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# The Role of Values in Teaching Literature in the High School

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The effort now underway to improve the quality of education in the high schools will have little success without the active participation of students in their own education. But engaging high school students in their classes is no easy task for today's teachers. Over twenty years ago, social scientist James Coleman put his finger on the reason why conventional high school courses so often bore their students:

> Modern adolescents are not content with a passive role. They exhibit this discontent by their involvement in positive activities, activities which they can call their *own:* athletics, school newspapers, drama clubs, social affairs and dates. But classroom activities are hardly of this sort. They are prescribed "exercises," "assignments," "tests," to be done and handed in at a teacher's command. They require not creativity but conformity, not originality and devotion, but attention and obedience. Because they are exercises prescribed for all, they do not allow the opportunity for passionate devotion, such as some teenagers show to popular music, causes or athletics.[1]

For high school English teachers, the discussion and examination of the value issues inherent in literature is a major element in engaging

students. Once students see how the values in the novels, plays, and poems they read relate to their values, once they see that the world of literature is really their own world, that literature is a source of insight—even wisdom—into the human predicament, they are on their way to "owning" their English classes.

James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for instance, has, like all good literature, many elements. Certainly students should understand the historical and sociological aspects of *Portrait*—the struggle of the Irish nationalists against England, the role of Charles Parnell in that struggle, the power of the Catholic church, with its strict dogma, over the Irish. The biographical elements are also essential. In many ways Stephen Dedalus is James Joyce, and an acquaintance with Joyce's personal life certainly will contribute to a full understanding of the novel. Furthermore, a student probably cannot grasp *Portrait* without familiarity with its technical and aesthetic elements, especially Joyce's use of the unreliable third-person narrator and stream of consciousness.

The problem that I had when I began teaching *Portrait* was that students could understand all the historical, sociological, biographical, and technical elements in the work, could get A's on all the tests, and still say, "I didn't like it. It was boring. Why did we have to read that?" They weren't "owning" the work, and I wasn't satisfied after teaching it. After two years of struggling with *Portrait* I realized that I had been assuming too much. I had taken for granted that my students understood the values in the novel and how all the difficulties Stephen was experiencing in growing up were similar to their own difficulties.

The next time I taught *Portrait*, I made a deliberate effort to link Stephen's world to the student's world. This involved getting away from the text a bit, and at first I was reluctant to do so. Like most teachers I felt that there was never enough class time, and I wanted to spend the time I did have "covering the material." However, once I loosened up a bit and talked about Stephen in terms of the students' own feelings and experiences I could see more of them responding to the novel. We discussed Stephen's decision to be an artist rather than a priest in terms of their own decisions about what colleges to attend and what fields to major in. We compared the fear Stephen felt about leaving his family and country to the anxiety they feel about graduating and going off to college. We examined parallels between Stephen's courage to go against his friends and their struggles to become independent. In the abstract this may sound like an excess of relevance-seeking, but in reality many of the discussions were poignant and, more to the point, they made Stephen Dedalus, living in oppressive Dublin in the 1890s, very real to kids living in liberated Alexandria in the 1980s. This time around far fewer asked, "Why are we reading this?" I felt that I had



achieved a breakthrough with *Portrait* and that many students were making it their own. I think it also helped that I finally loosened up enough to tell them about my own youth in a strict Irish Catholic environment. My stories about confession, for instance, helped make that ritual—so crucial in Stephen's life but so foreign even to Catholic students today—a bit more comprehensible.

When I first taught Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, I had the same difficulty I had initially had with *Portrait*. I felt that I just was not connecting with the class. Even the best students seemed indifferent. After two years of teaching it, I finally realized that at the heart of this great play lies a value question of supreme concern to high school students: How does one strike a balance between work, duty, discipline (all those values represented by Hal's father, King Henry IV) and freedom, passion, play (all those qualities represented by Falstaff)? Now as we go through the play I try to direct the discussion toward that central issue by raising questions like: What causes some kids to be overachieving grinds who give up a lot of the fun of high school? What is it that causes others to do no work at all and generally waste their lives away? How does one deal with the guilt that comes from disappointing a demanding parent? Is it possible to achieve a balance between work and play, planning for the future and enjoying the moment? To many teachers this kind of discussion may seem a waste of time better spent on textual analysis, but for me it is a successful way to help students to understand and become involved in one of the world's great plays.

