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ABSTRACT

This 20-week course in mystery fiction for high school students is designed to provide experiences in logical thinking, reasoned written presentation, the nature of literary analysis via the crime story, and the tools of research. Students should be able to (1) use their language well, (2) read critically with attention to detail, and (3) meet and successfully challenge the generalization, slanting, equivocation, and other logical fallacies. The Introduction Unit consists of Dorothy Sayer's essay "Aristotle on Detective Fiction" and a record and filmstrip set on logical thinking. It also presents a variety of class exercises which include problems in logic built from hypothetical murder cases, vocabulary drills, and working with such concepts as truth, falsity, validity, invalidity, the probable, the possible, and the major concept of mystery fiction: paralogism, the art of telling the truth in such a way that the reader is induced into coming to a false conclusion. The subsequent reading units consider plot, characterization, and setting and atmosphere. A review of the structural elements is the next unit, using in-class discussion of short stories. In the final unit, the students read, study, and prepare critical essays for each of two novels. (TO)

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STUDIES IN SCARLET

An Approach to Mystery Fiction as a Literature Elective

by Stephan P. Clarke

It has long been a contention of mine that most people don't know how to think. Today's high school or college graduate may be exposed to more material, have a greater say in what he will study, even have a say in how material is to be taught, but he is not necessarily more learned or knowledgeable than his predecessors of 20 or 200 years ago.

To illustrate my point, just review the success of the mass media propagandists. Whether we deal with Hitler, Goebbels, and Goehring or that equally reputable firm of Batton, Barton, Durstin, and Osbourne, we are forced to concede that the product of modern educational institutions is not as skillful as he or she should be at sifting fact from opinion, and the proven from the plausible.

The sentiments expressed here are entirely my own, but the idea is not at all a new one. I am drawing from an essay by Dorothy L. Sayers, published posthumously in 1963, entitled "The Lost Tools of Learning." In that essay she theorizes that the medieval trivium and quadrivium are a possible source of an answer to the problem at hand. Her theory is based on the ideas that we often come across people for whom all of knowledge is compartmented into subjects, each one forever separate and distinct from the next; and the equally disquieting group who know what they have learned, but have entirely forgotten how they learned it. Quite simply, we have succeeded in teaching "subjects," but have failed lamentably in teaching students how to think. Our students learn everything

852 102



except the art of learning. These young scholars of ours can recite vast quantities of material on demand, but cannot apply even the most general of these concepts to some other distinct but similar problem.

What we commonly know as the "scientific method," a basic logical procedure taught somewhere in junior high school, could be suggested to senior high school students as the model upon which they could build a highly successful critical essay--the tools of the scientist and the tools of the critic being one and the same, at least on the elementary level. However, attempts at application generally lead to frustration and confusion simply because this particular tool of learning is the scientific method, and therefore has no business being a part of the English curriculum. Only after continued drilling does the connection between the two areas of knowledge eventually begin to clarify.

Neither Miss Sayers nor I propose a purely medieval approach as a practical solution to this problem of compartmentalization, but serious consideration of it offers some truly interesting points of departure which can be readily utilized today. The medieval approach was two-fold. First, lucky youngsters chosen for any schooling at all would be taught to deal with subjects before those subjects were ever specifically considered. An ancient student's first problem was to learn a language--everything from aardvark to zymurgy, and precisely how it was structured. Secondly, he learned how to make accurate statements, construct arguments and find errors in logic--his and anybody else's. Lastly, he learned to use language elegantly and persuasively. When that had all been accomplished, and only then, the student went on to face the rigors of the

second part of his education, the quadrivium. The quadrivium consisted, in large part, of essays and debates on a multitude of topics drawn from theology, ethics, history, math, sciences, the arts, etc., and was to be unto him who could not hold his own against the stringent challenges of his professor and classmates.

Now, I have said earlier that a direct application of the medieval approach would be a bit difficult today for such reasons as irate parents and an angered Supreme Court. But, there is absolutely no reason why at least some of the precepts of a medieval education cannot be advantageously applied to today's educational system, and it was with this thought in mind that I developed a twenty week course called Mystery Fiction. Mystery Fiction is designed to provide experiences in logical thinking, reasoned written presentation, the nature of literary analysis via the crime story, and the tools of research.

Remember that the trivium dealt with the tools of learning more than with any given subject matter, and it was with that in mind that I first set out a list of priorities--"objectives" in "ed biz" jargon. These priorities included my belief that students should be able to use their language well. Vocabulary and usage should be relatively consistent with grade level expectations; writing should demonstrate careful prior planning; all work should be logically sequential, and should be free from digressions, incoherent construction, and fallacious argumentation. It is also expected that appropriate grammatical standards will be rigorously upheld.

