HOW TO STUDY LITERATURE

How to Study a Poet

John Peck

HOW TO STUDY LITERATURE

General Editors: John Peck and Martin Coyle

HOW TO STUDY A POET

IN THE SAME SERIES

How to Study a Novel *John Peck*
Literary Terms and Criticism *John Peck and Martin Coyle*
How to Study a Shakespeare Play *John Peck and Martin Coyle*
How to Begin Studying English Literature *Nicholas Marsh*
How to Study a Jane Austen Novel *Vivien Jones*
How to Study a Thomas Hardy Novel *John Peck*
How to Study a Renaissance Play *Chris Coles*
How to Study Modern Drama *Kenneth Pickering*
How to Study Romantic Poetry *Paul O'Flinn*

IN PREPARATION

How to Study a D. H. Lawrence Novel
How to Study Literature: Practical Criticism
How to Study Chaucer
How to Study a Play

HOW TO STUDY A POET

John Peck

M
MACMILLAN

First published 1988

Published by
Higher and Further Education Division
MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Typeset by Wessex Typesetters
(Division of The Eastern Press Ltd)
Frome, Somerset

ISBN 978-0-333-44262-3

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Peck, John, *1947–*
How to study a poet.—(How to study literature).
1. English literature—Study and teaching 2. Poetry—Study and teaching
I. Title II. Series
821'.007 PR504
ISBN 978-0-333-44262-3 ISBN 978-1-349-09536-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-09536-0

Contents

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

Acknowledgements

The author and publishers wish to thank the following who have kindly given permission for the use of copyright material:

A. P. Watt Ltd on behalf of Michael B. Yeats for two stanzas of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan); Macmillan Publishing Company for two stanzas of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' from *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983).

Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the first opportunity.

For Alison

1

First steps

THE two poets I studied in most detail at school were John Donne and John Keats. Donne, I discovered, was a seventeenth-century clergyman who wrote difficult poems about his love of God and equally difficult poems about his love for women. They certainly were difficult poems; I am not exaggerating when I say that I did not understand any of them. I must have managed to stumble out a satisfactory examination answer on Donne, however, as I did go on to study English at university (where, I might add, Donne remained just about as much of a mystery to me as he had at school). I imagine that in the examination I must have waffled about the intensity of Donne's love, and thrown in a quotation whenever I got stuck. I might have managed to convince the examiner that I knew something about Donne, but I knew that I was totally lost with this writer.

My response to Keats, another writer new to me at the time, was far more positive. In most of the poems we studied, I could actually see what he was concerned about. My understanding might have been limited, but, compared to my understanding of Donne, my grasp of Keats was first-rate. The problems began when I had to write an essay about Keats, as I did not really know what to say about poetry. I seem to remember that my usual approach was to tell the 'story' of a poem and then say what I thought it meant, but such an approach did strike me as clumsy. I felt there must be a better way of doing it. Part of the difficulty was that I genuinely liked Keats's poetry, but did not have a method adequate to expressing my enjoyment of it.

The problems I experienced with these writers are, I think, the difficulties a lot of people experience with poetry. A great deal of poetry is hard to understand, and then, if you do understand a writer, there is the question of what to say about the poems you have read. This book tries to provide answers to these problems: it shows you how to understand a poet's works, and then shows you

how to talk about his or her verse. What has to be said at the beginning of a book such as this, however, is that the suggestions offered here do not represent the only way of tackling an author. These are methods I have found useful and which I like to think some of the people I have taught have found useful. I did eventually get to understand Donne's poetry, or at least to understand it sufficiently to enable me to enjoy it, and I am no longer tongue-tied when it comes to discussing Keats. What has helped me sort out my view of these writers is the way of looking at poetry that I describe in this book. The same approach should help you with the poet or poets you are studying. It might be that the particular poet you are interested in is not referred to here, but try to see how I present an approach that should work with any poet. You might, therefore, find it useful to persevere all the way through this book, even if you are studying none of the writers discussed. That, however, is for you to decide: what follows is a method for tackling poetry which should not only help you in examinations but also, I hope, increase your understanding and enjoyment of poetry.

