By Rutledge, Donald C.

TEACHING LITERATURE: SOME HONEST DOUBTS.

Pub Date 68

Note: 5p.

Journal Cit: The English Quarterly; A Publication of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English; v1 n1 p19-22
Summer 1968

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.28

Descriptors: BIBLIOTHERAPY, DEVELOPMENTAL READING, EFFECTIVE TEACHING, ENGLISH CURRICULUM,
ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, LITERARY ANALYSIS, LITERARY CRITICISM, LITERATURE, LITERATURE
APPRECIATION, PERSONAL GROWTH, PERSONAL VALUES, SOCIAL VALUES, STUDENT REACTION, TEACHER
ATTITUDES

The possibility that many English teachers take their subject too seriously should be considered. The assumption that literature can to any degree either improve or adversely affect students is doubtful, but the exclusive study of "great literature" in our secondary schools may invite basic reflections too early: a year's steady diet of "King Lear," "Heart of Darkness," and "Lord of the Flies" may turn a student away from literature toward more optimistic pursuits. The stressing of form, techniques, and literary merit before such considerations matter to the student may also remove his delight in literature. To counteract these tendencies, study should not be restricted to great literature; instead, it should include books which speak to the child and, while offering him stimulation, do not force him beyond his present capabilities: most children, like adults, read to satisfy fantasy needs. Because the arts seem one of the chances for overcoming the universal boredom and violence which menace Western society, literature must be made a more natural part of more people's lives, and any distortion of the natural growth of artistic perception through misguided literature teaching should be avoided. (LH)
Teaching Literature:

Some Honest Doubts*

Donald G. Rutledge

If you are, like me, an English teacher, you probably find it hard to believe that you may take your subject too seriously. But both of us should consider the possibility. With everyone telling us how much language has to do with emotional and intellectual development in children, and everyone else announcing that literature is a prime cause of better human beings, the temptation to assume an evangelical stance is great. Yet what Auden said about writers is even more true for English teachers: 'Writers can be guilty of every kind of human conceit except that of the social worker: We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know.'

Since we English teachers do a kind of social work with writers' products, our temptation to spiritual pride is twofold. That we have not entirely resisted the temptation in the past is obvious by the uneasiness we produce in many adults. We shall soon have to work, as the clergy is working, to prove we are regular chaps. English is the school subject, above all others, which gets mixed up with morality and improving people.

To some extent this can't be avoided. Literature is about life and life forces all of us to make moral decisions. But many of us add to our own problems by being unconsciously snobbish about literature, and by making excessive claims for it.

As an example of what I mean, here is a statement from a recent publication of The Schools Council of Great Britain:

*English provides us with opportunities of finding or creating the*

*This article is reprinted from the Toronto Education Quarterly, April, 1968, with the permission of the editor.*
most alive, poignant and energetic expression we can of any part of
our experience, and in so doing forms an essential part of the
experience itself. It is not just an instrument. Literature, too, is an
essential part of the process from the beginning. The literature of
both past and present can illuminate the underlying pattern of human
problems today. From literature the attraction of man's good qualities
can be felt at its strongest: the generosity of Cordelia's 'No cause, no
cause', the compassion of Wilfred Owen for his dead enemy. The
impact made on our feelings by such behaviour is a lasting one: it
helps to mould our own reactions to life, and we become in the best
sense more human.

I am sure that for some of our students this statement holds. But
are we justified in our assumption that the teaching of literature can
really affect the sensibilities of most students in our schools? Our
experiment in mass literacy, less than a century old, has not yet
produced a great many people interested in 'high art'. Is this because
literature has not been properly presented, or because most people
never will be interested in 'high art'? Are we making the fundamental
mistake of trying to graft an elitist culture onto a group of people
who are not temperamentally suited to it?

Many senior teachers of English in Ontario are experimenting this
year with a free choice period, when students bring their own
favourite poems to school and read them to the class. Few of these
poems turn out to be by major, or even recognized poets. Yet the
students honestly like these poems—some merely trivial, some
unashamedly sentimental or didactic. And remember that these are
the Grade 12 and 13 students. If, as has been said and as I believe,
culture must grow in the soil from which it springs, there is surely
something here to make us pause. Are we giving students enough
good poetry early enough to hope for a genuine development of
taste? Or would it matter? I hope so. I think I believe so. But I wish
we would consider our assumption a little more humbly.

