

THE THEMATIC APPROACH TO LITERATURE

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(Much has been said about a "thematic" approach to literature. Miss Garvin offers a summary and some implications for those who must decide how much attention to pay to statements about theme as a basis for organizing the teaching of literature. She is a graduate student at the University of Minnesota.)

R. S. Hennis says that "for more than thirty years English teachers have been in the throes of a controversy concerning the nature of the literary experience and the philosophy underlying the teaching of literature,"¹¹ and this controversy is reflected in the variety of approaches to the teaching of literature advocated by individuals or groups of teachers. In all of the questioning of approach and content in literature in the schools, two questions emerge again and again:

1. Can programs be devised that are sequential and cumulative from the elementary school on upward?
2. What are the most profitable ways to approach a literary work at various educational levels?

This investigation is concerned with the thematic approach as a possible and profitable means to a sequential and cumulative program of literature study in secondary schools.

Jerome S. Bruner, in The Process of Education, reasons that cumulative learning is made possible by specific transfer of skills from one task to a similar one and by non-specific transfer involving utilization of principles and attitudes. Mastery of the structure of a subject matter is necessary before the non-specific transfer can take place. In Literature Study in the High Schools, Dwight L. Burton points to agreement among literary scholars that this structure is to be found in literature in its recurring themes and modes and in the various forms and genres. Burton identifies four human relationships as universal themes of literature--man and deity, man and other men, man and nature, man and his inner self. He uses Northrop Frye's Design for Learning to identify four modes--romantic, comic, tragic, ironic. A curricular structure lead-

ing out of these categories might emphasize theme as an over-all category, mode as the next most inclusive classification, then form or genre. Work on a specific selection would consider it in this structural framework.

Various Practices

As "thematic" organization is described in existing or suggested curricula, the patterns evidence a great deal of diversity. Personal problems most frequently recognized by students become topics or themes of units in literature classes. Broad thematic categories which are treated in each grade of a six-year program may be filled in with more specific themes appropriate to a single grade level. An integrated language arts curriculum may be organized around such themes as "the individual in relation to God and the universe." A six-year program may be based on the single theme of "Man's Search for Guiding Principles in His Life," with sub-themes designated for each grade level. Within such organizations, matters of chronology, national literatures, types of literature, and other conventional considerations are typically specified at certain points.

Differences may also be noted in the substance receiving emphasis within a thematic framework. Stress may be placed on keen observation and application of observation to writing. Ideas from "new criticism" or some other formalism may be related to practical aspects of communication. Concern with universals at one grade level may lead to emphasis on these universals in American literature at another level and the art forms used to express these universals at a third level. Study of levels of meaning and form and genre may proceed from a thematic basis in early years. Curricular diversity comes when the curriculum designer opts for specific themes and particular emphases within these themes.

Research and Observation

The paucity of experimental research in instruction in literature forms a significant contrast to the extensive reporting of curricula and classroom activities. Few con-

trolled experiments are reported to substantiate guidance offered to curriculum organizers. The problems of research are complicated by the absence of tools for investigation; Paul Farmer, reporting for the special committee appointed by the National Council of Teachers of English, states that one noticeable obstacle to research in teaching literature is the lack of "an objective measure of growth in literary tastes and appreciation at all levels."¹⁰

In one such attempt at research, Dwight L. Burton⁵ conducted a controlled experiment comparing three methods for teaching appreciation of fiction--analysis of technique of craftsmanship, illumination of a central topic or theme, and general study of the short story in conjunction with original writing by students. Equivalent control classes were taught grammar and mechanics during the five and one-half weeks of the experiment. Three tests were used to evaluate results--a short story selection test, a short story comparison test, and a prose appreciation test. In addition, intensive analysis was made of free responses by students to the stories used in the experiment. Burton concluded that the three methods for teaching appreciation were equally effective, and that all were beneficial when students in the experimental groups were compared to students in the equivalent control groups. On a related topic, Burton concluded that studying short stories in a thematic unit did not sacrifice appreciation of the literature as art. There appeared to be no significant advantage of one method over another, but the emphasis provided by a specific approach did have an effect on student responses. Those who had been taught by thematic approaches more readily discovered the theme of a new selection and those taught by analysis responded more to the literary techniques in the test literature.

Polar opposites to such investigations are the generalized observations of classroom teachers. Thematic organization is said to be more difficult to teach than the pattern provided by literary anthologies but greater interest is shown by students in thematic organizations. A student may report that a thematic approach has provided a new way to look at books--or at people. Thematic approaches are characterized as ideally suited to the unit

method of teaching and lend themselves to relatively simple organization of materials.

