Old Wine for Young Skins

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I suppose I had better begin by saying something about that title, maybe by apologizing for the dreadful pun on the Biblical verses. I guess it was stretching a bit to try to get that old saying to cover a modern situation. . . . Perhaps I should have picked something like "Our vines have tender grapes." That would have been more dignified and would have made much the same point. And the point is this: junior high people are tender. In some respects they are pretty tough, but in other ways they have very delicate systems, at least many of them do, and good literature, as you know, can sometimes be pretty strong drink. It should, therefore, be given to the students very carefully, not slowly, necessarily, not adulterated, not disguised. Just carefully. With full regard for little experience, but much imagination; for very circumscribed literary backgrounds, but very good brains. I am afraid, though, that often either the wine sours or the skins split in spite of our best efforts--or perhaps because of them. I know I've often done the wrong thing in the ten years that I have taught. I'm not sure I really would care to know how many times the wine has turned to vinegar in my hands. Still, I was asked to explain how I go about the business, and so I will.

First, in order to provide some context, I will describe our curriculum and tell you something of our school. Then I will describe, briefly, how I teach three readings: Job, Oedipus, and Beowulf. I will make some remarks about various teaching techniques, and I will conclude by mentioning some issues that still puzzle me a bit.

I teach only ninth grade, and the ninth grade in our district has the traditional three-way curriculum: language, literature, and composition. The latter two have a way of fusing together, I find, and it is often hard to draw the line between them.

There is a curriculum guide which was written by teachers who are employed for that purpose during vacation times. It has been in use for about seven years now. The literature portion of the ninth grade curriculum is titled, a little presumptuously, "An Overview of Western Literature." The material in it is arranged into four units: ancient, classical, medieval, and early modern or Renaissance. Some readings are required; supplementary readings and themes are suggested.

It is expected that the whole thing will take from 16 to 18 weeks, but it usually takes longer for me. In my classes, the major readings are Job and portions of the Iliad in the first

unit; Oedipus, a novel about ancient Rome, and some passages from the New Testament in the classical unit; Beowulf, parts of the Arthurian legend, and Everyman for the third; and Marlowe's Dr. Faustus for the Renaissance. It is quite a line-up for the ninth grade, but we believe it is suitable for our school.

Minnetonka East Junior High School is a new suburban school of the neo-sprawl style of architecture. It holds about 200 ninth graders. Almost all of these students live in nice houses, and almost all of them are clean and well-dressed, the average IQ is about 113, and about 80% of them will start college. There is pressure to succeed in school, and there is not much of a discipline problem. My idea of a crisis, for example, is to have a kid not show up if I tell him to stay after school. All in all, our students are capable and hard-working. It is, I suppose, an average suburban school. And I suppose also that the attitudes toward literature are average. That is to say, the students are like their parents -- there is no generation gap here -- they sort of grow up assuming that English literature in general and the classics in particular are kind of a necessary evil. Literature in their view, is a little hard to understand and a little irrelevant. It is O.K. for the connoisseur but business is business and there are more important things.

The sharp edge of this view may be seen in a remark by an editor of a college newspaper. This young man, one of the student activists of our time, said, regarding his college studies, "I don't want to spend time on things like the humanities. I want to find out why people are bad and then change them." Now, most of us would say that that man has turned his back on some of the answers he's seeking. At least, three or four thousand years of thinking can't be altogether worthless. But his views are probably set; he's not a likely prospect for conversion. There are, however, people who are, people who are still open to our influence. They are in junior high school and it is our great privilege to teach them. For my part, I want to teach them to enjoy--and value--the taste of that old wine.

My students first taste Job. There is, however, a general introduction to the whole program before we begin the readings. In this general introduction, I say that there are some issues that seem to interest almost everyone, ninth graders and ninth grade teachers as well. Deep in their hearts, most people, at least once in a while, do wonder "what really is right and wrong?" "Why am I the way I am?" "Is there a God?" "What's it all about anyway?" These questions I call deep questions, and I say that people all over the world think about them, and that people thought about them three and four thousand years ago. It is good, I tell my students, to know something about these other views, for they can serve as both grounds for and tests of one's own views. And with not much more of an introduction than that we turn to Job.

