LITERATURE OF THE OPPRESSED: THE USE OF HISTORY AND ETHICS IN THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

by David Taylor

In a consumer society one should not be surprised to find students behaving increasingly like consumers themselves. They want to know what a particular course is going to cost in terms of papers and amount of reading, and what they are going to receive for their payment in terms of useful skills or information (or, at the least, entertainment). Given this approach, a literature course may appear a questionable investment. It could be entertaining enough, provided the emphasis is on short, contemporary novels, but what value does it really have to make it worth the effort? The more hard headed student may even verbalize the question lurking in the minds of many: "How will I ever be able to use this stuff to make a living?"

A traditional response is to expand, if possible, the student's notion of "living" to include beauty and imagination as well as dollars and cents. But the case for literature cannot rest on its decorative function, as something which makes life a little more pleasant, a bit more beautiful. We need to demonstrate to students, and remind ourselves, that literature deals with issues which are foundational to life.

It is easy enough to get assent from teachers to such a platitude, but how does one convience students? The German founder of sociology, Max Weber, pinpointed the problem over sixty years ago:

> The American's conception of the teacher who faces him is: he sells me his knowledge and his methods for my father's money, just as the greengrocer sells my mother cabbage. And that is all. To be sure, if the teacher happens to be a football coach, then, in his field, he is a leader. But if he is not this...he is simply a teacher and nothing more. And no young American would think of having the teacher sell him a Weltanschaung or a code of conduct.

Nevertheless, the teacher of literature is in the world view business. World views and codes of conduct are part of our

stock in trade because they are central to literature and to the humanities generally. That no single world view or moral code arises from literature is self-evident, but it is incumbent upon us to communicate to students that forming a view of life, a system of values and priorities, a code of conduct, is at the heart of the educational process and of the utmost value, and to demonstrate that the humanities are indispensible to that process.

One important way to achieve this goal is to invest the study of literature with a certain ethical intensity. By that I do not mean reducing works to logical or ethical propositions, but recognizing, rather, that most writers are dealing with what Tolstoy said is "the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?"' That question is ultimately an ethical one that requires answering in terms of right and wrong, good and evil. In trying to locate the central point of all his work, Solzhenitsyn observed that his "outlook on life has been formed largely in concentration camps. . . Those people who have lived in the most terrible conditions, on the frontier between life and death, be it people from the West or from the East, they all understand that between good and evil there is an irreconcilable contradiction, that it is not one and the same--good or evil--that one cannot build one's life without regard to this distinction." Perhaps we expect this of as moralistic a writer as Solzhenitsyn, but it is no less true for Allen Ginsberg, or Lawrence, or Denise Levertov, or even a writer as seemingly amoral as Joyce. These writers will not fully agree on what is good or desirable, or what is right conduct, just as their readers, including our students, will not agree, but we can all acknowledge that such things are worth laboring over.

As a concrete example of an attempt to do as I have suggested, I developed a course entitled "Literature of the Oppressed." Its catalogue description reads, in part, as follows: "A study of works of literature that spring from peoples who are politically, socially, or spiritually oppressed, focusing on the various aspects of their response to persecution: anger, courage, endurance, despair, triumph." There is, unfortunately, no shortage of oppressed peoples or groups, so the

initial task is one of limiting rather than generating materials. I have started typically with a study of Holocaust literature (using writers such as Elie Wiesel and Tadeusz Borowski), followed by an investigation of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia (primarily through the works of Solzhenitsyn). To demonstrate that oppression is not just something that happens abroad, we have focused on black or American Indian literature (for example, N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn), and to show that oppression is not limited to open violence and overt injustice, we have considered feminist writing (such as Images of Women in Literature as edited by Mary Anne Ferguson).

Literature was purposely tied with history in the course for the sake of both. The historical realities gave a kind of legitimacy to the literature that is especially helpful when working with those with no special enthusiasm for literature. Likewise, the literature gave flesh and personality to historical events which students often see only as dry bones. And both history and literature gave a context for ethical considerations that have little life in the abstract.

