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TEACHING LITERATURE FOR RELEVANCE

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For the last thirteen years, I have taught literature chronologically from its most basic beginning and always with a running historical commentary. Students need to see what actually happened. Who did what to whom? When was it done? How was it done? Can we determine why an act was done? Studying history helps, but when we add stories from the same time period, we add the hearts and souls of a people. We see their fears, dreams, ideals of beauty, beliefs, conflicts, heroes, gods, and hobbies. Put simply, literature is a way to become another being in another place. We become these characters and so understand what and why they do act the way they do; we have the privilege of seeing the consequences without emotion while paradoxically feeling those same emotions. We experience a different reality and gain understanding of those who have come before us. As we learn more about our ancestors, we come to understand and accept more of who we are today.

Understanding who we are today helps us to direct our futures with wisdom informed by generations who have gone before us. Each generation charts new experiences, doubts, and questions, with new answers and beliefs to make sense of their worlds as they knew them. To have access to such knowledge offers us the chance to understand ourselves now in our deepest sense of community. Seeing the roots of problems and conflicts and their counterparts of epiphanies and heroism helps us to define who we are as a society and, as our sense of society enlarges, as a global community. The study of history gets us close to understanding our past, but the study of literature makes understanding our past selves a “living” reality.

Every literature course can be taught with history as a way to learn about ourselves. American history with American literature, British history with British literature—there is no better way to learn the “humanities,” that field of study of our humanity. Most literature textbooks today mesh historical information with the literature of its day. What most textbook editors fail to do, however, is connect the changes in literature with the changes in man’s ability to perceive. Literature can show us how people actually thought about their world through its forms, techniques and genres. There is a process of birth for language. From sounds come letters, which when combined with other letters becomes a word, a symbol for an object or sensation able to be held in memory. From a string of words comes perceptions; a string of paragraphs, the development of greater, more complex observations with casual effects. From these paragraphs come literary works in different forms: poetry, prose, and fiction. Then these forms are multiplied many times further into specific genres and techniques associated with those forms. No word is born within a vacuum, just as no genre or literary technique can be born without an environment to conceive it. Forms of literary works and their genres, their devices and techniques, their vocabulary and diction—all are derived from a particular environment, a particular way of thinking. By tracing these changes in literature, we actually see society’s thinking changing with each story written and each poem sung. We can trace our changing conscience from era to era, directly to our own television shows, movies, and radio songs. We can see ourselves in the mirror with a greater understanding of all that has brought us to this moment in time.

Whenever I correct essays, I find myself again and again writing in pencil within the margins, “develop and connect with thesis.” Our current textbooks fail to “connect and develop the thesis” of literature. The textbook excerpts are arranged chronologically, annotated historically, and complemented with biographical notes. The questions are arranged to respond with an accurate denotation of the reading, a personal connection with

the characters, and an understanding of certain literary techniques being used. What textbooks fail to ask is “why” those characters, those themes, those techniques, those settings, and so on. The answer to the “why’s?” tell us about ourselves.

Let me offer some examples. Oral literature promotes certain techniques as mnemonic devices. With each era’s oral literature we can see these mnemonic devices in place. For Anglo-Saxon epics and elegies, there is the alliteration forming the strong two beat caesura, two beat rhythm. Such a rhythm forms a strong, percussive beat for warriors celebrating or lamenting. Their kennings offer word play for cunning minds, and their epic devices pass on cultural mores within its characters’ conflicts and settings. The epic *Beowulf* captures a people’s history, sense of heroism, and world-view. The scop who remembered these stories for the whole group were misplaced by the Norman world of feudalism. No longer in a tribal community offering homage and advice to the king, scop now lived in a society focused on individuals offering homage to other individuals above them, ultimately paying homage to a king. Feudalism is more stratified with less movement between social standings. Alienation is much greater. Scops no longer could convey a national image of itself to a people; they were a conquered people who adopted the ways of its captors. Scops were replaced with minstrels who traveled from town to town. Maintained by the offerings of the townspeople instead of being maintained by one group of people, the minstrels became the means by which the people maintained a sense of connection with the outer world. These feudalistic French minstrels brought with them their ballads with distinct literary mnemonics of a syllabic iambic tetrameter and trimeter rhythm alternated with a rhyme scheme of *abab*. These ballad techniques were more adaptive to short narratives told in short easily memorized stanzas about individual experiences rather than one long interwoven story of a people’s culture, as in the epic. In other words, short episodic moments could be captured forever in a society that has been rifted

from its roots with the introduction of the French culture and language.