I give a short talk on the beginnings of civilization and Jewish history. I say that the Jews developed a very hard, clear notion of a God and that they believed that their God was particularly concerned with His "chosen people." But the chosen people had rough going -- they still do -- and somehow the sons of Abraham had to figure out how and why this great and good God let his children suffer so. The problem, early in Jewish history, took shape as a story, a story of a wealthy and happy man, a good man, who suffered terribly. Why? And in a larger sense, why does any good man, or any man at all, suffer? Why, for example, if there is a God, does he allow Viet Nam? Or divorce? Or two of our students to drag their cerebral palsied bodies through the hallways of our nice school? It is, of course, an old question. Old for mankind; old, presumably, for you. But not for the ninth graders I teach. For them it is strikingly new, it is almost daring, and, for a while, it is relevant.

We don't read all of Job, just the beginning, the first cycle of speeches, Elihu's speech, and the ending. That's twenty-five out of forty-two chapters. It takes a bit over a week to get through. I assign a few chapters, give a quick preview, and make sure the students begin reading before the hour is over. That is important. I find that when the students get started on a reading in class, they are much more likely to finish it on their own than if they wait till after supper to start. The next day we discuss the assigned chapters and read some more. By discussion I mean that I ask them to tell me what has happened in the narrative. Or I read certain lines and ask the students to explain. I try to squeeze the answers out of the students, but if that doesn't work, I answer myself. Generally, they answer. I add background and cross references when appropriate.

In the discussion I particularly try to bring out two things. The first is the idea of gaining wisdom through suffering. Job does. The other is this matter of God and evil. To the question, "Why does Job suffer?" the book gives three answers; better, one explanation, one answer, and a response. These three together serve as the subject of the paper that the students write. They are told almost exactly what to say. The number of paragraphs and the topic of each one is specified. I provide class time to write a good share of the theme.

Another of our readings is Oedipus the King; we use the Knox translation. A filmstrip and my elaboration start it off. Then I say that the Greeks liked to watch such plays, and I give some description, not much, of the Greek theater. My aim is to show that the Greeks thought the theater very important; it was a big part of the lives of a great many Greeks. I also try to give some notion of "catharsis" and "hybris"; the former seems to interest the students, and the latter is the heart of the play. It is also related to the theme of wisdom through suffering, and along about now, a few of these young men and women are beginning

to get that point. The excellent introduction to the Knox paperback says much the same thing so the students get the Oedipus legend twice before they begin reading. It helps them to grasp the irony which I stress as we go along.

We read through the play fast, in three or four days. I ask the students to read it through in one sitting if possible and most of them do. It's quite a different thing from Job; it goes considerably faster. I read most of the lines out loud in class and provide commentary when I can't draw interpretations and responses from the class. As we move toward the end of the play, I begin to ask why is it that all these things happen to Oedipus? Whose fault is it anyway that he is the way he is? The students get pretty excited about this matter of responsibility, of fixed fate or free will. Should Oedipus be blamed for his pride? Should a lazy or troublesome student be blamed for his character? Is the bad boy responsible for his badness? Or the good for his goodness? Should the "A" student or the athlete be congratulated for his achievement? Look around you, I tell the students. Look within. Fixed fate or free will?

A paper is assigned for this unit also. The student has a choice of topics: fixed fate and free will or irony and paradox in Oedipus.

The Beowulf lesson is the third one I'll describe. The introduction this time compares Beowulf with the Iliad, the Anglo-Saxon with the heroic Greek. I make the point that some pretty tough old Vikings seemed to find a place for poetry in their lives, not because they got good grades in school but because poetry was not part of school. Rather, it was a part of life, much like the theater was a part of Greek life. Again, I use a film strip before we start to read. (That is, I did until it got lost this year.) We are able to read a prose version first. The students go through it easily enough; it's "neat," they say; I think the gore attracts them. Then we read a modern poetry translation and during this we stop to take a closer look at some of the lines. Finally, using the NCTE pamphlet, we look at a page of the real thing, and I either play a recording of someone reading the original, or I read it myself just to get the flavor of it.

