

The cross in cross reference

Mind the gap

Have you ever hit a stumbling block in your teaching, sweated blood until you have seen the light, then witnessed the scales fall from your students' eyes? I'm sure it is an experience common to most teachers, but how many of us realise that our ability to express any of this is thanks to the Bible? That is where all the idioms in that first sentence originated.

And how many of you, like me, have been brought up short by some gaping hole in your students' knowledge? It can blow carefully constructed lesson plans right out of the water. Sometimes it is just a key fact that has been forgotten; a fact that is a stepping stone to the next level of understanding. An extra half lesson, or even ten minutes may be enough to plug the gap and allow the lesson to carry on. But what about when what is missing is an entire way of understanding the world, something that would take weeks to convey?

Shared understanding

In the Summer 2008 edition of *ACT Now*, the article entitled 'YFC and schools' referred to the 'post 9/11 generation'. The events of 11 September 2001 have had such a huge impact on the world in which we live that the writer could confidently assume that we would all understand what he meant by this short-hand.

What English 'A' Level students no longer seem to realise however, is that almost every author they encounter during their course draws on a similar, once universally understood short-hand. There is frequently a wealth of meaning implied by a writer which goes undetected by students. Not knowing it is out there means that they don't even know that they are missing something. Students do not realise that such simple references as drawing lots, a loaf of bread, lambs, lilies and fish have associations with a text and culture which have had a far more profound effect on the world than even the devastation of the World Trade Center. I am, of course, referring to the Bible and Britain's Christian heritage.



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Biblical illiteracy

I used to teach with the assumption that students had a working knowledge of this rich cultural seam, that it was part of their heritage and would help forge their cultural identity. Yet it seems to me that this knowledge has slipped from students' grasp, as the teenage / young adult subculture moves further and further away from what was once a commonly accepted worldview.

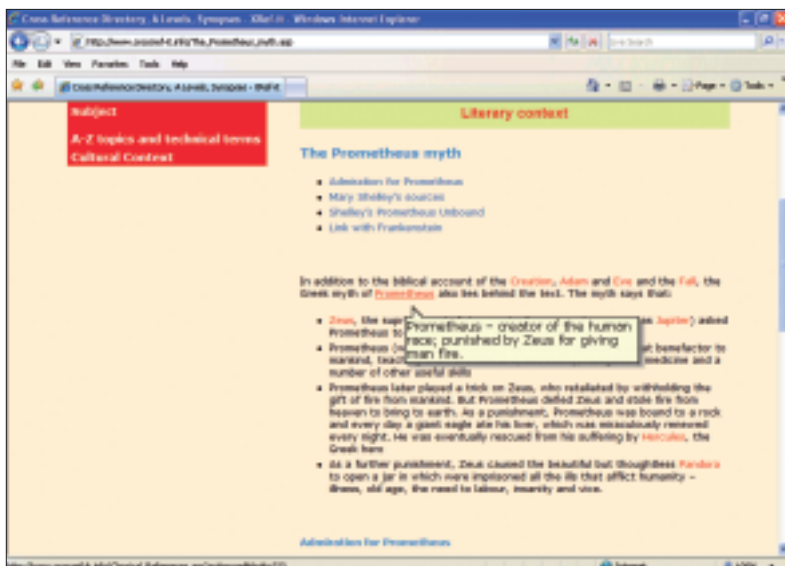
This is why the Cross Reference Project came about. There have been increasing concerns expressed by English Literature teachers, academics in HE, advisors, inspectors and examiners about the lack of necessary biblical literacy and Christian understanding encountered in students and teachers. In the light of this, representatives from the Bible Society, the Christianity and Culture initiative based at the University of York, and The Stapleford Centre put their heads together to create an educational resource designed to address the issue.

www.crossref-it.info

Initially the aim of the enterprise was to create printed material, which focused solely on equipping teachers and students to explore and understand the interaction between Christian thought and English literature.

Three years on, the scope of the Cross Reference Project has significantly widened. It is now all about online materials, designed to serve as a 'one stop' student resource. This means that there is





a summary of the biblical narrative and specific popular stories from it.

Assumption free

We know that many students feel it is far too daunting to actually search through chunks of the King James version, but with one click as they are reading, crossref-it users are given the relevant Bible passage in both the Authorised Version (to which most authors have referred over the last four centuries) and Today's New International Version (for a contemporary interpretation).