In order to accomplish the first objective it is imperative that the

student be able to read critically and with attention to detail, retaining that detail for at least the duration of the story. Such criteria are essential because the processes of literary criticism presume the critic's familiarity with the story in all of its detail, not to mention the basic structural elements of literature and their functions.

The third, and primary, objective is based on the first two. If the student can read critically and write logically, then he is better prepared to meet and successfully challenge the generalization, slanting, equivocation, and other logical fallacies invariably encountered and generally mishandled in life. We wouldn't think of sending someone to fight a tank with a toothpick, and I don't think we should leave our children at the mercy of the printed word, films, or the broadcast media with the kind of intellectual armor often provided.

The priorities listed here for Mystery Fiction could apply to almost any course of study, but I find that the literature of detection and mystery is particularly well suited to these objectives for a variety of reasons. Among these reasons are:

1. there is a great variety of material available on reading levels from grade school to severely academic,
2. the material enjoys great popularity in the free world among all classes of people, and is commonly printed at low cost,
3. frequent opportunities for matching wits with the author are provided, especially in the puzzle and whodunit forms which depend heavily on careful logical construction for their success,
4. there is no limit on the material available to be studied in conjunction with the story itself. One need not be restricted to the functions of literature as research into the occult, the reasons for English Channel weather conditions, differences between European and American railroad coaches, British social institutions, the stock market, forensic pathology and toxicology are only a smattering of subjects available for research exercises to provide background material for novels and stories read in class.

5. Lastly, parents love the course. Junior brings home the book to finish a reading assignment and his parents commandeer the text before the student can do his work. I have enjoyed several instances when a student has signed out two copies of a book just so he could have one to read while the parents have read the other and passed it on to other members of the family. It should be noted that students enjoy the books too, and often develop strong attachments to the works of one author or another.

Trying to second-guess students reactions to books is a dangerous game. When choosing titles to use for the course I wanted works which would be of genuine interest to students, but which would also meet the course requirements. Remembering my own reading habits from high school I dismissed the Sherlock Holmes canon as too familiar, a judgment which might have been a bit hasty, and began to look elsewhere. At the same time I had particular units of study to construct. Putting both problems into one basket brought about an interesting result: several units of study built around appropriate reading assignments drawn from the literature of crime.

The Introduction Unit is multi-faceted. Its foundation is Dorothy Sayers' essay "Aristotle on Detective Fiction," which uses the Poetics to explain the mystery story. Miss Sayers' tongue-in-cheek theory is the Aristotle really wanted detective stories to write about, but lived some 2500 years too soon and had to settle for ". . . no better mysteries than the sordid complications of the Agamemnon family, no more scientific murder methods than the poisoned arrow of Philoctetes or the somewhat improbable medical properties of Medea's cauldron. . . ." The remainder of the unit encompasses a record and filmstrip set on logical thinking, and a variety of class exercises which include problems in logic built up from hypothetical murder cases, vocabulary drills and working with such concepts

as truth, falsity, validity, invalidity, the probable, the possible, and the major concept of mystery fiction: paralogism.

Miss Sayers discusses paralogism at some length, and rightly so, for paralogism is the art of framing lies in the right way, the art of telling the truth in such a way that the reader is induced, or more bluntly, duped, into coming to a false conclusion. Great fun can be had when paralogism is skillfully and honestly used for the reader can enter into a battle of wits with the author and, if the clues are fairly distributed, be on an equal footing with the detective. Encouraging students to enter into such a battle can bring surprising results for all involved, and give a real sense of accomplishment to the student.

Once the introductory material is complete, the first reading unit is confronted. Using the Sayers/Aristotle essay as a guide, plot is considered of primary importance and is dealt with first. Worksheets, vocabulary words taken from reading assignments, and discussions of plot accompany Agatha Christie's novel And Then There Were None. This classic in suspense is technically a whodunit, so chances of discovering the villain before the author wants him discovered are slim. However, the students unanimously seem to like the book and the plot devices are so readily observable that discussion is easy to generate, and problems are willingly tackled.

The emphasis throughout a whodunit is, oddly enough, on the howdunit and the whydunit; the whodunit aspect always coming at the end when reader and suspects, all equally baffled, are gathered together for a stunning denouement. As the book is closed, the careful reader sharply kicks his mental self and hears the taunting, "Elementary my dear Watson," somewhere in his subconscious.

Whodunit characters tend to be rather shallow, but the budding sociologist can easily set up a sociogram to determine what can be learned from the various interactions observable in the novel.