Examples of how storytelling shifts from the epics to ballads can be seen in the most commonly anthologized ballads of “Sir Patrick Spence” and “Barbara Allan.” The ballad of “Sir Patrick Spence” is based upon a true event from approximately 1285 when a Scottish king, without regard for the safety of his nobles, demanded that many Scot nobles travel across the sea for him during weather that guaranteed trouble. The nobles go, loyally pledging their fates to their social betters, the king, and drown for their loyalty. The ballad ends with the image of their wives waiting and waiting and a sense that the king had broken a sacred trust between king and fealty. This sense of betrayal runs within the ballads. We know that such a disruption within the social hierarchy of losing so many nobles in one storm would have impacted the common people, so much so that a song would be composed to remember this catastrophic event. The same sense of betrayal is found within the ballad “Barbara Allan.” Though no proof that a mismatched love between Sir John Graeme who lived on top of the hill and Barbara Allan who lived deep within the town exists, the possibility of such a conflict is easily understood within a rigid hierarchical social structure. Medieval society did not allow the mixing of social stations, particularly a mixing of such intense social differences as lord and peasant; they actually passed laws to keep social lines distinct. Behind “Barbara Allan’s” compact lyrics is an intense drama that would have had the town buzzing for years, possibly centuries, for we still read about them in our current textbooks. Minstrels, through their ballads, shared the individually experienced stories from other towns, capturing a bigger sense of the world within song, and then shared these stories from town to town. Most ballads are about pain and suffering as a result of social changes or beliefs or broken mores. Ballads capture the common, daily view of life and its heartaches; they are social songs sharing common pains within the community.

The Renaissance, however, finds a new way to share individual pain. Instead of betrayal by a

king or a husband or lover and those affects upon the community, poems begin to focus on issues of personal love: issues that define, question, complain, apotheosize, warn, and philosophize. Instead of telling epic tales that capture an entire culture or episodic tales that capture a communal experience, sonnets reflect on individual thoughts and feelings about oneself and one's place in a world. The Renaissance world is a world where marriages are arranged as power contracts, where corruption in the church is turning people's heads, where knowledge from the Middle East is poring forth into newly expanded universities, where the plague has broken feudalistic ties to the land, where King Henry VIII has broken religious structures, where theaters allowed people to be someone outside the social structure and fit into no structure.

It is in this Renaissance world where individual's personal thoughts and feelings are explored and appreciated, and so literature arises within the conflicting worlds of personal love and social power. These concerns are transformed into new forms of literature: sonnets, novels, pamphlets, pastoral poetry, essays, and complex plays. When looked at closely, the sonnet is a syllogism or a hypothesis with a conclusion; we can see the same symbiotic connection existing between the nascent growth of scientific thought and the birth of the sonnet during the Italian Renaissance. The English novel created by Thomas Nashe focuses on a common individual who works himself out of social predicaments. Pamphlets wage war with individual opinions about religion and proper social conduct. Pastoral poetry focuses on preferences for an idealized nature where true love can be found in contrast to the convoluted politics of court. Contrasting Marlow's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Sir Walter Ralieggh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" make clear the extreme worlds of idealized nature and the reality in which people find themselves. Yet many of Shakespeare's plays place the finding of true love outside the confines of the court: characters find true love on a wild island, an exotic coastal city, the forest of Arden, or a rural villa. Within the court, however,

exists power plays that result in death for Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, and Hamlet, characters who choose power over love. The essays, especially those written by Sir Francis Bacon's, focus on using language in an exact, clear prose to explain how to view the physical world without being misled by false premises. And then the theaters are built and 15,000 people a day in London watch the fictional predicaments of fictional people, and the imagination of an entire culture soars to new heights. There is no stopping science and imagination now. Freed from medieval constraints, literature explodes outward to new audiences and inward to analyze the dreams, hopes and ambitions of individuals who mirror ourselves or share personal thought processes about our world. Interestingly, we see the literature taking on scientific qualities in form (the sonnet or essay), in content (focusing on real people with real issues), and technique (masterfully controlling iambic pentameter with a strict rhyme scheme, great verbal word play, and the birth of blank verse to enable the writer to create more natural speech). We see new changes in form and content exploding in the Renaissance with the essay, novel, and complex plays—each one with great detail and precision carefully exploring new ways of thinking and writing. Consider Hamlet who questions the purpose of being and action in a corrupt world and Macbeth who dares defy the social hierarchy by putting his needs above the ingrained social structure, a man who chooses power over love and loses everything. Each new genre, form and technique is born from the new ways of thinking by people within time. By studying the genres, forms and techniques, we also study the way people organize their sense of reality.