What Can Be Said?

Casual observations and individual rhapsodies aside, there is much to be said for a "thematic" approach to literature. If one supports Charles Calitri's indictment that "The whole stuff of education has been too far removed from the stuff of life,"⁷ he may find additional evidence in studies which reveal that most teachers utilize contemporary novels for work outside the classroom rather than for classroom instruction and that many teachers comment about unfavorable attitudes in their communities, among their students, and in their schools toward use of contemporary novels. Selection of themes which the student can recognize as pertinent to his own situation and use of contemporary materials (for the sake of their literary value and not simply for their modernity) seem logical means of involving students of varying intellectual capacities in the "stuff of education."

One must be careful, however, not to assume too much for the method; Burton issues some appropriate cautionary remarks. Thematic units in a literature program can result in using literature rather than teaching it. Particular attention must be paid to selection of themes which are truly significant, to selection of literature for some over-all purpose of the program (not just because it fits into a specified unit), to controlling and directing what can become a directionless study of vaguely related selections, and to adequate teaching of language, vocabulary, and reading skills.

The various curricula being developed and utilized in the teaching of literature seem to indicate that the thematic approach is one means of achieving a "sequential and cumulative" program, but the Burton study and the informal observations of teachers do not clearly establish this as the most profitable of approaches. Other structures for the literature curriculum have been suggested as logical and effective as well. What is clearly needed is more experimental research under carefully controlled conditions to determine priorities among approaches. The Bur-

ton study does seem to indicate that the choice of approaches ought to be based upon the goals of the curriculum: if one wants to stress the relevance of literature to the choices of action being made by students, one would hardly teach literature according to the method of analysis which leads students to respond to the literary techniques of the writer. There has been too little conscious thinking about approaches in teaching literature; this should be the starting point for anyone designing a program for instruction in literature.

For Further Reading

Among the materials which formed the basis for this article, the following may be of interest to teachers who are involved in deciding how to approach literature.

1. Balliet, Conrad. "On the Teaching of Literature," College English 25 (May, 1964).
2. Bettina, Sister Mary. "Teaching Frye's Theory of Modes," English Journal 54 (February, 1965).
3. Broening, Angela M. "Development of Taste in Literature in the Senior High School," English Journal 52 (April, 1963).
4. Bruner, Jerome S. The Process of Education. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963.
5. Burton, Dwight L. "An Experiment in Teaching Appreciation of Fiction," English Journal 42 (January, 1953).
6. Burton, Dwight L. Literature Study in the High Schools. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964.
7. Calitri, Charles. "Macbeth and the Reluctant Reader," English Journal 48 (May, 1959).
8. Dyer, Prudence. "An Expression, a Possession, and a Dream," English Journal 53 (September, 1964).
9. Early, Margaret J. "Stages of Growth in Literary Appreciation," English Journal 49 (March, 1960).
10. Farmer, Paul. "Conference on Research in Teaching Literature," College English 25 (October, 1963).
11. Hennis, R.S., Jr. "A Broad Unit Approach to Literature" High School Journal 45 (February, 1962).
12. Heilman, Robert B. "Genre and Curriculum," College English 24 (February, 1963).

13. Hillocks, George, Jr. "Approaches to Meaning: A Basis for a Literature Curriculum," English Journal 53 (September, 1964).

14. Ojala, William T. "Thematic Categories as an Approach to Sequence," English Journal 52 (March, 1963).

15. O'Malley, Rev. William J., S.J. "Literary Craftmanship: the Integration of Literature and Composition," English Journal 52 (April, 1963).

16. Rockas, Leo. "A Program of Literary Theory," Journal of General Education 14 (January, 1963).

17. Tanner, Bernard R. "Tone as an Approach to The Scarlet Letter," English Journal 53 (October, 1964).

<p style="text-align: center;">CALENDAR OF EVENTS Fall, 1966</p>
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Oct.	15	MCTE Advisory Board	St. Cloud
	20	MFT State English Section	St. Paul
	21	MEA State English Section	Minneapolis
		MRA State Meeting	Minneapolis
Nov.	4	State Dept. Workshop on Use of the Newspaper	Worthington
	11	State Dept. Workshop on Use of Overhead Projector	Marshall
	24-26	Annual NCTE Convention	Houston, Texas
Dec.	2	Overhead Projector Workshop	Mankato
	9	Newspaper Workshop	St. Cloud
	27-29	Annual MLA Convention	New York City
Jan.	13	Overhead Projector Workshop	Wayzata