

PLANNING AND RUNNING A COURSE ON ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The present article does not propose to solve the problems of teaching literature. Far from it, it simply aims at sharing a teacher's experience with undergraduates with her colleagues. Methodology of literature must be a complex and risky subject otherwise how can one explain the almost total absence of titles on it in publishers' catalogues? I suspect it is something one learns in practice, observing students' reactions and trying one's best.

At the very beginning of my experience in teaching literature one thing I knew I should not do: base my methodology on lecturing. My own experience as a student had taught me that teachers' lectures, no matter how brilliant, are quite ineffective. The student has to do something, not only listen to the teacher and occasionally participate with a sentence or two. Memory plays tricks on us, and after a few months we are bound to forget what seemed so striking the moment we heard it.

The second tenet I hold is that studying literature must be an enjoyable experience. Students should work hard but find it worthwhile and gratifying.

The third belief I abide by is that literature is important in itself. This has nothing to do with any philosophy connected with "art for art's sake". It simply has to do with a belief that literature is

important for the self, it is important for life. Consequently, although different fields of experience are called forth in the study of literature-philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, sociology, geography, etc - these other subjects must come naturally into the discussion of particular literary works, whenever fitting, always tentatively and with the purpose of illuminating the text. The literature teacher is not a living encyclopaedia (the Renaissance ended a long time ago) and cannot aspire to be an expert in so many areas of interest. Scientific humbleness is an essential quality for all professionals, and the literature teacher has to remind him/herself of it quite often for the temptations to forget about it are numerous in his/her daily activities.

My fourth tenet is connected with theory of literature. For the past decade or so, literature teachers have been overwhelmed by an avalanche of theories they can hardly keep up with. It seems that the more enigmatic the theory the more fashionable it becomes, at least for a time. After a long period of Freudianism, there came structuralism, new criticism, deconstructionism, new historicism, and now the fad seems to be post-modernism and "cultural studies." Obviously, the poor literature teacher can hardly keep the pace with so many currents and still read literature. Yet, if he keeps in mind that theory of literature is a subject in itself, an item of the curriculum, he will stop feeling guilty about his lack of expertise on the subject. Thus, my tenet is that theory of literature is not an aim for the literature teacher but a tool. He may use any theory he finds adequate, always keeping in sight his major aim: the teaching of literature. Furthermore, I still believe that it is not the theory that should dictate one's approach to the literary text, but that it is the latter that should dictate the approach. Thus, it seems obvious that if one is dealing with a highly psychological work it is not structuralism or new criticism that will be the most convenient tools to analyse it.

With these tenets in mind, let us see the implications they entail. The first tenet leads us to the fact that if the methodology

discards lecturing, except occasionally and mostly as an introduction to a subject, the students ought to be required to work. Thus, I generally prepare questions for them to discuss and answer, either in groups or individually. They may also be asked to prepare questions and ask their mates. After a time for preparation, the students present their answers orally and a discussion follows. Some written work may also be required. The questions follow two stages, the first, connected with understanding (textual reading), the second, connected with technicalities. Keeping in sight the fourth tenet, a certain amount of theory will be provided previously through the reading of a text or a hand-out and then the technical questions will be proposed. Thus, if the work at hand is a stream-of-consciousness novel, for example, the students will receive a hand-out on the stream of consciousness to equip them with the necessary tools for analysis. If the work is a utopian satire, a hand-out on utopia and satire will be provided, or an oral explanation; if the text is a poem, a hand-out on poetry and poetic devices will be furnished, and so on. I particularly like the hand-outs because they are something concrete the students will always be able to read and consult when necessary. Besides, they convey useful bibliographies for further research.

The second and third tenets, respectively the pleasure that should be derived from studying literature and the latter's importance for life and self, have to do with the choice of the material to be read and its amount, to begin with. The teacher generally faces an unanswerable question when planning his/her course: what is the students' reading speed, since he does not know them? The experienced teacher will probably surmount the problem, but the beginner will have to rely on his/her common sense. We all know that the students work part-time and we may guess the amount of reading they will be able to perform in a week. I always try to help my students with a kind of deal: all the work will be done in class, and they will do the reading at home since that is something no-

body can do for them. I seldom assign more than fifty pages a week, anyway. Furthermore, we read and discuss poetry in class while they are engaged in reading a novel at home, for example.

In a seventy-hour course (one term) we generally read two novels, one play, about eight poems (by three to five poets), and eight short stories.

I always try to select as varied texts as possible, so as to provide the students with a pretty good view of the period production and make the course interesting. Thus, if the programme covers the twentieth-century English literature, for instance, I shall concentrate on Modernism and may assign a novel by Woolf, or Forster, or Joyce's *A Portrait*, or Lawrence, and one by Huxley, or Orwell, or Burgess, or Golding, for them to see the variety of the production and the several trends of our century. We will also read stories by Conrad, Kipling, H.G. Wells, W.S. Maugham, K. Mansfield, Evelyn Waugh, Angus Wilson and other authors. Since we are all aware of the fact that the university courses will probably be to many their only contact with English literature I prefer to stick to the canon; I wouldn't like to be responsible for their ignorance of the English great writers. The same concern dictates my choice of poets: Yeats, Auden and Dylan Thomas, at least.

Besides the care with the selection of material I always try to make the students discuss the texts in their context and relate them to their lives. If the short story being read deals with child psychology, why shouldn't they learn how sensitive and intuitive children can be and how careful we have to be in dealing with them? Why can't we learn with literature? Why can't we learn with other people's mistakes? After all, the meaning of catharsis remains as elusive as ever, and one of the possibilities is that of living vicariously different experiences. Should we keep our minds divided in compartments? In one word, why remain aloof and supercilious instead of open-minded and receptive? This is too Horatian, someone may argue. Yes, it is. And why shouldn't it be? Is there anything better

concerning the aims of teaching literature? Are we smarter than Horace?, I ask.

Thus, this is the experience of twenty years I have dared to share with you. Every teacher will have his/her own methodology, but exchanging experiences may be fruitful and anything is valid as long as it aims at our students' benefit.