Seeing what a poem is about

Our starting-point has got to be the fact that it is possible to read a poem and have very little idea what it is about. In some cases this is because the poem is deliberately difficult, but often the problem is more basic. There are many poems that are easy to read but at the end of which you can feel at a total loss as to what they amount to. Rather than discuss the issue any further in general terms, let me provide an example: a poem by a Victorian writer, Matthew Arnold, entitled 'Dover Beach':

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; – on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægæan, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

This could be described as a fairly straightforward poem, but you will not be alone if you soon lost any sense of its meaning. Most readers would probably be able to grasp that the poet is in a room at Dover looking out of the window and describing the view, but what could prove confusing is the sudden appearance of Sophocles and then the talk about 'The Sea of Faith'. What is the poem doing or saying? At first it seems to be a description of the view, but at these points it goes off in quite unexpected directions. It might be the case, of course, that you have no difficulty in understanding this particular poem, but I am sure you are familiar with the problem I am describing here of finding it hard to grasp the basic sense of a poem.

What we need is a way of confidently getting hold of this or indeed of any poem and of moving decisively beyond that first feeling of confusion. We need a method for getting at the essence of a poem, so that we can state immediately, 'This is the main thing this poem is about.' Fortunately, it is easy to grasp a poem as a whole in this way. The thing to do is to look for a contrast or opposition in the poem, a contrast which is at the heart of and which informs the whole poem. What helps in the search for this contrast is the fact that remarkably similar oppositions are at the heart of most poems. To understand this, think about life and ask yourself what the main things are that worry and distress people. I am sure that you will agree that it is things such as death and suffering, and the awareness that the lives of many people are far from happy. We worry about the state of society and about violence and cruelty, and on a more personal level we worry about the things that cause stress in our lives, such as school and work and emotional relationships. In short, we worry about a great many things all of which seem to suggest some disorder in our lives or in the world. What makes us happy is even easier to describe: we enjoy security, the security of being healthy and well-fed, of having a role in life, and relating positively to other people. We do not like to feel lost in a cruel, chaotic world; we do like to feel safe and secure in a friendly and reassuring world.

There is a sense in which every poem ever written deals with such issues. The central opposition at the heart of just about any poem is a tension between some idea of security and happiness, on the one hand, and things that are worrying, on the other. The poet confronts what can appear a baffling or frightening or depressing world and searches for something positive, something to celebrate, some sense of security. What, then, can help us with this Arnold poem, or any poem, is the confident expectation we can bring to the work that some kind of opposition on the lines described above will be at its centre. Let us see how this is the case in 'Dover Beach'. I started my discussion of the poem by saying that the speaker in his room at Dover looks out at the view. There is something secure about the narrator's position just as there is something reassuring about the calm scene he describes. As the poem goes on, however, the sea becomes turbulent and ideas come into the poem that suggest unhappiness and misery: this is particularly evident in phrases such as 'human misery' and 'we are here as on a darkling plain'. What we can say, therefore, is that the

poem is built on a contrast between a sense of security and a sense of the misery of experience.

Obviously not every poem deals with the same issue as 'Dover Beach', but the point is that some such contrast between an orderly sense of experience and a disorderly sense of experience will be at the heart of most poems. Knowing this allows us to get hold of a poem very quickly; it helps us get behind the surface of a poem and see its real theme. 'Dover Beach', to return to our example, is clearly not just a piece of nature description. It is a poem about living in an insecure and frightening world, a world where, in particular, the security of religious faith has been lost. This is a big issue to explore in a short poem, but often a short poem seems weighty precisely because it is confronting these large questions about happiness and unhappiness in life. You will find it hard to grasp such matters, however, if you fail to make sensible initial moves with a poem. Begin by trying to see how a poem is built on an opposition. If you can spot a tension, between order and disorder, or between happiness and unhappiness, or between something attractive and something unattractive, then you will be well on the way towards understanding the poem.

Building a response

One implication of what I have been saying so far is that interpretation should start with being able to see almost at a glance what a poem is about. The secret lies in searching for a central opposition. Once you have spotted this, the poem as a whole should start to make sense quickly. In 'Dover Beach', once the sense of security and insecurity has been spotted, it is a direct journey towards realising how the poem deals with the loss of religious faith. The same will be true in the case of all poems: once you have spotted the opposition, you will only be a step away from beginning to appreciate the poem's theme.