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was another work that used to give me trouble. My breakthrough with this novel can be traced to a girl in my class two years ago. I had always assumed that Tess had been seduced by Alec, and few students challenged my assumption until this young woman insisted that Alec raped Tess. She brought in an article from *Ms.* magazine entitled "Date Rape: A Campus Epidemic?" to help argue her point.[2] The article dealt with the insensitive attitudes of college males toward females, how some young men will force a date to have sex, and how the young woman will blame herself. It also discussed the fraternity "gang bang" phenomenon. Was this a fit subject for a high school class discussing a Victorian novel? In retrospect, I would say yes indeed; the discussion provoked by the article—on the ethics, or lack thereof of young people, on the double standard, and on the need for more communication between young men and women—seemed to bind the students to the novel and to give them real insight into and sympathy for Tess's struggles in a male-dominated society. For the last two years, students have loved *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and much of that has to do with the discussion of values sparked by the "Date Rape" article.

One of the works I taught successfully from the beginning was

*Light in August*. Joe Christmas's struggle to find his place in southern society and the constant injustice that society deals him seem to strike a deep chord in young people. Underlying all our discussions of the novel is the basic value assumption that each individual has a special dignity and is entitled to be treated with respect. Our school has an equal percentage of blacks and whites in its population of twenty-four hundred students, and though the races live in peaceful coexistence, there is a great deal of unspoken racial hostility. *Light in August* has prompted many discussions on the often-taboo topic of racism in our school and has made students more sensitive to the pernicious effects of racism both on its victims and on its perpetrators. Of all the novels and plays I teach, *Light in August* seems to engage students the most. Many of them have persuaded their parents and grandparents to read it.

Students also become engaged in poetry, come to experience ownership, if they can see how the values in the poems they study are relevant to their own values. Granted there are some poems that are basically exercises in rhythm and are relatively value-free: Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo," for instance, can be experienced on a purely aural level. But, as poet Robert Lowell said, "Poetry essentially operates in the realm of values."

When I teach poetry, I begin with several works that explore a topic of central concern to the lives of many teenagers—the relationship between parent and child. While we do analyze the technical aspects of these poems, I also emphasize the value issues inherent in them. For instance, John Ciardi's "Boy" and Richard Wilbur's "The Writer" afford teachers a wealth of imagery and figurative language to discuss. But the reason students find both poems so compelling is that they raise the question of how much authority parents should and can exercise in the lives of their children. Both poems have sparked intense exchanges on the values of obedience, authority, and freedom in families. Furthermore, the pain and uncertainty that the speakers in both poems experience as they struggle with their parental roles come as a revelation to many students. They seem to discover that being on the other side of the freedom-and-authority seesaw is not as easy as they thought it was.

Maxine Kumin's "Life's Work" and Phyllis McGinley's "The First Lesson" involve related value issues. In these poems, the speakers are children who must struggle to break away from their fathers to find fulfillment. Young women, especially, respond very strongly to these poems and their common themes that daughters cannot let their fathers live their lives for them.

Adrienne Rich's "The Middle-Aged" and James Dickey's "The Aura" address the natural misunderstandings that arise between parents and children and the profound, unspoken love that exists despite



those misunderstandings. "The Middle-Aged" has generated some of the fiercest discussion I've ever seen in a classroom. Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse," Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," Louis Simpson's "The Goodnight," Peter Meinke's "Advice to My Son," and Robert Mezey's "My Mother" are other poems on family relations in which my students have shown keen interest.

By starting the study of poetry with works dealing with value issues that are important in the lives of the students, I feel I have a much stronger chance of engaging them with the literature, of getting them to experience ownership in the works. Once they are engaged, once they experience poems that speak to them about their lives, students see poetry—and, by extension, all literature—as having worth and meaning. They become much more eager to study and discuss the technical and historical aspects of literature and to tackle poems that at first may not seem accessible. At that point, I feel comfortable moving to more challenging poetry—that of Donne, Keats, Arnold, Yeats, Eliot—with one eye always on the values inherent in the poems and how those values relate to and illumine the students' world.

