

GENERAL INTEREST

Norma Greco

I Think I'm Falling in Love with This Novel

High school teacher Norma Greco affirms the value of teaching literature as lived experience. As testimony to the importance that literature can have, she includes teaching suggestions and students' reflections on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Last June, as I again watched students graduate from the college preparatory school for girls and young women where I teach English to seniors, I realized how much they have taught me, as have many students in past years. In a time when the larger, utilitarian American culture and even literature PhDs wonder why it is that we teach literature at all, students have shown me reasons that affirm my profession and my passion.

In his review of books wrestling with the lamentable, soul-searching state of the humanities after the recently proclaimed death of literary theory, John Rouse poses the question: With the "increasing emphasis in education on the practical, the useful, how is the study of literature to be justified?" He contends further that this "becomes a pressing question as the importance of literary culture in the general society continues to fade" (464). Indeed, justifying the teaching and study of literature becomes harder in a culture that doesn't really think it needs it. Why do we teach poems, plays, and novels when most of the world pushes them to the side as softly undisciplined, ineffectual in solving the actual conflicts of life, and superfluous to more tangible, profitable studies—technology, science, economics—that promise to improve the condition of our material lives? For many in our schools and society, it is not a passion for literature they want for students but rather effective writing and reading skills and high SAT and AP scores that will advance them to the best colleges and move them through as efficiently as possible to mar-

ketable and lucrative life careers. Rouse adds that even those in university English departments seem to lack a "literary sensibility," the apprehending of the unifying sense of meaning that he argues is gained through "much reading of literature as lived experience" (459). Literature is seldom taught as "experience that might renew one's connections to others and the world" (461).

I have found that students often affirm what most secondary English teachers already know: Studying literature in the classroom as "lived experience" is important to their lives. While we want students to possess all of the necessary critical language skills, we also want for them something more inclusive and more fundamental that literature can offer. We want them to know how to live in the world as moral beings who can think and feel complexly, respond to others with compassion, and act with courage and integrity in life's tough times. In class discussions and in their writing, I invite students to discover and examine ideas in literature that reflect on their lives in real ways. When given opportunities to grapple with what matters to them, students come to recognize and value the power of literature to ask big questions and to move them to deeper understanding of themselves and others. In the process, they become stronger, more engaged readers and writers.

Reading Hardy and Woolf

While students read several other works that offer them much, including Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, two other works—Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—especially motivate them to explore issues that are important at this time in their lives: the complexities of moral action and judgment and the search for a meaningful life. Hardy's novel engages students in moral reflection and questioning and, despite its Victorian setting, touches surprisingly on their postmodern lives. When students are placed hypothetically in situations as morally ambiguous as Tess's, they examine dilemmas that are real and identifiable. They begin to recognize the limited choices in life that many people face—situations in which actual freedom is denied by culturally ascribed roles and expectations, poverty, oppression, family responsibilities, and the actions of other people. Through their discussions and writings, students also begin to understand that decisions and actions may be clouded with such moral ambiguity that no choice is clearly better than another and that, at times, we are all caught in the trap of equally undesirable alternatives. Some students in the class imagine the possibility that free will may be only hypothetical in certain instances in their lives.

For example, when we discuss Tess's decision to help her family in the end and rejoin Alec, most students at first view her action as submissive and morally weak. But when I ask how many think they would make sacrifices to help their families, almost all agree that they would. Other questions then arise in the discussion: What kind of sacrifice is one willing to make? To what extent is one willing to sacrifice for others? While they do not yet know the answers, most realize how they too might be compelled to act to save their families from starvation and homelessness, as does Tess. We certainly do not reach conclusions, but students reflect on and debate these questions and others that intrigue them and that eventually they understand as potentially determining in their lives. As they consider these issues and write about them in journals and essays, students begin to expand their moral selves and stretch beyond their immediate worlds. They ultimately view the answer to Hardy's essential question—Who is the moral person?—more complexly. In contemplating Tess's limitations from birth, they realize that many people are not successful in life or even considered moral by cultural stan-

dards because of multiple prevailing factors. These factors often mitigate harsh judgments and elicit the need for compassion, charity, and even social change. Students are able to identify such powerful factors in their lives and discuss ways in which their culture is as imposing as Tess's Victorian society.

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* would seem to be a novel far removed from the lives of high school seniors. The middle-aged heroine and her friends inhabit a wealthy 1920s British society, in most ways remote from the lives of young women today. But when the novel is approached through themes that relate intimately to their lives as young women "just grown up" (34), students find this novel's often enigmatic but deeply resonant prose worth the commitment. Students study the novel in April as they prepare to leave the security of school and home for colleges in many parts of the country. They are at the age and juncture in life when they are eager and able to engage complexly with compelling questions: What is the meaning of life, after all, now that the struggles and stresses of their college searches have ended? Where do they go from here, the safe place where the support of friends, teachers, and parents has buoyed them through the tough times? What will endure for them in the future?

Many are struck deeply by one answer the novel proposes: Find your gift and give it back as an offering to the world. We talk about gifts—what theirs might be and what the concept of gift means to Woolf and to them in their lives. They respond eagerly to my invitation to reflect on their gifts and to help classmates identify theirs.