The course lends itself to experimentation and rewards a variety of pedagogical techniques. Individual journals are particularly effective. Students have strong emotional and intellectual responses to this material and the informality and semi-privacy of a journal encourages reflection, exploration, and struggle. Besides the open-ended charge to simply respond to the reading, journals can be used for more imaginative and directed assignments such as the following:

> You are a young Nazi soldier in the Warsaw ghetto. Your job is to round up Jews for transportation to the concentration camps. Write a letter home explaining your job and your reaction to it. Assume the role of a patriotic German who feels he is doing right.

Such an assignment serves many purposes, including sensitizing the student to the reality that many who participate in oppression see themselves as normal, sincere, well-meaning people. One can use that realization to explorethe extent to which all of us can unwittingly contribute to oppression.

In addition to formal and informal writing, students can be encouraged to use other talents to explore the subject of oppression: painting or drawing, oral interpretation, acting, dance, and creative writing. Similarly, the course can be greatly enriched by use of outside speakers (concentration camp survivors, minority leaders), films (both documentary and artistic), field trips (perhaps to an Indian reservation or urban community center), and so on. Long after my students have forgotten what I look like, for instance, they will remember the woman who spoke to them of her life in five concentration camps.

An unanticipated result of this approach to literature has been the degree to which issues under consideration in the class are linked to and reinforced by current national and international events. Whether it is a contemporary trial of a suspected Nazi concentration camp guard, or the conference to review the Helsinki Accords, or the election-year debate over human rights, or the battle for the ERA, the point becomes clear that these are issues which affected millions of lives today. An unstated goal of the course, in fact, is to motivate students to responsible citizenship in the world community, the first step toward which is raising awareness.

Part of the attractiveness of this kind of course is its flexibility. It can be designed to emphasize literature, as I have done, or any number of other disciplines or mixture of disciplines (history, philosophy, psychology, art, political science, theology, sociology, and so on). It can also be taught at different levels. There are many books about the Holocaust and the minority's experience in America, for instance, that are specifically intended for elementary and junior high aged students. (The Anti-Defamation League is very helpful in providing a wide range of information.) The kinds of questions raised by such a study are neither beyond the very young nor beneath the very wise.

These are not particularly sunny days for those concerned with literature or the humanities generally. As teachers, we can design courses that make clear the central place that literature and the humanities occupy in life without at the same

falling prey to transient notions of "relevance" or practicality. Perhaps the most important effect of a course such as this is that it humanizes; it forces students to consider the world in larger terms than is either convenient or comfortable. In helping make that possible, we partially fulfill the role Weber assigns to the competent teacher; that is, to help the student "to give himself an account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct. . . [A] teacher who succeeds in this . . . stands in the service of 'moral' forces; he fulfills the duty of bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility." I have found that students are still interested in such things. Tolstoy asked, "What should we do, and how should we live?" Given a chance, most students will recognize that as a question for which he or she needs an answer.

STUDENTS, PARENTS, TEACHERS AND TV

by Robert H. Miller and Don Johansen

When the first researcher discovered that by the time a student has graduated from high school, he/she has spent more time watching television than going to school, the "awareness level" of a number of individuals and organizations skyrocketed. As a result, many of these organizations have initiated programs to (1) use television to generate discussions between parents and children and (2) help students to become more critical of TV programs.

One of these organizations, the National Parent-Teacher Association, moved in two directions. First, they determined that there was too much violence on TV and organized a program to urge advertisers not to support programs that contained excessive violence. Second, they began a program to encourage parents to use TV to communicate with their children.

As a result of this second thrust, the PTA developed a program which trains facilitators to conduct workshops with small groups and they have provided a number of helpful hints to make the program successful. For example, they suggest that the facilitator be certain that the age separation of children is