Poetry can also be used to shed light on novels and plays. For instance, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem, "the poet's eye obscenely seeing," can give students who are reading *The Great Gatsby* a clearer understanding of one of the essential themes of that work—the corruption of the American dream. Robert Frost's "Two Tramps in Mudtime" puts Prince Hal's struggles to integrate work and play, vocation and avocation in a new context. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" can help a student understand the timelessness of Hamlet's confusion and doubt, as Browning's "My Last Duchess" can illuminate Othello's jealousy. The purists might say that using a poem to illustrate a value in a novel or play is prostituting the poem. I have found, however, that the students' understanding of both the poem and the larger work is often greatly enhanced when the poem is seen in the context of the issues raised by a novel or a play.

In *Horace's Compromise*, Theodore Sizer asserts that "there is opportunity for student ownership in every class in every subject if the teachers value it."[3] It is hard to tell whether some teachers do not value ownership, or whether they just do not know how to help their students achieve it. But the impression I get from talking to students is that ownership is missing in many classes, and that often teachers are to blame. One of the most common student complaints is that teachers merely dispense facts.

"In many classes all that's going on is a transfer of information. Teachers who teach like this don't seem to realize that they are making themselves obsolete," says Yael Ksander, a National Merit Scholar.

"We can get everything they 'teach' just by reading the textbook. In one class the teacher is just a presence up there in front of us. We know it's alive—that it's flesh and blood—but it just goes on babbling, off in its own world, totally out of touch with what we need to master the subject matter."

Teachers who are wedded to factual information usually will not view student ownership as important. The question of values will seldom arise, for once their students grasp "the facts," these teachers see their job as completed.

Another complaint I heard frequently from students was that teachers themselves often do not appear to "own" or to be engaged with or enthusiastic about what they are teaching. "Sometimes it's hard to tell whether it's the subject or the teacher that's boring, but many times it's the teacher," says Elisabeth Orshansky, who was accepted to Harvard and Stanford. "Some of them just stand up there and read their notes, and at times the notes don't even make sense. Maybe these teachers aren't really boring people, but just afraid to show their personalities to teenagers. The problem is that if you're not naturally interested in the subject matter and you get stuck with a boring teacher, chances are you'll never get interested."

Of course some students have such low skills or are so jaded by the video culture that they will find even the greatest teachers boring. On the other hand there are teachers who are, for whatever reason, just plain boring, and boring teachers, as Orshansky says, are deadly. I feel this is especially true of boring English teachers, for they can kill a student's interest in the world's most compelling literature. They seldom spark in their students that exhilarating recognition that the world of literature is one with the students' world. They usually create alienation from, rather than ownership of, the literature they teach.

The biggest gripe of students, however, seems to be that too many teachers just do not understand kids as kids. "So many teachers don't have a very accurate picture of what we're like. Some of them seem to think we're a bunch of degenerates who don't care at all about school, and others feel that our whole life revolves around their subject. Very few really understand us, but those who do get the most out of us," says John Hendrickson, one of four seniors with a straight-A average. English teachers who don't understand kids and their world are obviously going to have great difficulty in helping students connect the values in their lives to the values in literature.

High schools aren't the only places where there is a failure to connect studies with life. In his article entitled "The Shame of the Graduate Schools," William Arrowsmith comments, "The most remarkable and agonizing feature of graduate education is, I think, the gulf between one's studies and one's life, between what we read and



how we live. Our studies are alienated from our lives and—such is our professionalism—we are usually required to side with our studies against ourselves, against our lives."[4]

And, apparently, many college English teachers, like their high school counterparts, aren't willing to work hard at connecting literature with their students' lives. In an address to the 1982 Convention of the Modern Language Association, Wayne Booth berated college English professors for their indifference to undergraduates who are not English majors. "We hire a vast army of underpaid flunkies to teach the so-called service courses, so that we can gladly teach in our advanced courses those precious souls who survived the gauntlet. Give us lovers and we will love them, but do not expect us to study courtship," said Booth. Too many English teachers on all levels, it seems, want classrooms full of ready-made scholar-aesthetes eager to soak up whatever literature is assigned. They will not face the fact that, if there is no courtship, especially courtship through the discussion and examination of values, there will be little ownership.

