better, however. I can tell you where the questions come from.

Where Literary Critical Questions Originate

The questions we ask of literary texts are the same deep questions we ask everyday of ourselves and of the people around us. Literary texts are the closest sort of things to us. They are in language. Each

stories and make patterns out of our reality. That means we judge, shape and think about language all the time, so much so that we often just forget we are doing it. Thinking as a critic both reminds us of that and, more importantly, uses that fact. Criticism is about how we use language.

Narratives

Literary texts also have stories. Each of us, in the stories we tell, is a skilled author and weaver of narrative. Just as we judge the stories our friends tell, we can all judge a novel by the high standards of our own everyday stories. We do this all the time, too. So criticism is also about what we use language for. And because it takes longer to read a novel than it does to see a film or to listen to a piece of music, or to play most games, and because novels demand more time and energy, they are more immersive. This is the origin of phrases like 'losing yourself in a book' or 'the book speaks to me', as if a novel was more than just ink on a page or words on a screen. We live in novels more than in any other art form and after reading them they stay with us. I call this the 'after-reading'. So criticism is about what language does to us.

This closeness between literary texts and us means that the questions that critics ask about literary texts are the same questions we ask ourselves. That's why English is so risky. When we read or talk about a text, we are risking ourselves - risking exposing ourselves. Sometimes people say that analysing a poem kills it. But they never say, 'Oh, you are killing this landscape by doing geography all over it' or 'that maths is butchering my enjoyment of numbers'. Actually, if you allow yourself to ask the really important questions of texts, far from being dull, the questioning reaches into the heart of who you are and your own identity.

A Process of Critical Thinking

Learning to think as a critic is a process: I'd say there were six steps. (In real life these all ooze into each other, so breaking it down like this is just to help us think about it.)

First, you'll always begin with your own initial response to the text. This could be enthusiastic or interested or even negative: whichever it is, you should think about why you responded like that.

Second, it's important to listen carefully to the responses of your friends and other people in your group. Somebody else may have seen something that you missed or may have a very different take on the text. When I read Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, I felt sorry for the poor monster; my classmates didn't at all. Criticism you read can be a bit like this too: different points of view that make you think.

Third, you could begin to respond to 'soundbites' about the text: short ideas or suggestions that illuminate it. You might come up with some initial ideas from looking at an online guide to the author or a relevant critical essay. Actually, essay titles are very often 'soundbites' which exist to make you think. So, a good 'soundbite' for *Frankenstein* might be from the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle: 'to live outside society you must be a god or a beast'. Victor Frankenstein, who makes the monster, alone in his lab, away from everyone, is like a god, creating new life: the monster, also alone and isolated, becomes a beast. (Discuss!)

The fourth step would be to read essays or reviews of the text. Just like you, these critics will have ideas and points of view that will guide their response to the text and you can begin to ask what 'position' each critic is writing from. For example, one critic, Franco Moretti, writes that the

monster is denied a name and an individuality. He is the Frankenstein monster; he belongs wholly to his creator (just as one can speak of 'a Ford worker'). Like the workers, he is a collective and artificial creature. He is not found in nature, but built...

Moretti points out that the monster is made of the bodies of the poor, reshaped and given an identity by modern science and industry. He's obviously a critic with an interest in politics and history, and how these shape a literary work and its contexts.

In the fifth stage, rather than reading a critic who develops their own ideas, you could yourself explore different critical positions on the text (you could think of yourself as a feminist critic, say, or one who is interested in the ethical or political issues in a text). Arguing from a certain position can be very revealing, and it also involves discovering something about the critical approaches themselves. (You will probably have begun to think about these approaches in step four.)

The final step is when a critical position is one that you 'own', when a set of ideas becomes part of your 'literary critical' toolkit, always ready to hand. This sixth stage, leads back, of course, to the first stage; only now your initial response will be much more informed and analytical.

Why is it important to think about the processes of literary critical activity and understand more about them?

John Hattie, an expert in education, undertook a huge 'study of studies', covering some 80 million (!) students over many years. He argues that what improves a student's work most is what he called 'metacognition', by which he means, roughly, knowing what you are doing. In English, this means that the thing that helps you to do best most is not (just) knowing the texts but knowing what you are doing with them and why. So knowing why you are reading criticism is, perhaps, as important as reading criticism itself.

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