We then discuss the novel's notion that, like an artist, one must offer a meaningful gift, symbolized by the party—Clarissa Dalloway's gift—that extends beyond the self, that combines disparate and fragmentary elements, and that brings relief and even happiness, however fleeting, to others. Another related idea that intrigues students is Clarissa's "religion of doing good for the sake of goodness" (78). In words from her novel that students often write down in their notebooks for their

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meaningful poignancy, Woolf writes, "let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners . . . ; decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can" (77). In Clarissa's charitable love of life that permeates the novel and her ultimate affirmation of that life and communion with others, students find an inspiring vision that their class comments and writings suggest moves them powerfully in thought and feeling.

For their written assignment, students choose a passage from the novel and then analyze how Woolf achieves her purpose to reach readers decidedly and deeply, to "weigh and shape dialogue till each sentence tears the shingles in the bottom of the reader's soul" (Howard xiv). I encourage them to consider all aspects of the reading experience, including Woolf's language devices and any personal responses to her techniques that they may have as readers. While some write an objective language analysis, others move between the text and the self, integrating textual elements and personal connections, and their writing often shows precision, energy, and voice as a result. One student, for example, felt moved to write about her deceased mother's connected life in an essay that became at once an intricate textual study and a story told from the bottom of her soul.

Coming to Understand Oneself

When I asked students for their early responses to *Mrs. Dalloway*, one student simply said that she was "falling in love with this novel." While such a response may seem antithetical to the present treatment of literature as "simply a text, an artifact, not a source of experience" (Rouse 462), it represents for me precisely the place where I want students to begin their love affair with literature. When I ask them late in the year to reflect on their growth as readers and writers during the course, several students choose to talk about their new understanding of themselves and others, which they often link to their development as readers and writers.

One student comments on the difficulties of reading and writing that have been eased for her by the class discussions: "Even though I still have some difficulty in doing so, reading a novel and writing a paper on that novel, has become a lot easier. A lot of this has to do with the classroom discussions, which help me to re-affirm my thoughts and to expand my ideas."

She continues to reflect on her new self-awareness as a "writer and as a person":

Both the Literature and Ideas class and reading these novels, has helped me to look inside myself and to realize so much more about life and who I am, both as a writer and as a person. *Mrs. Dalloway* has helped me to realize that we each possess a gift in life and that we should embrace each moment in our life. . . . *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* questions morality and what defines a moral person. Even today, I still do not know what exactly defines a "moral and pure" person, but I do realize that in life we all make mistakes and in the end we are all worthy of forgiveness. . . . Each day as I left literature class I would be in awe and inspired by discussions [we] had over the novels, but more importantly over how we related the topics to our life today. Writing, for me has always been a way for me to release my emotions and my thoughts.

Another student presents herself as a protagonist in her self-reflection in which she chronicles her literary journey as a journey of the self, alluding to *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Pygmalion*, and *King Lear*. Contemplating the unknown of her first year at college, she describes the thoughts and feelings that changed her and inspired her writing:

Next year—what will come of it? Fear not, she told herself. She had come to adopt Mrs. Dalloway's philosophy on life: do not be afraid of the intensity of life, plunge right in. She was more than well prepared. . . . Four times a week, English class brought her to truth. She realized truths about education, about love, about life. After learning about the education of Eliza Doolittle, she thought about her own and realized how much it had shaped her mind, shaped her soul. She learned about love, unapparent, intangible love—and was able to see so much more deeply into the souls of others. One must see the world feelingly; one must look outward with a critical eye. It was all so much, almost too much, but she took it all in. With each new class, the marble slab of her innocent philosophy was chiseled and molded, and with each subsequent paper, the clay putty of her soul was given voice, given form with which to communicate with the outside world.

In reflecting, another student comments that entering into a text as a "human being" has resulted in an exciting amalgamation of thought and feeling—and stronger writing:

Did I always think and write like this? It was immediately apparent that I had not. And it was these foundations—approaching literature as not just a writer but a human being, and reading texts with fluency and thrill—that my writing skills improved. For as I began to read a Norton as though it were sacred text, and to write my own commentary, I realized that I was “inside” the literature, slipped within its very words. . . . Literature itself is a great process of connecting all that I know. . . . Reading, thought, emotion, and writing are more closely linked within.

As these writers suggest, when students study literature for its aesthetic power to inspire and unify complex thoughts and feelings, they are moved to meaningful reflection on important matters in their lives, including relationships with others in a world whose tenuous future is theirs. In the process, they become more engaged and earnest readers and writers, who embrace both the value of

fiction and the synthesizing strength of their writing. This is the justification for the study of literature, and it needs no other.

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EJ 60 Years Ago

Teaching English Language Arts for Democracy

What is the purpose of English instruction in a democracy? In part, at least, it is to give to each rising generation the language instruments by means of which democracy works. This is no time for pious phrases about our heritage of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, nor to indulge in regrets over our shortcomings. But now is the time to build democracy by giving each new generation the competence to practice it. I submit, then, that one of the fundamental requisites of a workable democracy is universal competence in the technique of formal and informal group discussion. That is one of the services which teachers of the language arts can render in maintaining and improving the democratic way of life.

Harold A. Anderson. “The Function of English Instruction in Education for Democracy.” *EJ* 35.2 (1946): 69–76.