All this discussion of ownership through values is fine, but it will be for naught unless English teachers first solve the very mundane problem of getting students to open their books and read. English teachers too often assume that those kids sitting in front of them deferentially smiling and nodding have read the assigned material. The fact is that many of them will actually fake it with Cliff's Notes or their own cleverness, unless they are prodded to read by old-fashioned scare tactics such as objective quizzes to monitor their reading. I find that when such quizzes are given on a regular basis, most students do read their books. The few who don't may respond to as little additional stimulus as a phone call to parents. In April 1984, when I was pressed to finish teaching *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* before the May Advanced Placement test, I announced that there wouldn't be any quizzes because we needed time to discuss the book. "If I can't trust you at this time of year, it's too bad," I told my classes. It may have been "senior slump" or spring fever or a combination of both, but several students slacked off in their reading and succumbed to the Cliff's Notes temptation once the threat of quizzes was lifted.

The fact that many kids need to be prodded by quizzes and grades discourages the purist in me. Shouldn't the subject matter, the world's greatest literature, be enough in itself to compel them to read? The fact is, however, that many do need the prodding. But the practice is worth the effort. I have taken consolation from seeing students who practically had to be browbeaten to do their reading suddenly become swept up by the power of the work and find themselves unable to put it down. But I have also been told by former students how they have faked their way through English courses in college as well as high school because

teachers were too proud—or too lazy—to monitor their reading by giving them quizzes.

In addition to getting students to open their books, another very basic problem facing high school English teachers interested in ownership is the young age of students. Many even of the ablest youngsters just do not have the experience or psychological maturity to grasp the significance of many great works of literature. This is especially true of high school boys, who usually lag a year or two behind the girls in their development. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is probably included in every high school British literature text in the country. Yet I wonder how many seventeen-year-old boys can truly comprehend or be moved by that profound work—by the antitheses between art and life, youth and old age, passion and permanance that Keats so subtly presents.

How many students have been turned off to great literature simply because it was assigned when they were too young? Some teachers seem totally oblivious to this problem and just forge ahead in the name of "high standards," teaching the literature they like and assuming that there is something wrong with any sixteen- or seventeen-year-old who doesn't share their refined taste. These are usually the teachers who can regularly be heard in faculty lounges complaining about the quality of their students.

I have had students who were soured on *Hamlet* because it was "taught" to them in eighth grade. I also have known youngsters who thought that modern poetry was something totally unintelligible because some junior high school teacher thought that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was suitable material for twelve- and thirteen-year-olds.

Robert Wallace's poem "In a Spring Still Not Written Of" addresses the dilemma posed by the youth and inexperience of students. The speaker in the poem is an English teacher reading poetry to a class of college women. The class is meeting outdoors on a beautiful spring day, but the students are hardly experiencing ownership of poetry:

> *. . . all the while, dwindling,*
> *tinier, the voices—Yeats, Marvell, Donne—*
> *sank drowning. . . .*
>
> *Calm, indifferent, cross-legged*
> *or on elbows half-lying in the grass—*
> *how should the great dead*
> *tell them of dying?*
> *They will come to time for poems at last,*
> *when they have found they are no more*
> *the beautiful and young*
> *all poems are for.*[5]