The usefulness of the idea of an opposition does not stop at this point, however, for it can help us organise our discussion of every aspect of a poem's structure and use of language. To illustrate this, let us return to 'Dover Beach', and start with the fact that some parts of the poem suggest security whereas other parts convey a sense of insecurity. The simplest way in which this is evident is that the poem opens with some very neat sentences, with lines breaking neatly into two balanced halves; the symmetry of this is orderly

and reassuring. As the poem goes on, however, the sentences become more complicated and involved, and this suggests the loss of simple convictions in life. In every poem there will be similar impressions of simplicity and lack of simplicity in the form of the verse, and it will always be the case that simple, straightforward lines will seem positive whereas complicated sentences will suggest the disorder of experience. A sense of an opposition will therefore provide a way of organising a discussion of the overall formal structure of a poem. That opposition will, however, have to resolve itself or be reconsidered before the end of the poem. This is a fundamental aspect of the structure of poetry. A theme is set up, which is built on an opposition, but for the poem to end it will need to have progressed somewhere, and this can only be done by some alteration of or fresh way of looking at the original tension.

Let me illustrate how this works in 'Dover Beach'. I have already identified a tension in the poem, how feelings of security give way to feelings of insecurity, but Arnold is unlikely to spend the whole poem in an endless moan. The poem has to arrive somewhere. Look, therefore, at the last stanza, where he pleads with his love that they be true to each other. Can you see how the poem arrives at a kind of answer, setting up love as a thing of tremendous importance in a threatening world? Clearly, the particular resolution used by Arnold will not be used by all poets, but a similar general pattern will be evident in all poems. There will always be an opposition, which should prove easy to spot as it will be dealing with some of the major things that concern us in life. If you can spot the opposition, you should then be looking for how the poet alters the balance of things as the poem approaches its end. The 'problem' in the poem will not always be resolved, of course, and sometimes, as is the case in 'Dover Beach', the ending might be rather more complicated than it initially appears to be. What leads me to say this about the ending of Arnold's poem is that he seems to know that the love he talks about is illusory, for he talks about a world that has no 'joy, nor love, nor light . . . '. Love, therefore, is dismissed as an illusion, but can you see how Arnold would rather cling to an illusion than accept a terrifying and vicious world?

What we have seen so far is how the sense of an opposition helps us over any initial feelings of confusion with a poem, bringing us very quickly to an appreciation of a poem's theme, and how it provides us with a way of describing the formal pattern of a work

right through to its conclusion. The usefulness of the concept of an opposition goes further still, however, for it provides an organising framework for exploring the words out of which the poet builds his poem. I am not going to go into this in detail here, as how to talk about the language of poetry is the central subject of this book, but I will touch on one aspect of 'Dover Beach', Arnold's use of 'light' and 'dark' imagery. At the beginning of the poem, when the scene is tranquil, Arnold uses phrases such as 'the light gleams' and talks about the 'glimmering' cliffs, words which help create a sense of well-being, but by the end of the poem there is only the 'darkling plain' and the armies that 'clash by night'. The obvious point is that these 'light' and 'dark' images have helped Arnold bring his theme to life, the original opposition we noted being reflected in the use of opposing images. Wherever you look in poetry you will find that the same thing is true, that the poet uses opposing images to help realise his theme. What this means, is that, once you have spotted an opposition in a poem, the basic discussion of the poet's use of language can be quite simple, as all you need to do is spot the opposing images the writer uses and how they reflect the poem's theme.

A further example

These brief comments about imagery anticipate areas that I do not really want to get into in this chapter, where I am only concerned to show how it is possible to get started on a poem. As I am sure is clear by now, the initial move to take with a poem is very simple indeed: it comes down to spotting an opposition and letting everything develop from there. To illustrate how this approach will work with any poem let us look now at a sonnet by William Shakespeare:

When I have seen my Time's fell hand defac'd
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;
When sometime lofty towers I see down raz'd,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the watery main,
Increasing store with loss and loss with store:
When I have seen such interchange of state,

Or state itself confounded to decay,
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate –
That Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

This is a difficult poem to follow, more difficult than 'Dover Beach', and is so because of the extraordinary compression of ideas throughout its fourteen lines. There is a great deal to take in, a whole series of puzzling lines. You might be able to see that it is in some way about 'Time', but have very little idea what it is saying about this subject. If a poem does puzzle you, the best way to get started is always by looking for a central opposition. Ask yourself, are there ideas and pictures in the poem that seem unattractive, and are there ideas and pictures that seem attractive? My first impression of this poem is that there is very little that is positive. It seems negative most of the time because it is packed with images of destruction and things changing and wasting away. A lot of these images are complex and difficult to absorb, but in the early stages of an analysis you can look through, and ignore, the details. Do not get trapped by every little local difficulty. Try to get at the big theme. In this poem it seems to be time as a destroyer. The idea in itself, however, is a bit flimsy unless we can find something to set against it, so we need to search for an alternative idea that is also present in the poem. The main thing I can see that Shakespeare might be offering as a positive alternative to a world of waste is the concept of love, for what distresses him most of all is that time will take his love away. In this poem, then, as in any poem, we can point to a central opposition; it is built on the idea of the attractiveness of love versus the destructive force of time.