Again the paper. Last year the topic was Christian and pagan features of Beowulf. This year it was fatalism in Beowulf. In both cases the assignment was tight, as were the earlier ones.

These three units are typical except for the written requirement. As the school year flies on, I am less and less restrictive on the papers, and at the end I don't even specify a topic or length.

I have described only three units. More are listed in the curriculum guide, and others find their way into English 9. It

makes a full year -- and one that is never boring -- for me.

Let me now quickly mention some other principles or techniques that I find useful.

Introductions to the different readings are necessary; it doesn't help to start cold. But they should be short, I think; only enough to give the student some kind of social and historical content for that particular work. One or two dates, some events or anecdotes, and some idea of what to expect when they begin to read. A contest and a preview, that's about it. I don't think a quantity of critical detail is important.

Nor do I think a mass of detail important in the discussions. In fact, all things considered, available time, student interest, etc., an exhaustive commentary, line upon line, is simply exhausting. I like it but the kids don't care for it. One of them told me once, after we had finished the Iliad unit, "Don't drag it out so much. Just let us enjoy it." I am aware of a strong counter-argument here; there is a place for close reading. But it can get out of hand.

Whenever possible, I try to bring some poetry into the unit. Maybe just a few lines to highlight something. This seems to work better than collecting all the poems into a poetry unit.

A-V aids are a problem. It wouldn't be too hard nowadays to throw together a real floor show instead of an intellectual activity. But some things do have their place. I've mentioned my use of film strips; I consider them to be guides, previews. And, by the way, I have a small question here. I sometimes wonder if a strong pictorial preview, such as a film or filmstrip, might limit the imagination later on during the reading? I don't know, but I have wondered.

I use art work whenever possible to enrich a unit, and I try to play some music for the readings. For example, we read about the battle between Achilles and Hector in the Iliad, and the reading includes Hector's farewell to his wife and infant son. I have a photograph of a departing Marine carrying a rifle saying goodbye to his weeping little son. I post it with the title "Hector bids farewell to his son." And I put the Dali painting of The Last Supper on the bulletin board when we read portions of the New Testament. As for music, "The Pines of Rome" goes with the Roman unit, and the prelude to "Parsifal" goes with the legend of the Holy Grail. The student may doodle, read, even sleep while the music is on. I won't say much more about art and music because there's not much more to say. I'm neither artist nor musician. Just say I'm working on it, and let it go at that.

Recordings? I'm not so sure. Most of the time, I would rather read myself. For one thing, I can do as well -- so can

you -- as some of the performers, especially the scholars and the authors. Secondly, I find that students don't pay as much attention to a disembodied voice ringing around the room as they do to me. But I do play tapes of Everyman and Dr. Faustus while the students read along in their own books.

When I do read out loud in class, I try to dramatize as much as I can. Frankly, I act, I try to make a good show of it. I don't, but I try. Let's be honest: most of us are a little hammy, and it is kind of fun. More importantly, though, effective, dramatic oral interpretation adds to the impression the work makes on the student. Furthermore, to use again the opening metaphor, good wine deserves a little ceremony.

The students keep a little time-line, about 4" x 44"; on which they record principal dates and eras. This is kept all year and additions are made with each unit. However, the students think this is a real lemon, and I'll have to either drop it or find a better way of handling it. They make simple maps, too.

