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The Glories of Reading the Proper Way

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The Glories of Reading the Proper Way

What do you do if a student cries in class?

It comes up sometimes in literature classes, especially if one encourages personal responses. It usually happens like this. We are reading a novel by Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and pick a passage to respond to. One student responds to a passage early in the book, where the parents of “poor Tess” are shown to be poor parents indeed, the sadly incompetent captains of a sinking ship aboard which the children are helpless passengers who did not even volunteer for the journey. For this student, the passage evokes her childhood with a fluttery, indigent single parent, who would spend profligately on ponies for birthday parties while the gas and electricity were being shut off. The passage maps so precisely and powerfully onto the student’s life that, hearing it and her response read in class, it assumes an emotional intensity and proportion for the class that casts the rest of novel in its shadow, properly, I think. That is, this student’s response “updates” Tess’s predicament, and lends its own emotional power as a kind of propellant with which we all rocket off to further readings. And to just plain further reading, of what for many of my students is a rather long book. This, however, is not the student who cries.

That not very academic emotion instead seems to accompany a student whose response seems more wayward, for example, the student who focused on Tess losing her baby and having to baptize and bury it herself. It is never mentioned in the novel afterwards, this student noted, and that seemed highly unrealistic to her. This was because her mother had lost a child and cried about it for years. This missing child was a ghostly presence in the family, one this student was aware of throughout her years in that household, present at anniversaries and birthdays and Christmas and at the odd meal or moment, when her mother would burst into tears. Reading this student cry, Hardy did not understand, she said, the loss of a child could be remarkable enough.

This is always a delicate thing, trying to convey student feelings in class, trying to convey the author and work.

If this were a story, I report a kind of confrontation of the student with the text, the energy, as in my first essay_. If one is examining this lost child in the text and notes, talking about Sorrow. This does not seem to be realist. Let’s see, Tess is raised on the site of that crime—Sorrow. This was not a readership with no help from an ideal husband. She stokes the novel, as emotional consumables she works in, as mourning machine she works in. The child expresses emotion, for the child? for her lost child? rather than depressable. This is a bit of Hardy’s biography. He had children, a sort of that crime—Sorrow. This was never spoken of, years. The student would suddenly express emotion, it was ignored! it is central to her plight, herself, her life, to Tess dies on the gangplank, and weep, and long after her, Tess, a person she knew, and meals and anniversaries.

This is reading, hurrah, in this class, this can indeed happen. I edit her paper, adding to her response. She enthuses for the student literature. She saw fit. She made the

What mattered
in class?

I was teaching literature classes, responses. It usually was a novel by Thomas Hardy. I would pick a passage to read in class. One day I read early in "Tess." The children are shown to be incompetent captives of their environment, the children are chosen to volunteer for the annual Christmas and New Year's Day parties while the parents go off. The passage seemed to get into the student's head. She began to cry. I read in class, it went on for a long proportion of the page. It was not a happy ending, properly, the "updates." Tess's emotional power was not used to full rocket off to greater understanding. No further reading, of course, on that long book.

This is what the student seemed to understand. This sense seems more real to me than a story that focused on optimization and produced a happy ending. What the student focused on was the household, the family, the Christmas and New Year's parties. Her mother would burst into tears. Reading her response paper aloud made this student cry. Hardy, probably because he was a man, did not understand, she concluded, the powerful sadness the loss of a child could bring, and thus didn't consider it remarkable enough to return to later in the novel.

This is always a delicate moment for a teacher, honoring student feelings and perceptions and honoring too the author and work under examination.