Even more doubtful is the assumption that literature can improve
human beings. This notion, which has been around in crystallized
form since Matthew Arnold's time, needs to be questioned. In fact we
know very little about the relationship of art to life. We do know that
more people are influenced by movies, television and pop music than
by King Lear. We do know that life imitates art very often, sometimes
for the better, sometimes for the worse. A girl may be led, through
seeing The Miracle Worker, to dedicate her life to working with
handicapped children. A man may be led, by reading Justine, as Ian
Brady was led, to commit murder. In neither case is literature the
only contributing factor, but it is a factor.

In other words, we can't have it only one way. If literature really
does change people, we had better not assume that it can only
improve them. And we had better be very careful about the kind of
literature we present in schools, since the mass media are not under
our control and not always on our side.

It could even be argued that the literature we present in secondary
schools has its own special dangers, that it invites basic reflections too
often, leading our most intelligent young people to self-conscious
passivity or anguished questioning too soon. A typical senior course
in Ontario could well include King Lear, Death of a Salesman, Heart

20
of Darkness, Lord of the Flies, and 1984. What teacher of senior grades has not heard the complaint, from good students, that the literature presented is morbid? The world of King Lear is a terrible one, and once visited, never leaves the consciousness.

I know that it will be said that such vicarious experience of suffering as literature offers prepares a person for real suffering, making him less vulnerable. But I wonder. There is no denying that some of the best literature is harrowing, and a steady diet of it may darken a student's outlook.

Obviously my doubts about literature apply only to literature with a capital L, the staples of drama, poetry and fiction which we rigidify into courses in secondary school and beyond. We have never been as grandiose in our claim for young children's stories, fairy tales and rhyme, although in fact their value to young children is more easily demonstrable than in the value of King Lear to adolescents.

What then, am I arguing for? Do I want an end to the teaching of literature? Not at all. But we do not need to make doubtful claims for it. The reading or writing of literature should be seen as an endemic and enjoyable human activity, worthwhile for its own sake. The mystique, the abracadabra of literary hero-worship should be replaced by a pleased and genuine relish of authentic literature. And by authentic literature I do not mean, necessarily, great literature. I mean literature which speaks to the child where he is, and moves him only as far as he can be moved at the particular moment. This will include much great literature, but it should also include the literature children create themselves—one of the best ways of making literature second nature to children. Surely the heavy emphasis on solemnity needs to be modified. And surely we should be presenting books which do more than present man's tragic plight: books leading with modern insights into psychology, language, sociology, and anthropology; books which suggest how collective action can help man in his plight, if plight it is.

In raising these fundamental doubts I have perhaps over-generalized. Obviously literature can make life more interesting, and it does affect our feelings and our attitude towards other people. I am only suggesting that if we were a little more humble about its role and our role, we would be more effective. I think some of us have suffered from a heresy that T. S. Eliot describes in The Sacred Word: 'It is a perpetual heresy of English culture to believe that only the first-order mind, the Genius, the Great Man, matters; that he is solitary, and produced best in the least favourable environment, perhaps the Public School.'

This snobbery syndrome also helps account for the fact that students, delighted by stories and poems in their early schooling years, often become less and less interested, and eventually even hostile to literature. There is a natural human reaction against everything which is made out, even implicitly, as good for you, or refining.

Of course there are alternatives to the heavy literary approach. We could try to learn, for example, which books really speak to children at various stages in their development. Kate Friedlander's brief start in this direction, Children's Books and Their Function In Latency, needs to be followed up by much more extensive research. For
another era, basis which works against an honest native culture in
Canada is our preoccupation with the conscious and cerebral in
literature. Most people read for the same reason that they attend
movies: to satisfy fantasy needs. We are quite willing to accept this
in very young children, but we make little allowance for it as children
get older, and so we often lose them as readers. We stress form,
technique and literary merit long before such considerations matter to
the student. And we fail to recognize what seems very obvious—that
only some of our students will ever benefit from formal literary
criticism. For the gifted minority technical analysis is invaluable; for
the rest it is frustrating and eventually boring.

This paper is not against literature, or even against interpretation.
It is a plea to have literature made a more natural part of more
people's lives. In a time when it has become boring even to mention
the universal boredom which menaces Western society, the arts seem
one of our chances for health. The cultivation of the sensibilities can
help combat the present cycle of boredom and violence. It is precisely
for this reason that we must get more clever at our jobs. We know
now that the same processes of discrimination which constitute the
beginning of intelligence in infants are operating in the creation of
our finest works of art. Anything we do in schools to distort the
natural growth of artistic perception is harmful. Any mystique, any
grandiose claim, anything which separates literature from the life of
many people, is pernicious.