Shifts in reality can be seen when a people, for the first time in English history and possibly Europe, legally declare a king treasonable—Charles I. A people pass judgement upon the king and chop off his head. This shift in social structure and individual social responsibility is so great that a new form of literature begins to dominate: metaphysical poetry. John Donne's *Meditation 17* stresses the oneness of a society in his famous line "No man is an island" and his poetry provides paradoxes about

the realities we see around us. George Herbert's and John Donne's poetry show this new understanding of rethinking our relationships with each other, with God, and with society. While royalists focus their poetry on maintaining honor and court pleasures, a puritan of great education, John Milton, and a tinker in rural England, John Bunyan, write religious, allegorical epics in poetry and prose to redefine man's relationships in a world turned topsy-turvy by power politics coming from the common people. *Paradise Lost* and *Pilgrim's Progress* are works from authors, both rich and poor, who speak out against the politics of the day. Students can see the power of the written voice spreading down into society as education and freedom increase. And yet this education and freedom increase mainly because literature demands that people be allowed to grow and express their pains and joys; subversively or outright, the voice of the people cannot be stopped. Such a landmark idea is immortalized in Milton's "Aeropagetica", an essay arguing for freedom of speech.

Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Pepys are excellent examples of voices from the common man. Diaries, journals, and satirical essays become the norm as people struggle to make reality comprehensible. Pepys personally records the most minute detail in eleven volumes to keep a personal record of reality for himself. Pepys diary had been written completely in code. Only he knew what he wrote. Literature for the first time is being used to define one's own personal reality for oneself and no one else. Defoe and Fielding use that same minute detail to recreate fictional worlds so real that the main characters come alive for their audience, so alive and real that censorship becomes an issue. For the first time, with the refinement of the novel in the 1700's, readers can immerse themselves in the worlds of other beings and see their worlds from their perspectives—many times the worlds of thieves, survivors, and rogues.

We continue this analysis of literature as an insight into real people struggling with real changes within their society, and we see how new forms, genres, and techniques are born. We see the authors

who begin to champion the smallest within society: Blake writes for the poor, the children, and the downtrodden in his poems; Burns writes about a mouse (an absolutely incomprehensible idea to an Anglo-Saxon) with whom he empathizes as a "fellow creature" in his groundbreaking poem "To a Mouse." Burns breaks free of "correct" language and recreates a "real" world using the rural vernacular of the Scottish. Literary themes change to encompass greater masses of humanity to understand who we are within this surrounding world, what focus we should have, where the truth life's purpose lies, and so are born the Enlightened writers of Pope and Swift who use reason and highly controlled language to mock or lecture upon social beliefs. Satires and mock epics become the fashion.

A backlash against this cold, rational approach to language is found within the Romantic poets of Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Byron. Romantic literature forces us to think about our relationships with the true source of life, not our rational minds but our intuitive souls. Keats explores beauty as truth in "Ode to a Grecian Urn" while Wordsworth explores the divine soul out of tune with nature in "The World is Too Much With Us." Mary Shelley in her novel *Frankenstein* writes about the role of society in creating its own monsters by using science to manipulate nature and then abandoning such creations because of our inability to empathize with those around us. These Romantic writers set the standards for Dickens who in fifty years will help the novel to mushroom into every level of society as he recreates through detail, dialogue, figurative language, and complex plotting the worlds of the orphan, the forgotten student, the child from the blacksmith shop, and others overlooked who struggle to survive. Interestingly enough, at the same time literature focuses on the poor and oppressed, the most far reaching social reforms are beginning: slavery is abolished; the Boys Scouts, the Salvation Army and the YMCA are born; social reforms include changes in factory employment, public health, voting standards, and education. The literature mirrors the issues of the day, and who is to say which one begins the other?

Victorian literature abounds in novels that explore in great detail the worlds of others, worlds that can only be survived by personal honesty and remaining true to oneself. We see reflected within Victorian poetry the angst of a people who have lost their way because of Darwin's new theory on the origin of the species, especially in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" or the characters of social perversion who have set themselves up as gods in their own right in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, "Pophyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess," or Rudyard Kipling's "Recessional."

Modern literature continues this search for meaning in a world shaken from the secure confines of theology, national identity, righteousness, and propriety. The focus on real details with real people has intensified with the outpouring of autobiographies, novels and movies based on real events, and a rewriting of history in historical fiction or remakes of the classics into modern settings and characters.