The materials make no assumptions about readers' knowledge, which is where other resources frequently fall down. When I looked around for current study aids, I found that most still expect too much familiarity with the Bible, or steer clear of many Christian references altogether.

At www.crossref-it.info there are succinct pop ups to explain terms from 'parson' to 'pentateuch'. After all, given the rate of church reordering, even committed Christians may no longer comprehend what it means for someone to 'slip into a pew'!

Core concepts

Students are not expected to agree with what people have believed in over the centuries – but there is a growing consensus that if they are going to get the most out of literature, they do at least need to recognise that worldview. The Bible needs to be sprung from the confines of its cultural box. Site-wide theological explanations are clear and concise, allowing students to gain an understanding of what authors are referring to, but never presuming that they will share in Britain's traditional cultural belief system.

In order to provide a comprehensive context, the site also provides information on a variety of other cultural concepts, in a very user-friendly way. There are accessible articles about developments in British history, and key concepts such as: the effect of eighteenth and nineteenth century scientific developments; the nature of humanity; communication and travel; and the nature/nurture debate, with links to the literature that reflects them.

A-to-Z

English specialists will be relieved to find articles and definitions of literary terms like 'Romanticism', 'the sonnet' and 'poetic scansion'. Busy classroom teachers are guided through the site by notes which highlight how the materials meet syllabus requirements, and give them ready-made seminar resources.

coverage of every aspect required for successful literary study by the 16–19 age group.

We start with where students are at: website information is structured around current and forthcoming popular exam texts. These guides cover all three literary types and include nineteenth century novels like *Frankenstein* and *Great Expectations*, the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and poetry from Chaucer to Hopkins.

Fully comprehensive

Further texts are currently being commissioned, reflecting the release of new exam courses. All are written by experienced 'A' Level teachers, lecturers and examiners, and include the basics like synopses and textual commentary, as well as guidance on exam technique and tips on writing successful essays.

This is what we might expect a pressurised student to look for as they grapple with the initial demands of their syllabus. But of course there is much more on offer. One of the key assessment objectives of 'A' Level English (and vital for undergraduate courses), is an appreciation of the context in which works were produced. A particular strength of the www.crossref-it.info website is its comprehensive coverage of this. The site deals with texts in context.

Reflecting the initial inspiration of the project, alongside text specific guides, there is supporting information to help students access a wider understanding of the Christian and biblical foundation to western culture, including directories of common sayings from the Bible (if you want to 'go the extra mile'), and literary titles inspired by it (eg *After the Fall*, *The Pearl*). There are essays and articles about what is in the Bible, how to read and understand it,

References to classical mythology and philosophy are explained and there is a comprehensive A-to-Z of literary, theological and wider cultural technical terms. All this is helpful to students and teachers irrespective of whether they are studying one of the featured texts.

All the materials are designed to be cross referable with each other, hence the project title! This allows the student to follow links to other areas as far as they wish, thus catering for all levels of aptitude. It is a dynamic way of learning!

The best of British

Creating materials for the web has been a very different process than that which we envisaged for printed guides. It is ironic that information about literature now has to be shaped for a generation that does not 'do' books and reading.

Post-modern culture tends to assume that only the present is really relevant. This mindset does not sense the need for any continuity with the world which shaped Donne, Dickens or Marlowe, or even McEwan, Hughes and Friel. What does that do to students' entitlement to access, understand and appreciate their cultural heritage, not just through literature but through art, music, architecture, law and science?

