

Teaching Literature

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Lesson Plan I: What IS literature?

I like to begin any course on literature by having us address the question, “What is literature?” Until the 17th century all works of literature, whether they were written in prose or verse, were called “poems.”

- ❖ Do you know the etymology of the word “poem” or “poet?”
 - POET=MAKER, and POEM=A MADE THING, an artifact made out of words.
- ❖ Why would human beings create designs made out of words? You cannot eat them, or take shelter from the rain under them, or move earth with them as you can with a shovel, yet all cultures in all times make them.
 - A poem is a way of shaping, of giving order to, of finding meaning in our human condition. In the Renaissance the poet was likened to God and making a poem—as Tolkien said of his own work—was a species of “subcreation.” And Shakespeare not only names his theater “the Globe,” but calls his stage “a little O,” a microcosm.

[At this point give the students a copy of the 4 selections to be considered]

SELECTION ONE

“Existence exhausts itself in maintaining a conflict without a solution; the poem is this same conflict but at rest.....man is entirely nature and entirely contra-nature: he transcends the world, but the world crushes him. But this ambiguity which we have to live is [in the poem] presented to us as a thing. We are given it to look at.” (Sartre)

This is a definition of what poetry is [and remember “poetry” in this sense can be verse, prose, dramatic dialogue] by the 20th Century philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre.

Let's take the statement apart and think about it.

1. What does “man is entirely nature” mean. In what respect are we humans “entirely nature?”
 - a. Each one of us is enclosed in a fleshly body and is capable of perceiving what is outside that body only with our sense organs, which are often notoriously inaccurate and which in themselves are influenced by biological effects and changes: e.g., blood sugar level, hormone level, extreme heat or cold.
 - b. And each one of us is biological related to a “blood network” by our genetic inheritance—over which we have no control—and are thereby related to the whole human gene pool, the whole human family.
 - c. Each one of us is also biologically related to an eco-system—to the whole larger organism, the plant earth.
2. OK, so we are entirely nature. But then what does “man is entirely contra-nature” mean? (NB, that is not COUNTER, but CONTRA, defined against or in opposition to).
 - a. Each one of us is capable of transcending the limited biological self in THOUGHT, REASON.



- b. Moreover, we as a species create ABSTRACT SYSTEMS, like language and mathematics, that transcend and outlive our biological selves.
- c. Furthermore, because we have self-reflexive consciousness, we can mentally stand outside our fleshly selves and outside all of nature and LOOK AT THEM—as we do in the study of biology, chemistry, physics. And we can build upon nature, as we do in architecture or fashion design.
- d. We can transcend our limited senses and explore vast reaches of the universe and minute particles of matter—and even darkly perceive the existence of anti-matter. We can explore profound depths of the ocean. IN SHORT, WE CAN KNOW WHAT WE CAN'T SEE.

And not only do we create abstract systems of thought, but we also act upon them. So, for example, Einstein conceives an abstract formula, E=MC², which physicists wherever they are and whatever their native language can understand, and then we act upon the knowledge the formula gives us to send humans to the moon, explore space craft to Mars, the Cassini to Titan, and even train the Hubble telescope on the beginnings of the universe.

- e. Furthermore, because we have language we have writing, and because we have writing, we can transcend time as well as space. We can look at little black marks on a page (symbols of thought that do not exist in nature) and know from them that the Israelites were led out of Egypt, or what it felt like on the “windy plains of Troy” over 4000 years ago.

SO, we can transcend time, space and natural limit and therefore we are “entirely contr-nature.”

The 20th Century psychiatrist R. D. Laing called that paradox “the divided self.”

A human being is BUT No human being is
individual/individuated isolate



A human being is related

To other human beings BUT Human beings are

not a corporate
body like a coral
reef. We MUST
MAKE OUR
CONNECTIONS

Now this paradox constitutes the condition of being human. In our basic natures:

a) each is a finite self YET each is part of the

infinite external

b) each is enmeshed in YET each is engaged in

the blood network free-flying thought
that puts us in
touch with a realm
beyond nature

c) each is enclosed in a YET each participates

body that dies in immortal systems
of thought and
language, which
W.B. Yeats calls
“the artifice of
eternity.”

This human condition is Sartre’s “conflict

Without a solution,” it is our very existence. AND THIS IS WHAT ALL POETRY
LOOKS AT (in different ways and from different perspectives) AND WHAT POETRY
HOLDS UP FOR US TO SEE. “We are given it to look at,” as Sartre says.