The things we read, however well learned by the students, sort of float around in their heads unless fixed some place in time and space. That's why I have time-lines and maps. But the readings must be related to the here and now also. Accordingly, I make contemporary applications and interpretations whenever it seems appropriate. This helps, I think, and it is easy to do. But it is easy to overdo, too. It's one thing to compare the later Roman Empire with the United States, perhaps to illustrate, perhaps to warn. It's quite another thing to ramble on about how everything is going to the dogs these days, and kids don't work for their money, and teenagers drive too fast and pro football is really a gladiator contest, and you ought to study harder, etc. I have to watch it; I find myself prone to preaching when I make contemporary applications and interpretations. And God knows that will sour the wine as fast as anything.

A word on testing. I don't. Occasionally I use a pop quiz to encourage diligence in keeping up on assigned reading, but that's all. No tests. I mark the paper, and that's about the whole unit mark. And as for papers, I mark just a few things on each paper, things that I think a student can correct or improve and remember that he has done so. The student must revise these items then before the grade is recorded in the red book. Sometimes they revise each other's papers. Sometimes I write a sample theme to show them how it's done. I won't say any more because my subject is literature, not composition.

Toward the end of the year I have the students fill out a questionnaire anonymously. In this way, I am able to partially see the class and myself through the minds of the students. I ask for their views on the class, the readings, the activities, even myself. It is a very illuminating experience!

Briefly, this is how I teach literature. Clearly, it is nothing spectacular, just the work of an ordinary teacher. But there are two points to make about it.

In all of this, I haven't really come anywhere near the heart of the whole thing. Techniques, aids, assignments -- all of these are, in a sense, peripheral, important but more or less dependent on the heart of teaching which is, I believe, the relationship between the student and the teacher. And so far as I can see, there is no one right relationship; the tyrant and the friend may both be equally good teachers. This leads to my next point.

Teaching is an art. And there is no single right way in art or teaching. You may go about your work in an entirely different manner. All the better. But if your style is akin to mine, then I hope these remarks have been of value to you.

I conclude by considering two matters that puzzle me. Many things puzzle me, but these two are particularly relevant to teachers of literature. If they concern me, it is altogether possible that they concern you also. I therefore mention them now.

The first matter is this: Where do my own views fit in? At present, I accept two contradictory answers. On the one hand, I agree with those who say the teacher's job is to present, to guide, to open doors, to teach, not preach. And in line with that, I agree that I am to be objective and impartial. I must not impose my views on that captive audience. In fact, unless the class specifically asks, they shouldn't even know my views. I may believe in free will, but the class should never know it from the way I teach the Iliad. In other words, while I am teaching something, I am at that time the spokesman, the advocate of the author. That is the only fair way.

On the other hand, I agree with those who say, "Let's be honest; no one is objective. We all have our starting points, our perspectives, our "biases" is a word that is often used. To be really honest according to this view, a teacher should announce his views at the start of a course. Let the teacher say, "I am an atheist." "I am a Catholic." "I am a fatalist." "I am thus and so." One's views will shape and affect one's work anyway, so why not be open and at least warn the student? Let him be on guard. That is the only fair way.

Since the choice of either of these positions will obviously make a great deal of difference to what goes on in the classroom, I am anxious to get the matter settled. But I can't.

The second puzzlement is a related matter. Here the problem is not, "What's the answer?" I have an answer, I think. The problem is what to do. Consider: reading literature brings know-

ledge. Obviously. And I think most of you would agree with Bacon that "Knowledge is power."

Yet I also believe with Lord Acton that "Power corrupts and absolute power ..." you know how it goes. Well then, does this mean that the two sayings may be combined to say that knowledge corrupts? That learning -- a little or a lot -- is a dangerous thing? That the more successful we teachers are, the more harm we do? Hard questions, and I am inclined to answer, reluctantly, it seems that way. And if I do, what then? This issue doesn't seem to have the immediate relevance of the other, but it is a little unsettling, nevertheless. After all, what are our goals in teaching literature?

Maybe you can give me some light. Or maybe you don't think these are real problems. Either way, you and I have grave responsibilities and great opportunities. I wish us every advantage and, for better or for worse, all possible success.

John Streed gave this talk at the NCTE Junior High English Teachers Conference in March 1968, in Minneapolis.

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