The consideration of characterization is basically inseparable from the consideration of plot, but academic discussion requires this artificial division for investigatory purposes. The second unit therefore deals with characterization. Originally, I had chosen Daphne DuMaurier's Rebecca for this unit, but its length and the unfounded fear that many students would have read it caused me to look elsewhere, Vera Caspary's outstanding novel Laura finally having been chosen. The advantages of Laura are legion, but of real importance to high school readers are the believability and consistency of the characters, a very readable style, an American setting, a very masculine hero, a very feminine heroine, an appallingly gory murder, and a villain they love to hate.

I like the novel for those reasons too, but as a prospective teacher of that novel, there were other facets equally interesting to me. Almost any paragraph can be examined for a wealth of inferential material. Miss Caspary's style is also noteworthy in that the book is divided into three major parts, each part told by a major character. This would not be significant were it not for the fact that each of these segments is done in the delivery style of the person narrating that segment. Fat and fussy Waldo Lydecker spreads his fatuous vocabularic accretions across the pages in one section, while the masculine, abrupt cop, Mark McPherson, curtly details his material in police report rhetoric in another. Because these characters live, such distinguishing features make an analysis of their progress through the novel's conflict much more interesting a challenge than the drudgery otherwise to be expected.

Again, vocabulary drills, work sheets, and class discussions are a part of this unit as they are in the third unit which deals with setting and atmosphere. I had originally intended to use A. A. Milne's The Red House Mystery because of its fun qualities. It has underground passages, mysterious relatives from Australia, etc., but it was temporarily out of print just at the time I had to make the purchases. A mad scramble through several other titles eventually left me back with Agatha Christie and her novel Murder in the Calais Coach.

This choice was not the best for my purposes, or so I thought, but time has proven me wrong. The setting in Europe's fabled and sinister Orient Express, and the atmosphere, both literal and literary, is of paramount importance. Coincidentally, the plot is almost the exact reverse of the earlier And Then There Were None, so students have a handy prior reference for use in constructing essays to analyze the function of setting and atmosphere in literature.

Thus far, the course has set itself into a basic pattern: read a novel, do study questions, research problems, define vocabulary words drawn from the novels, and a critical essay designed to evaluate some aspects of the novel appropriate for the unit being considered. A review of the various structural elements considered to this point is undertaken next through the in-class discussion of the short stories contained in 12 Stories for Late at Night, edited by Alfred Hitchcock. This anthology contains work by such authors as M.R. James and Ray Bradbury. These are not detective stories at all, but truly scary tales which arouse all sorts of primeval fears and a great deal of ghoulish delight for students. As it so happens, the twelve

stories lend themselves to equal distribution among the three areas studied so far in the course, so review is a rather painless affair.

The last unit is the culmination of their work in the course. Using two novels, Dorothy Sayers' Strong Poison, and E. C. Bentley's Trent's Last Case, the students are left to their own devices to read the books, research the vocabulary, and prepare general critical essays for each of the novels. Because of the nature of some of the background material, both of the novels require some assistance in bridging cultural gaps.

Strong Poison's hero, the dilettante detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, is of the British aristocracy, and that institution requires some explanation for American high school students. Fortunately, a videotape of the final segment of Public Television's Masterpiece Theatre serialization of an earlier Sayers novel, Clouds of Witness, helps plug that gap. Slides from my own tours through the Newport "cottages" of the Vanderbilts help students understand the nouveau riche of the turn of the century whose extravagant life styles form some of the background for Trent's Last Case.

Since the burden of work is placed on the students in the last unit, some time is available to have fun with the material and help the appreciation of the writers' skills at the same time. Strong Poison, for instance, has a delightful scene wherein Miss Clapson, one of Lord Peter's agents, dupes Nurse Booth with a Ouija board. Today's faddish preoccupation with the occult provides willing participants for a bit of experimentation in the interest of intellectual expansion.

When all this was organized and in operation, I still could not swallow my deep-rooted desire to do a survey of mystery and detective fiction

literature. My nod to that dream lies in the book report and occasional outside reading assignments. Howard Haycraft's Murder for Pleasure is an excellent history of the genre which provides good background material for students' use. Short readings from that book clarify the importance of Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Freeman Willis Crofts, and other giants in the mystery fiction world whose works I recommend for book report efforts.

That these thinking, writing, and discussion exercises have helped prepare any student for a better life as a citizen in a world which strives to deny rational thought I'm not willing to say at this point. The medieval approach was a program which lasted ten to twelve years and encompassed some of the most rigorous mental challenges ever known. For me to say that my twenty-week course can accomplish the same end seems to be somewhat presumptuous. Nevertheless, I flaunt that presumption. I am trying to help students gain at least some control of the necessary tools of learning, and to be aware of the fact that a difference between plausible and proven does exist. The use of crime literature helps to make my task pleasanter, and seems to be a happy vehicle for the students. My studies in scarlet program has a formidable challenge, but it is one we all had better readily accept.