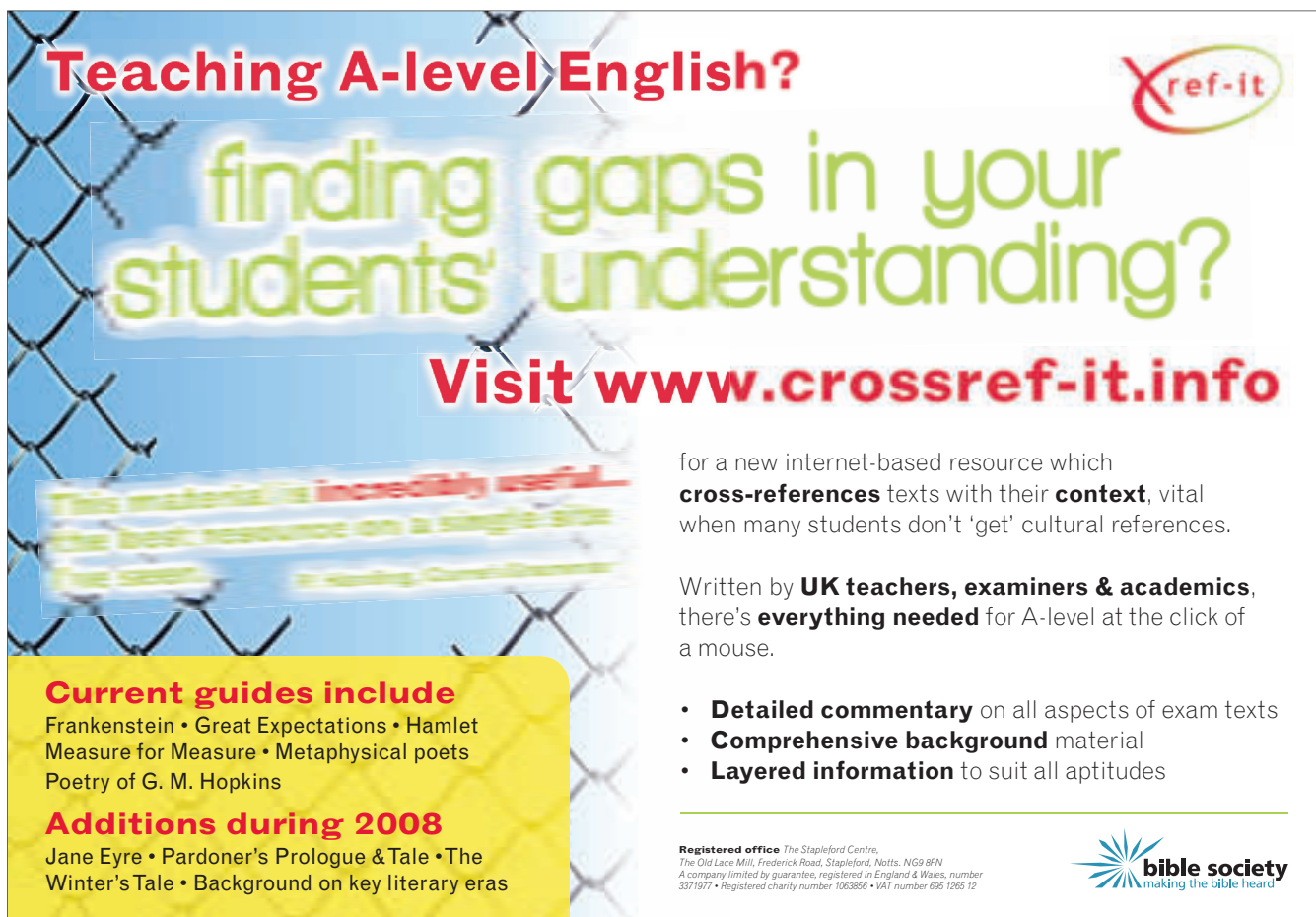
Most of the teachers that I have known hold that education needs to have an impact beyond the confines of the classroom. As our society and the media grapple with what it means to be British, I believe resources like www.crossref-it.info have an increasingly important role to play, in allowing students of all faiths and none to identify where people are 'coming from' and what has shaped cultural development for the last millennium.

Spread the word

Thanks in part to the international reach of the internet, English has also become the lingua franca of the world. More students are studying the subject across the globe than ever before. This presents us with a huge opportunity to help international students engage with British culture, without the influence of their own cultural and governmental spin.

It's a big challenge for what began as a small project, but one which crossref-it materials seek to meet by continuing to adapt and grow. Why not explore the site and share in the adventure? Then you can pass on the URL to English Literature students and teachers whom you know and spread the word.

■ Sue Coyne



Teaching A-level English?

finding gaps in your students' understanding?

Visit www.crossref-it.info

This material is incredibly useful - the best resource on a single site

Current guides include
Frankenstein • Great Expectations • Hamlet
Measure for Measure • Metaphysical poets
Poetry of G. M. Hopkins


Additions during 2008
Jane Eyre • Pardoner's Prologue & Tale • The Winter's Tale • Background on key literary eras

for a new internet-based resource which **cross-references** texts with their **context**, vital when many students don't 'get' cultural references.

Written by **UK teachers, examiners & academics**, there's **everything needed** for A-level at the click of a mouse.

- **Detailed commentary** on all aspects of exam texts
- **Comprehensive background** material
- **Layered information** to suit all aptitudes

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