The speaker in Wallace's poem is, I believe, unduly pessimistic. Even high school students can be engaged by certain works of Donne, Marvell, and Yeats. Yet the poem illustrates so well the difficulty of finding works of literature that will "work" with a particular age group. This is by no means an exact science, and even if one teacher has success with a particular piece of literature, another teacher may not. The critical factor is often the teacher's own love and enthusiasm for the work. As I once heard someone say, the best English classes are those where you can't tell where the book ends and the teacher begins. Because the teacher's relationship to the work is so important, administrators and curriculum specialists must give teachers some latitude in choosing works to teach. Administrators with scant background in the humanities (and very few high school administrators do have a solid grounding in these subjects) might assume that any English teacher can teach one work as well as another work. This is, as teachers know so well, not the case. For instance, I love *Othello* but am lukewarm toward *Macbeth*. Whenever I teach *Othello*, I seem somehow able to interest many students in it. The three times I've taught *Macbeth*, however, I have had little success. Hence I think it would be counterproductive for my students if an administrator handed me a rigid curriculum that required I teach *Macbeth*.

Though the teacher's love of the work is a key factor in engaging students, it by no means guarantees that students will respond in a similar fashion. I certainly love *Moby Dick* and *Joseph Andrews*, but even my best students have found them tedious and boring. There may be teachers who can interest adolescents in these two novels, but I am not one of them, so I gave up teaching *Moby Dick* and *Joseph Andrews*. At first I worried that maybe I was giving in to students, that perhaps I should teach these great novels regardless of how my charges reacted, and that maybe some day in the future they'd look back and appreciate them. In retrospect, though, I think my decision was sound. There is enough great literature that young people can readily make their own that there is no reason to feel bound to works that students find alien.

The question of what literature should be taught to what students is especially vexing in a large urban high school such as mine. Our English department has four academic ability groupings, euphemistically called "phases." At the top are "Phase 4" courses (also called Advanced Placement and honor courses) for those who read above grade level as determined by the Stanford diagnostic test. The brightest kids in the school are in these courses, although there are also a lot of

not-so-bright, lazy upper-middle-class kids who are there because of their parents' pushing. There is no question that students in the "Phase 4" courses, as well as those in "Phase 3" (youngsters who read at grade level), should be and are immersed in the study of literary classics. However, when one gets to "Phase 2" (reading one or two years below grade level), the suitability of these works is not so clear. I have seen a few great teachers excite "Phase 2" students about traditional literature. But it does take an extraordinary teacher to communicate successfully the richness of classic literature to students at this level of ability, and there simply aren't many extraordinary teachers. Nevertheless, kids reading a year or two below grade level can, and therefore have a right to, study the humanities. Of course, the choice of works for these students has to be very judicious. They can't really handle some of the more sophisticated works that most students in honors courses can—a Faulkner novel, for instance. But at the same time, they are being shortchanged if teachers limit them to popular novels like *Jaws* and *Salem's Lot*.

A more serious problem arises with what we call "Phase 1" students—high school kids who have the reading ability of a sixth-grader or below. Some educators and policymakers, including several contributors to this volume, are calling for a core curriculum in the humanities for all students. I'm not sure they understand the difficulties involved in transforming that ideal into a reality. I wonder how many of these policymakers ever tried to teach Shakespeare to an eighteen-year-old who could barely read street signs and who could not comprehend paragraphs of the simplest newspaper article. The tragic fact is that there are many such students in American high schools. In my school they make up perhaps 12 percent of the student body. These kids simply *cannot read* the literature that we consider part of everyone's heritage and birthright. Should we try to find, or create ourselves (as one of my colleagues did) condensed, watered-down versions of the great novels and plays so that these kids will at least be familiar with the characters and plot lines of these works? Or should we concentrate on survival skills and on raising the reading level of these students as much as possible before they leave school? Many teachers, myself included, try a combination of both approaches, but few of us feel that we are really accomplishing much. Trying to get these youngsters to experience any sense of ownership in class is the most frustrating aspect of high school teaching. For my part, I am hopeful that the situation will improve as the push for higher standards brings about improved reading proficiency at the elementary level. But we are still a long way from achieving our goal.

