

## Book Review : Mastering English Literature

By Richard Gill.

(3ed. Hampshire : Palgrave MacMillan. 2006) 528pp. ISBN 978-1-4039-4488-7

Review by kanchana Minson<sup>1</sup>

---

Reluctantly, literature has been integrated into the EFL/ESL teaching. Numerous arguments have been put forward against the use of literature in language classrooms. It is claimed that unique and nonstandard use of language in literary texts as well as rhetorical and literary devices may cause confusion in the teaching of grammar. Literature can also be highly culturally challenging and learners may find it is difficult to unravel. Besides, where academic or professional goals are the focus of the learning such as in EAP or ESP courses, literature is believed to offer no pedagogical benefits. However, a large number of studies still believe that literature is advantageous for language learning in many ways. It helps consolidate reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Literary materials enhance the learning of words and expressions and mechanics of grammar in meaningful and memorable contexts. It is also believed to encourage critical thinking and broaden learners' intellectual perspectives and it is simply an enjoyable way of learning English. (Bagherkazemi and Alemi, 2010 : Carter and Long, 1991; Lazar, 1993; Leech, 1973; Vandick, 1997)

Literature courses are often offered for English major students in many countries of which English is treated as a foreign or second language. Unlike using literature in a language classroom for the purpose

---

<sup>1</sup> Integration and ESOL project co-ordinator, Voluntary Action Broxtowe, Nottingham, United Kingdom

of language practice, in literature courses at university level, students are expected to understand social and historical backgrounds to the texts, literary genres and rhetorical devices, biography of the authors if necessary, to interpret, and to make critical analysis of the texts. Studying literature can sound very daunting and demotivating for students who may not have been taught to read literature critically before, even in their own language, and whose language competency may not be very advanced (Takagaki, 2002; Su, 2010; Vandick, 1997). Therefore, it is often an uphill task for the teacher to find appropriate textbooks to help students fulfil the learning objectives of the course. Whilst there are plenty of textbooks out there, most of them are not written with EFL/ESL students in mind.

In *Mastering English Literature*, although written for students who are studying for A-level examinations and first year students at university in the UK, the author is aware that his readers may not have learned how to critically read literature before. The book is written in a clear and concise manner. Concepts are carefully explained in such simple language that you could almost feel you are sitting in the author's lecture. A summary box at the end of each part of the topic is inserted to help the reader keep track of what he has been reading. The book gives a lot of emphasis on contextualising literature and in depth discussions on historical and cultural contexts are found throughout.

The book is presented into seven parts. Parts one, two, and three present the three forms of literature: the novel, drama, and poetry. In part one, elements of novels such as characters, points of view, plot, and setting are well explained with some short excerpts



to illustrate the points followed by contextualising discussion of the world, society, novels, and their meanings. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, for example, are used to explain how the social world is evident in locations. Nineteenth century London suggests a sprawling and rapidly changing world (p.63). In part two, a discussion of drama and society is introduced to familiarise the reader to this form of literature. Then all essential elements and terms in drama are discussed in detail. Part three: poetry is presented in a rather unconventional yet impressive approach. While most books would rather focus on explanations of literary devices expecting to help the readers to use such knowledge as a tool to analyse a work of poetry, Richard Gill invites the reader into the mind of the poet, deconstructs the poem from a perspective of its creator, and shows the reader how the poet employs linguistic structure and literary devices to convey his message.

In part four, classification of literature genres based on Western conventions: namely, tragedy, comedy, epic, lyric, satire, romance, gothic, and pastoral are explained. Contexts commonly found in each genre, such as human struggle in coming to terms with mortality in a tragedy (p.225) or the threatened lives of women portrayed in Gothic literature (p.276), are discussed in detail. Part five focuses on context: an understanding of history and ideas. The author explains at length the importance of contextual or historical study in literature before exploring concepts such as biblical references, classical civilisation, the Western world and society. Part six shows different ways how a literary work can be interpreted: internal or external interpretation. Major literary theories including formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, Marxism, feminism, and psychoanalytic theory are clarified. Schools of thought and their limitations are covered in

a balance way: enough for the reader to get the idea of what they are, but never too ponderous to put you off.

Part seven devotes to themes—a topic I found the most difficult to tackle when teaching English literature to EFL/ESL students. Aspects of life presented in literature are shaped and patterned by the "world" the writers live in. Unfortunately, their "world" happens to be at least a continent away from our students' world. It is difficult to find a book which extensively and patiently explains how tradition shapes people's minds and how writers employ elements around them symbolically to communicate the main message to the reader. I found this book has done an astonishingly impressive job in explaining the concepts of the natural world, landscape, buildings, society, beliefs and what they symbolise. An idea of Night, for example, is often referred back to Genesis and is used to symbolise chaos, death, and irrational fears. However, it is also traditionally the time for adventure and love as Lord Byron sensually described in his "So, we'll go no more a roving" (p. 432–437). This section is extremely useful for EFL/ESL students to understand Western mentality, ideology, and ways of thinking and to analyse themes in literature. The book concludes with a useful glossary of terms.

Literature is part of cultural heritage. Literature is unavoidably associated with history, society and individual lives. Although it is possible to develop meaning from literature without context and students may proceed through linguistic features of a literary text and may be able to make a meaningful interpretation, a good understanding of a social, political, historical, and cultural background can enhance students' ability to deepen their understanding of the text intellectually

and emotionally (Carter and Long, 1991; Leech, 1973). With its focus on contextualising literature and its easy-to-ready presentation style, *Mastering English Literature* can lessen remoteness of the cultural background which is considered a major hindrance to studying literature of EFL/ESL students. Each section of the book is clear, concise and complete in itself and that means the reader does not have to read the whole book to grasp the basic points. As well as being a good study guide for literature students, the book is handy for professors of literature to flip through the pages if they feel stuck on how to simplify certain literary terms and concepts.



## References

- Bagherkazemi, M. and Alemi, M. (2010). Literature in the EFL/ESL Classroom: Consensus and Controversy. [Online]. (URL <http://www.edusoft.ro/brain/index.php/libri/article/viewFile/71/190>). LiBRI, 1 (1). (Accessed 16 July 2013).
- Carter, R. and Long, N. (1991). Teaching Literature. New York: Longman.
- Lazar, G. (1993). Literature and Language Teaching. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Leech, G. (1973). A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry. London: Longman.
- Su, SW. (2010). Motivating and Justifiable: Teaching Western Literature to EFL Students at a University of Science and technology. [Online]. (URL <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume14/ej53/ej53a2/>). TESL-EJ, 14 (1). (Accessed 15 July 2013).
- Takagaki, T. (2002). The Role of Literature in College EFL Reading Classes in Japan. [Online]. (URL <http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/takagaki/article.pdf>). The Reading Matrix, 2 (3). (Accessed 15 July 2013).
- Vandick, S. (1997). Reading and Responding to Novels in the University ESL Classroom. [Online]. (URL <http://www.njcu.edu/cill/vol4/vandrick.html>). The Journal of the Imagination in Language learning and Teaching, 4. (Accessed 16 July 2013).