

The Study of English Literature.

Paper read before the Summer School of Science by Principal
Cameron of Yarmouth, N. S.

How literature should be studied depends of course on what the student's object is in studying it. If he aims at becoming a producer of literature himself or a professional critic of the productions of others he will study his business in one way. What that one way is I don't know, for I am neither a man of letters nor a literary critic. But he will be at no loss for plenty of recipes for success in his chosen profession. One authority will tell him to give his days and nights to Addison, another will recommend the leading articles in the *Times*, and others will prescribe other nostrums. As to the literary critic, if we are to believe one of the characters in *Lothair*, he should first try to be an author and should fail in his attempt; according to others he must be born with the ability to write a two-column review of a new book after merely cutting the leaves and smelling the paper-knife.

But these are matters much too high for me to handle and I pass on to consider some other objects we may have in view in studying English Literature. Perhaps it is to pass an examination on the subject. If so and if the paper of questions is likely to be one of the kind far too common, then my advice would be this, and as a matter of fact whenever I am applied to for advice in such a case it generally is this: You must get the prescribed texts of course, but be particularly careful to get the prescribed editions of the prescribed texts. Having got them, study carefully the preface and the introduction and the notes and the critical remarks and all the appendices — everything in fact between the covers of the books except the text. Study is not exactly the right word to use, "cram" is better. Cram into your memory all the scraps of biographical detail about the author, all the bits of bibliographical lore about the date of the work, the sources of the plot, and the &c., &c., &c.; all the odds and ends of historical and geographical and grammatical rubbish scattered through the notes; and all the parings and scrapings of criticism which the editor has collected or manufactured. Don't bother trying to understand all these things — just cram the stuff into your memory. Don't pack it too tight, however; let it be so stuffed that when the examination comes off you may readily pick out of the mess such fragments as the questions call for and dump them on your paper. If you feel so inclined, and happen to have plenty of time, you may also read over the text itself, but this is not at all necessary. It will be as well, however, to add to your burden by committing to memory some of the portions of the text which the editor tells you are particularly fine. You may not think them fine, you may be tempted to select your own plums, or you may wish to be informed how to tell a fine passage from any other; but you must shun all such wishing and thinking and temptation to thinking. Take the editor's word for it and shovel his fine selections into your mnemonic depository among its other miscellaneous contents. That's about what you need to do in order to pass a good examination in English Literature on the kind of papers generally set in that subject, so far as my observation goes. But while thus acting as stevedore

to your memory don't imagine that you are studying English Literature; you are only cramming for an examination on a school book.

In giving such advice in such a form I know that I am laying myself open to several accusations. I would admit the justice of some of them at once, but there will be charges that can always be made against anyone who feels strongly about something which he thinks a great evil. In the present case I have spoken with the exaggerated contemptuousness of strong feeling of some things which in their proper place I esteem very highly — of examinations and of cramming, and of certain very essential accompaniments to the study of literature. Of the first and last of these I may take occasion by-and-by to make proper amends for my present disrespectful treatment. As to the cramming, I may as well say now all that seems necessary in the present connection. Every one, no matter what his business or profession, knows how valuable is the power of being able in a short time to "get up" a case, to stow away in his memory in some well ordered fashion a multitude of details about some subject on which, for the moment, it is highly important that he should be well informed. This is what is known in educational circles as *cram*. As generally met with in our business it is a thing to be hated and avoided, but that is not because it is an evil in itself, it is simply because, as in so many other things, it is abused; and it is the abuse of cram in connection with English literature that I am condemning. If there must be cram in our school work — and there must be until a new heart and a new understanding are given to examiners and inspectors and superintendents, and other testers and question-putters; if there must be cram in our school work, let us at least keep our glorious heritage of literature free from it. If I had all our educational big-wigs assembled here to-night, I would like to say to them: Gentlemen, if you find it impossible to fix up your testing and examining machinery without encouraging and necessitating cram, then take the dead languages and apply your cram mechanism to them. So far as I am concerned you are heartily welcome to these as victims to your Moloch. And grammar, too, the grammar of our own and other languages, as that subject is generally understood in schools to-day. If you want more victims take such subjects as geography and history. If you must have more still, take modern languages or even some of your prescribed scientific subjects. If still more victims are absolutely necessary, you may even take mathematics; but as to English literature — "hands off!" Whatever educational atrocities you may deem it your duty to perpetrate or to sanction, don't compel your teachers to apply the cram method to the study of Shakespeare.

The average man or woman and the average school pupil who is to become the average man or woman, does not study literature for any of the purposes mentioned so far, and therefore in the case of this important element of society none of the methods of study mentioned so far are applicable. What then do we study literature for?

We read for many reasons — probably none of us are aware of all our reasons — and probably we have never taken the trouble to put some of them into words. Probably also our Anglo-Saxon reticence about serious and sacred things