Teachers who encourage students to discuss and think about the value issues raised in the study of literature run the risk of being



charged with "indoctrination." Sometimes the charge is justifiable. I have seen teachers use the study of literature as a vehicle for their own political, religious, or moral views. Several years ago, our principal came under fire from all sides when one of our English teachers was "teaching" reactionary Christian fundamentalism laced with anti-Semitism, and a social studies teacher was "teaching" value-free, if-it-feels-good-do-it ethics. Needless to say, there are some very strange people in the teaching profession, and any parent would shudder to think of them imposing their objectionable values on children. But there is a real difference between discussing and examining the value claims inherent in a work and using the work as an object lesson in an attempt to force one's own moral code on students. For instance, in Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going," the speaker (and in this case we may assume that Larkin is the speaker) views religion as an outdated social ritual that has little meaning in our time. Teachers could choose, depending on their religious leanings, to attack or defend Larkin's view, and in doing so risk alienating a portion of the class. Or, more profitably, teachers can discuss Larkin's views for what they are—one of many possible responses that people today have to religion. Using the latter approach, I have seen students who are very religious, both Christian and Jewish, as well as students who have no religious beliefs, find "Church Going" absorbing.

I don't believe that open and honest examination and discussion of the values in literature sends students the message that there are no fixed values at all. High school kids are much more sophisticated than many people realize. They know that in our society certain values are open to discussion while others are not. They know that intelligent people can and do disagree about religious beliefs, sexual ethics, and many other value issues. At the same time they know that values like racial justice are fixed. The teacher who openly sides with Faulkner's statement against racism in *Light in August* is not going to be accused of indoctrinating students, for he is simply expressing a moral truth. The teacher who simply explores, without taking a stand, the attitudes toward sex in the "carpe diem" poetry of Catullus, Andrew Marvell, e. e. cummings, or Edna St. Vincent Millay is not advocating hedonism or promiscuity, but is examining various stances toward values that can vary from age to age or person to person.

It is not our job as English teachers to teach particular values to our students. Rather, our job is to use values to teach literature. If values are learned in an English class, they are learned indirectly. For instance, Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* has probably done more to "teach" my students the value of brotherhood than any work I've taught. Yet this lesson is a byproduct of reading the novel. I did not choose *Song of Solomon* to teach brotherhood: I chose it because it is

about a young man's struggle to grow up. When my white students identify with the young man, "Milkman" Dead, a black, they experience a sense of brotherhood that is too often lacking in their everyday school life. An insensitive, meddlesome teacher, determined that students "learn" the brotherhood lesson of *Song of Solomon*, could negate the experience that comes from the book itself. Likewise, I know that students of mine have gained insight into parenting and a stronger respect for their own parents from Adrienne Rich's poem, "The Middle-Aged." But I never said, "This poem teaches you that you should respect your parents because . . ." etc., etc. I merely discussed the poem and the values in it. Those who "learned" values did so simply because they understood the poem.

English teachers must pay attention to the ways in which the values in literature relate to students' values, but not in order to indoctrinate, convert, or save students. We must do it to engage students, to create a sense of ownership in the classroom, or else we will reach only a limited number of them—the high school equivalent of "those precious souls" that Wayne Booth mentions. Moreover, if we teachers of the humanities won't discuss values, it is doubtful whether we should be teaching the humanities at all. We cannot reject the significance of values in the teaching of the humanities without rejecting the humanities themselves. The great works of literature, art, philosophy, and history are rich in values, and students cannot truly understand those works without understanding the value issues inherent in them.

Those English teachers who are not willing to make the effort to show students how the great issues in literature are related to issues in their own lives will perhaps do just as well to limit their attention to "communication skills"—to grammar and composition—and to hope that their students will discover the wonder and power of literature when they are out of school. Better that than to lead students to believe that great literature is so esoteric, so far from their experience, that only a few precious souls can own it.

## NOTES

1. James S. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education* (New York: Free Press, 1961), p. 315.

2. Karen Barrett, "Date Rape: A Campus Epidemic?" *Ms.* (September 1982): 48–50.

3. Theodore R. Sizer, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 165.

4. William Arrowsmith, "The Shame of the Graduate School," *Harper's* (March 1966): 51.

5. *Poems on Poetry*, comp. and ed. Robert Wallace and James G. Taaffe (New York: Dutton, 1965), p. 133.