To help students see our fascination with history, I have them read a modern novel that takes a new approach to our past. For the sake of students who need action packed, easy to read stories, I have chosen Michael Crichton's rewriting of *Beowulf* in his novel *Eaters of the Dead*, otherwise known as *The Thirteenth Warrior*. They read Robert Bolt's famous play *A Man for All Seasons* to understand the power politics of the Renaissance and the role of religion within those politics. I point out that Bolt uses a real historical moment to shed light on the politics of his own day: the Civil Rights movement. Students also read Crichton's *The Great Train Robbery* to see how history is woven into a good story as a means of helping us relive the greatest train heist from the perspectives of the criminals. As readers, we come to admire the criminals' ingenuity and secretly cheer when they get away. We discuss how much of our literature today, our movies, songs, novels, and television shows, focus on the criminal's perspective, a far cry from the Anglo-Saxon world of heroes. Today we try to understand the criminal's mind, motives, psyche, and history because in a world of individuals torn from the social definitions

of family, nation, gender, and religion we need to understand who we are. The last novel students read is Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* as a way of proving that modern literature is obsessed with understanding the individual's ability to survive social boundaries and the living proof that even the poorest amongst us can become Pulitzer Prize writers.

The students' final product before the final exam is to recreate their own short fifteen page story based on fiction. I want them to relive a moment in time by imagining what such a moment would have been like and how different it would have been from our own understanding of the world, even though both times involve people who love and hate, strive and hide, live and die. We are no different from our past; we have only experienced a little more and so have accrued a better perspective on worlds outside of our own. We come to understand that our past was what it was; it could be no different, and so our past sins are not to be judged but understood. We can learn from that past and so control our future. And we control that future by writing and reading. I prove to my students that they can be authors if they so choose; the power to recreate their worlds is in their hands.

Literature textbooks do offer almost the closest portraits we can make of our past; but if we take that study of literature to a deeper level, we find even deeper understanding. For this understanding of reality, I teach British Literature beginning with the Indo-Europeans in 2,500 B.C.. to the growth of the Celtic tribes throughout Europe and into England, to the conquering Romans, to the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, the source of our first written English literature, compliments of the church. With each succeeding era, we trace the techniques, forms, vocabulary, and genres appearing in each era. Our most prevalent study is of the Anglo-Saxons, Medieval, and Renaissance with a quick survey of the Reformation, Enlightenment, Romantic, Victorian, and Modern. Once I have laid the groundwork of the symbiotic connections between history and literature in all its images, I carry the thesis through a quick study of other historical

works. Time is my enemy in this course for so much about literature must be understood and then connected with its own historical context. But eventually we do touch upon the modern and then quickly jump into final exams.

On the final exam I simply ask my students to trace the transforming consciousness of man as can be seen within the literature we have studied, the exact same question given at the mid-term exam. Just as students had practiced then, they can trace our understanding of ourselves, our religion, our women and men, our social responsibilities, and our sense of nature through the use of literary techniques and devices born into those historical eras. What the students trace within the final exam is not as important as the fact that they do trace a theme that is strongly supported by the literature and its techniques. I ask them to tell me in their conclusions how their own experiences with literature on television, in the movie theaters, and on the radios help to continue this theme they have traced. Where do they project that we will be as a society? What are the key issues to be explored within their generations? Only by time we have reached the point of the final exam can the information begin to have relevance. Finally the students are asked to put together the mosaic of history and its authors and read for us the picture that they see. The students make sense of the literary works for themselves and their understanding of who their forefathers and mothers have been and whom they will be for the children yet to come. The final exams are difficult, but generally some attempt at relevance is made. Not all students are ready to study the minutia of authors, forms, techniques, themes, and historical events; but for those students who do, the essays are illuminating and inspiring.

We teach literature for a reason: the best reason for education itself—to better understand ourselves. With each new work studied, we gain a larger understanding of ourselves: the beauty and truth within the literature begins to resonate within our souls.

We may not have all the historical facts about the mundane lives of our ancestors, but we can understand what motivated them to change our society, to speak out and tell a story so that a society may better understand itself. The struggle of understanding continues today. We are surrounded by stories on movie and television screens searching for the fragile line between criminal and common behaviors, between justice and mercy, between righteousness and compassion. We hear songs demanding a full sense of sexuality and empowerment to all. We continue to seek out stories and songs that resonate with our souls that will one day be studied to understand better whom we have been. If we can teach students to find the relevance in literature that has existed long ago, they will also understand the relevance of their own literature. Such an understanding about our society and ourselves found within that literature is an empowerment that will be socially transforming. Nothing could be more relevant.