

The Fresher's Guide to English

So you've chosen to study English? You find a pleasant room which you refer to as your 'garret' and put up posters proclaiming your political beliefs ('Free Tibet!', 'Free Palestine!', 'Free Downloads!'); you purchase an extravagantly priced notebook bound in the skin of an endangered mammal and rent every film version of the year's set texts. But despite the best of your preparations, you've an unsettling problem: people keep asking you what English is and why you want to study it. Because, in the sweat of the breathless introductions and grabby romances of the first weeks, you keep meeting people who study 'proper' subjects - subjects other than English. How do you answer such questions?

The confusion arises because everybody means something different when they talk about English as an academic subject. When my friend Bill says he studies English he's implying that he is "mad, bad and dangerous to know", like Byron. He means he's troubled by bigger problems than sciency concerns like mathematics and how things actually work. He's suggesting he's the kind of guy who would swim an ocean for a bet, fight in another country's war for love or principle, or plunge the fathomless depths of the soul for inspiration--deeds he thinks are advertised by his habit of always carrying a book of poetry in his pale left hand. He doesn't mean that he shags his sister, though Byron did that too; he does mean that he would shag you, given one sniff of the honey. But Bill's is a specifically male version of 'English', treasured through lonely teenage years and an early contact with prohibitive family Calvinism.

When women talk about 'English' they are rarely trying to get laid, which is why Bill is always so depressed. Another friend, Liedewij, studies English because she wants to become an English teacher and always has answers to the questions of what? and why? Her friend Roos hopes eventually to work in an English-speaking country, unaware that most native English ears don't bother to register the differences between the spoken English of various kinds of Dutch people: whether you've just finished a Bachelor degree or just failed HAVO, it sounds like one big Goldmember impression to the English. Roos' tragedy is that she focused on the language rather than the work, a useful trade which could have been her passport to gainful employment in any country she chose.

No one ever studied English in the hope of becoming wealthy (apart perhaps from my friend Michael, who often sends videos of him hurting himself to Johnny Knoxville). Some students, however, cherish the idea of becoming full-time academics, motivated by the same impulse as the Formalists who tried to raise literary criticism to the status of a science in the nineteen-teens. They too wish to join the ranks of those paid to maintain the fiction that English exists as more than a hasty collage of history, sociology and political economy with more pleasing source material. These students have an eye for an opportunity and realise that if we measure it, analyse it according to predetermined criteria, follow a method and explain our results, English suddenly becomes respectably legitimate and we no longer have cause to be jealous of scientists and their almost-certainties.

If this version of English has little appeal, do not be discouraged. English departments will always have room for their share of dreamers and idealists, the ones who will forge in the smithy of their soul the uncreated conscience of their race. So take your oars and beat on into the great ocean of ideas, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. If nothing else you might learn to identify the literary allusions made in this paragraph, and that knowledge could be very useful in a pub quiz.

by Peter Crowe