If this were a story of successful teaching, I would report a kind of conversion narrative. The strong emotion of the student would be translated into intellectual energy, as in my first example. As a class we would be examining this lost child problem. We would turn back to the text and note the oddness of the child's name, Sorrow. This does not seem a very realistic name. Maybe realism is not what this passage is about, I would hint. Let's see, Tess is raped, conceives, and bears the fruit of that crime—Sorrow. She buries her sorrow, alone, with no help from anyone, not parents, not church, not husband. She stoically plods through the rest of the novel, as emotionally frozen as the frozen beet fields she works in, as mechanically numbed as the threshing machine she works beside. Then in an instant she expresses emotion, in a wild murder. Why? for her lost child? for her lost childhood? Sorrow turned to anger rather than depression? I would then skillfully elicit a bit of Hardy's biography, that he and Emma could not have children, a sorrow that haunted the marriage and was never spoken of, though it hung over them for forty years. The student whose mother cried all those years would suddenly exclaim that Tess's lost child is not ignored! it is central! it is the symbolic embodiment of her plight, herself, the lost child, and when that child Tess dies on the gallows we must hang our heads and weep, and long after reading this book be haunted by her, Tess, a person now in our heads at odd moments and meals and anniversaries.

This is reading, I imagine, in the proper way. And, hurrah, in this class all these marvelous things did indeed happen. I encouraged this student to rewrite her paper, adding the class's insights to round out her response. She enthusiastically agreed. She gave it to me, for the student literary magazine, to publish there if I saw fit. She made no revisions. I published it.

What mattered to her were her mother's tears.

The Improper Way

I still feel a little guilty relating the story about Tess and the girl whose mother cried throughout her childhood. I feel sometimes I have failed the girl, sometimes failed Hardy, maybe failed my profession. I can feel shame in how my colleagues might view my shoddy teaching, which never did get the rewrite out of that student, and still accepted it, in fact praised it. I can make a case for what I did—we can all always make a case—but the feelings recur.

I don't feel guilt or shame, however, listening to Dire Straits on tape as I drive to work. I have a cheap radio with a lot of static, and cheap ears with a lot of static too, so often I can't make out all the words of any song I listen to. This is like being a Catholic in the old days of the Latin mass, when I would hear the priest intone things like "Janie Towy, Janie To-kway, Pa says you can't go out to-night." I created a narrative from the materials at hand, and felt untroubled by my effort, and only mildly curious about what the Latin really meant. So with Dire Straits.

Right now my favorite song is "Brothers in Arms." Lyrics are notoriously lame without music to carry the emotional coloring, so listen to these with thunder, war, tiredness, loyalty, and hope on your brain:

These mist-covered mountains are all now to me
But my home is the lowlands and always will be
Some day you'll return to me your valleys and your farms
And no longer long to be brothers in arms.
My head fills, upon no good evidence, with the story of Robert Frost and Edward Thomas, each laboring alone as writers with no success, in their middle thirties and about to give up, then discovering in each other true brothers-in-poetry. Both feel seen, understood, appreciated, they write to and for each other. Then Thomas goes off to fight in the Great War in France. He says he'll come to America to live with Frost after the war, and sends his son to live with them in safety for the duration. But he's killed by an artillery shell in 1917. I imagine this song as Thomas' letter to Frost, safe back in America. I also remember my own years of struggle, to leave the farm, to become educated, but how those lowlands are somehow always home. I remember the Army, being a forward spotter for artillery, like Thomas. I begin to feel the incredibly complex mixture of emotion art can bring, in this case an intense loneliness which at the moment of greatest pain is paradoxically sweetened by the companionship of the song, sharing the pain like a brother, a brother-in-arms against the pain. And then the loss of that brother:

Now the sun's gone to heaven, moonlight in your eye. Let me bid you farewell, every man has to die.

I well up with tears right there. Am I crying for Thomas? for his orphaned son? for myself? for all those lost and abandoned souls in that war? or around us every day? for my own dead brother? The one question I don't ask is, am I getting the meaning of the text.

If there are professional Dire-Straits experts out there, they will care. They will feel pity or anger at my interpretation of this song. If one of them were my teacher, and let me get away with my "reading," with the flights of imagination I make about me and Edward Thomas and Robert Frost, brothers three, he or she must feel guilt and shame. Doubtless accurate knowledge of the lyrics would sharpen my interpretation. Doubtless further knowledge of the writer would deepen my appreciation. Doubtless none of this would make me like the song any more, and it might make me like it less. I'm a bad student. I don't care about any of that stuff. I'm already getting all I could ask of a song playing three minutes on a radio as I drive.

I care about the tears. I don't want to revise that reading.