

## **What About Appreciation?**

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vulgarity of the formulation: 'its use of language in packaging subject matter?').<sup>4</sup>

But really – what is the point of all the complexity and difficulty? Many works of literature are complex and difficult, and the task of understanding and appreciating them can be an enormous challenge, for student and teacher alike. But it's a rewarding challenge. It's actually worthwhile getting tied up in emotional and intellectual knots in our attempts to come to terms with a Shakespeare sonnet, a Bronte novel, or a Katherine Mansfield short story, because at the end of the attempt (enjoyable in itself) we might understand a bit more about ourselves, other people and the world – and the teacher, if she knows her stuff, will have helped her students to get there. As one of the many frustrated and unhappy English teachers in the audience at the ETAQ Symposium last May said, 'I'd rather be teaching the complexities of *Middlemarch* than the complexities of *Critical Literacy*.' So, I suspect, would most people.

The second thing I was struck by is that for all its ostensible attention to language and text 'out there', the CSCM is very inwardly focused on the act of reading itself, a feature that becomes particularly evident in Ray McGuire's piece. If I thought this focus really aimed at producing sincere and searching self-scrutiny, I would be less concerned – though I'd regard it as a pretty advanced intellectual capability, hardly to be expected, realistically, of most 16- and 17-year olds. But the main manifestation of this reading-focus – the formulaic threefold typology of 'invited', 'alternative', and 'resistant' reading positions, applicable to any and every literary text – is a caricature of dialectically self-conscious reading. All the 'resistant readings' I've read or heard about at this level have consisted of nothing more than crude and superficial applications of left-liberal platitudes about Race, Gender, and Class (the holy trinity of the CSCM), a treatment to which the literature of past centuries is, for obvious reasons, especially vulnerable. This kind of reading, though certainly worthless, is unfortunately not harmless. In my observation, it not only reinforces a patronizing 'presentism' by legitimising many students' already strong tendency to know nothing, and to care less, about how people thought or felt about life in the past; even more insidiously and destructively, it breeds an ignorant and indiscriminate cynicism. By rewarding students for crudely 'historicising' or 'ideologising' the emotional and intellectual content of the literature they read, the CSCM ensures that they will begin to cultivate a dismissive contempt for feelings and

ideas which will almost certainly not have registered with them in any case, but which various lists of 'emotive words,' for example, will help them to 'locate' in the text – at arm's length, as it were – and which the familiar social and political assumptions that saturate the Model will then enable them to 'place' historically.

I am speaking here only of the treatment of past literature, not of contemporary pulp fiction, or of the mass media, to the blandishments of which I have no doubt that students, like the rest of the population, have strong, often raw and naïve emotional responses. And as others have said in the course of this debate, the distancing, 'interest-seeking' moves that characterize the CSCM are probably quite effective in training them to deal warily with that important area of their cultural life-experience. But this is not the area to which the study of canonical (there, I've said it!) literature properly belongs, or should be assigned. To do so, as the CSCM does at every opportunity – is, in my view, a grave error. Not a *philosophical* error: I am not suggesting for a moment that literature is somehow essentially different from other language-in-use and therefore unaffected by the historical pressures that bear upon all other forms of cultural expression; but a *pedagogical* error, a seriously wrong call as to which parts of that large and diverse body of disciplinary knowledge that goes by the name of Literary Studies should be used to give senior high-school students an *entrée* to traditional literature. To put it simply, classic literary texts are not, in themselves, different in kind from other texts; but they should be treated differently – appreciatively rather than critically – at this stage of the education process.

The third thing that struck me, by the way, was just that insistence on the indissoluble unity of The Model, on its necessary applicability to the whole universe of language and textuality. Even when its parts may *seem* separate, Ray McGuire assures us, they are 'inextricably interconnected.' Nay more: 'To destroy these links and see them as separate entities is to destroy the generative power of the model.'<sup>5</sup> When I read this dark admonition I was reminded of Wendy Morgan's rather similar comment at the May Symposium, that a decision not to use the CSCM on literature as well as language would be 'a complete copout'. Why this passion for totality? In the words of Buffalo Springfield, 'There's something happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear.' But what it *sounds* like is a group of people who are more interested in preserving their Model than in teaching literature.