We've talked about the WHAT, Now for the HOW.



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SELECTION 2

What Shakespeare is not saying, though he has often been misunderstood to be saying, are that lovers and poets are insane. What he IS saying is that there is a resemblance among the ways in which a poet's, a lover's, and a psychotic's mind works. The poet—like the lover and psychotic, he says “is of imagination all compact.”

Let's try to figure out what he means by that.

THE LOVER

When Shakespeare says “the lover sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt”—that is sees the beauty of Helen of Troy when he looks at his beloved even if she is as ugly as a gypsy (who, it seems, were thought to be especially ugly in the 16th Century)

What is he saying in modern terms, and is there any truth in it?

- ❖ We call it Projection. We project our feelings upon that which we perceive, or, our sight, like all our senses, is influenced by what we FEEL, and therefore when we are in love, we cannot see objectively. [Give students some example from your own experience. Solicit examples from theirs]
- ❖ There is some evidence that this is true even when we are not in love. Particle physicists at Stony Brook University became aware that particles moved or seems to move differently when a scientist observed them. [Give example of the Ling particle]. In short, **THAT WHICH IS INSIDE THE ENCLOSED SELF GETS PROJECTED ON THE EXTERNAL.**

THE PSYCHOTIC

To test the validity of what Shakespeare says about the “lunatic” (we would call the person psychotic) take a look at the 3rd selection.



SELECTION 3

“Takes less place. Cat didn’t know what Mouse did and Mouse didn’t know what Cat did. Cat represented more on the suspicious side than the Mouse. Dumbo was a good guy. He saw what the Cat did, and put himself with the Cat so people wouldn’t look at them as comedians. Cat and dumbo are one and alike, but Cat didn’t know what dumbo did and either did the Mouse....PAUSE..A word like ‘milk’ shouldn’t be mentioned.”

I am going to give you only the information that the psychologist who interviewed the psychotic had. This is an excerpt from one of the responses a psychotic man made to a standard “Proverb Test” that psychologists used to administer to psychiatric patients about 40 years ago.

The test was simple; the interviewer would ask the patient to provide the meaning of a number of proverbs: like “What does ‘A stitch in time saves nine’ mean?” or “What does “A rolling stone gathers no moss mean?” The question to which this psychotic man is responding is, “What does ‘When the cat’s away the mice will play’ mean?” The patient, Mr. FB gives Selection 3 as his response to that question.

OK, What did the psychologist know about FB? He was 35 years old when the test was administered. He had lived at home all his life except for a one-year stint in the Army (This was a VA hospital.) His father was a very ‘heavy’ father, a stern disciplinarian, a domestic tyrant. His mother was a very weak woman, indulgent with her son but totally under the control of her husband.

1. First of all, what is most striking about this response in the WAY it chooses to deal with the question? FB does not answer the question, but rather he creates a tiny story, or scenario in response to it.



- Given the information we have about Mr FB, let's try to understand the characterization and plot in his story—keeping in mind Shakespeare's "of imagination all compact." Who is Cat? Who is Mouse? Who is Dumbo, and why is he called 'Dumbo'?

Cat is father; Mouse is mother; Dumbo is FB. Dumbo may refer to the flying elephant in the Disney movie or it may be a name ascribed to FB. (Psychotics were once believed to be stupid?)

- Why does Dumbo "put himself with," i.e. identify with, Cat, and how does that keep him from being "a comedian?" FB wants to identify with his father—a stern tough guy—so that he will not be laughed at.
- Why are Cat and Dumbo "one and alike?"
 - both are men, but
 - more important, this is the phenomenon known as "identification with the aggressor," or the "Stockholm syndrome," in which prisoners or abused victims identify with their captor/abusers; to create for themselves the delusion that they gain the captor/abuser's strength thereby.
- What do you think that Dumbo did that Cat and Mouse do not know about? We can NEVER KNOW. We may guess that
 - He did something that he associates with "play" ("when the Cat's away"),
 - It is something secret,
 - It is something about which he feels guilty since he cannot talk about it directly.
- What does the word "milk" mean to Mr FB? We can never know or even guess. What "milk" means to us—the white liquid that comes from a cow—requires CONSENSUAL VALIDATION. We English speakers agree (consensus) that milk



is white cow juice. BUT FOR FB THERE IS NO OUTSIDE, NO MUTUALLY AGREED UPON LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE.