As with many short poems, the apparent subject might be small, just the poet talking about his love, but the significance seems larger because the poem talks about what we cling on to in a world where things are for ever falling into decay. It is the images Shakespeare includes, which touch on and refer to various aspects of experience, which enable such a short poem to appear to be saying so much about life in general. For the moment, however, I do not want to go into this in any more depth. Instead, I want to concentrate on how the poem concludes; we can see that Shakespeare has set up an opposition, but the poem also needs to develop and arrive somewhere. It does not necessarily need to

resolve the tension, but does need a fresh twist or direction at the end. Look again at the conclusion of the poem; do you feel that there is anything different about the last two lines? What strikes me is that Shakespeare drops his elaborate images about the effects of time and talks in a far more direct way about how the thought of losing his loved one distresses him. What has happened is that he has changed emphasis or direction to conclude his poem. There is a pleasure for us as readers, a pleasure we should be able to derive from all poems, of seeing not only how the poet sets up an opposition but also how he brings things to a fresh or original conclusion so that we look at life in a slightly new way.

Is it really as simple as this?

With a bit of practice, you will find it easy to spot the overall pattern in a poem, to see what opposition is set up and how the poet develops that opposition, so that he or she finally arrives at a point that is significantly different from the point at which the poem started. But is it really as simple as this? Are all poems really so similar in terms of their general themes?

My first response to this is to say that the whole issue is even more straightforward than I have suggested so far. I have used a number of terms in talking about the central thematic concerns in poetry, but it can be argued that all poetry is about love and death, and that love and death are at the centre of every great poem ever written. The reason is that we live in a world where the ultimate problem is death; the only thing we can all be sure of is that some day we shall die. That thought is chilling. We therefore need something to make life meaningful. One positive force is the love of God, but another is human love: the point is that love offers a sense of something positive that we can set against the negative fact of death. It can, therefore, be argued that the opposition at the heart of any good poem is between death and love, that the writer examines the only positive thing we have to hang on to in a potentially meaningless and death-dominated world.

Clearly, however, it would be absurdly reductive just to say about every poem that it is about love and death. That would not begin to do justice to the unique quality of every good poem. And that is the real point about the whole method I am presenting in this book. My central concern in the subsequent chapters is with how poets fill out their basic patterns. Grasping a central opposition

only provides you with a beginning, an initial secure hold on the poem which can provide a solid foundation for your subsequent comments. Where so many examination candidates go wrong, however, is that they never get hold of this basic picture, so find themselves lost in a maze, unable to see the broad pattern. It is therefore vital to start by getting hold of the poem as a whole, but this leads on to looking at what really makes a poem come to life, which, as my subsequent chapters explain, is the poet's use of language. What we have done so far is comparable to saying that London and Tokyo are large cities: we have seen the ground-plan that underlies poems, but we have not yet begun to talk about the real texture of individual poems and specific poets. That kind of exploration of the verse itself becomes central in the next chapter, but there are a few more general points that are perhaps best made here.

Getting the measure of a poet

Thematically most poems have a lot in common, but the way in which every poet uses language to develop his or her theme makes every poem unique. Not only does an individual poem have a character of its own, however; the works of a poet represent his or her unique poetic voice. He or she is saying things that nobody else has ever said. This book deals with how to pursue that sense of a poet; its aim is not so much to help you discuss individual poems as to help you piece together a view of an author. And, as you might have guessed from what I have said so far, I am going to suggest that the most rewarding approach is to build that view from the evidence of the poems themselves. Indeed, could there be an approach other than reading and thinking about the poems and thereby eventually arriving at your view of the poet?

The sad fact is, however, that most students most of the time do not approach a poet through the poetry itself. So what do they do instead? Often they approach the poetry from the outside, perhaps through facts about the poet's life and times. I am not saying these facts are unimportant, but it must be clear that they should take second place to a consideration of the actual words of the poems themselves. In the same way, a look at the verse itself should always precede any sense of the poet's ideas or 'philosophy'. In marking exam papers it is sometimes apparent that the candidates are familiar with the poet's views, but write about the ideas with