## What about appreciation?

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Reading through the two most recent contributions to the 'Coalface' series, those by Lenore Ferguson and Ray McGuire, I was struck by three things. The first is how very complex and difficult the controversial 'critical socio-cultural model' (hereafter CSCM) seems to be. The endless proliferation of conceptual categories and sub-categories, the relentless labouring of the obvious, the merciless exhaustiveness: all characteristic of a theoretical model being worked through to its limit – but what a crushing burden to impose on a new English teacher! Yes, I can believe that some new teachers – lacking any substantive knowledge-base of their own – will

grasp desperately at the specific questions and activities the CSCM provides; and I don't doubt that some of these questions and activities could, if skilfully pressed by an imaginative and informed teacher, produce pleasurable aesthetic responses and insights. (Though what students, or most teachers for that matter, make of the question: 'How are these [cultural practices in *Pride and Prejudice*] shaped by the conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel?' I cannot begin to imagine! Could it be connected, I wonder, with the startling

<sup>4</sup> McGuire, Ray, 'Grammar at the Coalface: the Power of Attitudinal and Engagement Resources in Teaching English,' *Words'Worth*, December 2007, pp. 19, 22.

<sup>5</sup> McGuire, p. 18.

We were asked to be constructive in our comments, and I'm conscious that I haven't yet managed to do that. I find the CSCM pretty uncongenial, you'll have gathered, and I wouldn't enjoy having to work with it. Luckily for me, I don't have to, and the only constructive practical suggestions I can honestly make to teachers who do have to (and who also find it uncongenial) is to find ways around it by cherry-picking the activities you can use, discarding the ones you can't, introducing some strategies of your own – and waiting it out. I don't underestimate the difficulties of doing that under the current Model-dominated regime, but the tide is turning.

Last year Terry Eagleton, the pin-up boy of politicised literary theory, published a book called *How to Read a Poem*, written, he says, when it dawned on him that even his brighter students couldn't do ordinary literary criticism; and that the reason they couldn't is that they hadn't been taught to at school, because their teachers hadn't been taught to either.<sup>6</sup> In 2006, for similar reasons, John Sutherland (never much troubled by theory, it must be said) published *How to Read a Novel*.<sup>7</sup> They're not the first high-profile literary scholars to notice the loss of the basic ability to understand, appreciate and analyse a piece of literature in its own (literary) terms, and to try to do something about it.

Enriching your own reading skills as a practical critic by studying books like these can be an excellent long-term preparation for teaching classic literature. Several such books have appeared over the last few years; and if, in addition, you're prepared to demean yourself by dipping, somewhat discriminately, into the guides and handbooks to literary appreciation that appeared in fair numbers in the sixty years or so before about 1985, when literary theory and cultural studies began their curriculum takeover, you'll find much, much more.

A last word of advice though: Don't bring them into class with you! The one thing I'm sure of after thirty years of first-year literature teaching is that whether they expect to or not, the activity that students find most stimulating, revealing, useful and pleasurable in the study of literature is close, persistent, dialogical attention to the primary literary text – to what it means, what it does, how it does it, why it's doing it. Use all the tricks in the book to maintain and enliven that focus, but once you start to let it go by filling up class time with things that distract attention from the words on the page – whether it's film versions of the novel, background documentaries on the period,

Freudian profundities, Derridean paradoxes, even critical articles, magazine reviews, or guides to literary appreciation – you've begun to lose touch with the main generative source of knowledge and pleasure to be found in the study of literature, and that's the literature itself.

The following list of books is given in chronological order. All of them endorse, and most of them illustrate in practice, the kind of 'aesthetic' criticism I regard as most suitable and valuable for the study of classic literature at secondary level. Many of them are out of print, but most of those are obtainable in single copies one way or another, and then ... (I say no more!). My personal favourites, for what it's worth, are Pritchard, Moody and Alter.

W.H. Hudson: *An Introduction to the Study of Literature* (Harrap)  
E.A. Greening Lamborn: *The Rudiments of Criticism* (Oxford)  
F.H. Pritchard: *Training in Literary Appreciation* (Harrap)  
C. Day Lewis: *The Poetic Image* (Cape)  
Peter Westland: *Literary Appreciation* (English Universities Press)  
H.L.B. Moody: *Literary Appreciation* (Longman)  
Philip Hobsbaum: *Essentials of Literary Criticism* (Thames and Hudson)  
Robert Alter: *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (Simon & Schuster)  
Steven Croft and Helen Cross, *Literature, Criticism and Style* (Oxford)  
Denis Donoghue: *The Practice of Reading* (Yale)  
Edward Hirsch: *How to Read a Poem* (Harcourt)  
Harold Bloom: *How to Read and Why* (Scribners)  
Terry Eagleton: *How to Read a Poem* (Blackwell)

<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, Terry, *How To Read a Poem* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Sutherland, John: *How to Read a Novel: A User's Guide* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006).