What FB, whose imagination is certainly “all compact,” has done is to create a structure of words SEEMINGLY LIKE BUT NOT REALLY LIKE a poem. This poem, or scenario, PROJECTS ONTO AN EXTERNAL STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE (the question) A TOTALLY INTERNAL PERCEPTION OR UNDERSTANDING. He does not, he cannot distinguish between internal and external. He is “of imagination all compact.” For the psychotic there is no intention to communicate. He makes the design of words both to express and not express directly an event in his unique and particular personal life to which his words give us no entry. Moreover, there is no external reality for him. The words of the question simply TRIGGER a response which is totally internal.



SELECTION 4

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright
The bridal of earth and sky
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight.
For thou must die

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye
Thy root is ever in the grave.
And thou must die.

Sweet Spring full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie
My music shows you have your closes
And all must die

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives
But, though the whole world turn to coal
Then chiefly lives.

George Herbert

This very short poem was written in the 17th Century by the poet/priest George Herbert. Let us compare the mechanism by which a poet transforms INTERNAL TO EXTERNAL with the way in which a psychotic does.

1. In what respects does FB's statement resemble a poem? FB constructs an external verbal form that has symbolic characters and symbolic action out of internal feelings, sensations, memory.



2. In what respects does FB's statement differ from a poem? FB's meaning is ALL internal; there is no consensual validation. FB's intention is dubious. He is compelled to tell the story but also compelled to disguise it.
3. What is the subject of Herbert's poem? Dying. Herbert does not describe the process of a person's dying; he extrapolates the MEANING of the process of dying and makes a significant shape of it.
4. But Shakespeare says that poets as well as lunatics are “of imagination all compact. In what ways does the poet's use of internal subjective feelings and sensations resemble the psychotic's?

The poet INVESTS external objects and abstract ideas (like death) with INTERNAL subjective sensations/feelings. For example, the rose is “angry” and “brave” (in the 17th century means “showy,” “splendid”) and the person looking at it is blinded with tears by its beauty. He is “rash” even to look at such vibrancy, such glowing life. The dew “weeps” at the close of day. The poet tackles the IDEA that a human being (EVERY human being) is divided: half mortal/half immortal. A human being is HALF ENCLOSED BY DEATH AT THE INSTANT HE/SHE IS MOST ALIVE//and also//a human being possesses a SOUL WHICH CANNOT DIE. He takes this idea and, instead of TELLING it, he makes us FEEL what it is like to be caught (as Sartre puts it) in this “ambiguity which we have to live.” The poet reaches into our SHARED experience and feeling and makes an EXTERNAL, OBJECTIVE, SYMBOLIC IMAGE OF THEM. We have to have experience the almost blinding redness of a full-blown rose to UNDERSTAND what “angry” and “rash” mean.

5. So, in what way does what the poet does DIFFER from what the psychotic does?
 - a) The poet has control of the internal and his internal is shared. He assumes that we are all a bit amazed by the beauty of a flower, that we all feel a



little bit sad at the close of day. On the other hand, the psychotic's internal state is unique to himself.

- b) The poet transforms the internal to a NEW, LARGER EXTERNAL—a pattern of universal truth that he “holds up for us to look at.” THIS POEM SAYS here is death, not in Halloween skeletons or horror movie crypts, BUT HERE, RIGHT NOW IN THE MOST ALIVE AND MOST BEAUTIFUL THINGS AND EVENTS YOU CAN EXPERIENCE.
- c) We have to enter FB'S world as far as we can. We have to know what his father and mother were like to interpret his statement.

IN CONTRAST, the poet draws upon his own AND OUR OWN UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE. And the shape he makes out of words makes us draw back and WITH DETACHMENT see our universal experience whole—as one movement in a greater cosmic design. Even in this tiny 17th Century poem the poet is doing what the great Dante, the great Homer, the great Shakespeare are doing.

In a mere 16 lines Herbert makes us see the agonizing dilemma of being enclosed in a dying animal//and yet//free enough to stand back, outside ourselves, and see that our divided human condition is part of a universal order. That is why we read poetry, see plays or movies—because they enable us to see our condition WHOLE, free from “personal concerns” and “anxious interest,” as the aesthetician Suzanne Langer, says.. we are bound in time, “buckled in a span,” as Shakespeare puts it. But also we are boundless because we participate in all other life, in all other human experience. “No man is an island,” John Donne says, ”Every man is part of the continent that is mankind.” That is what literature shows us; that is what studying literature IS FOR.

