Reading for Pleasure

Classes in literature

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Reading a novel is often looked on as self-indulgence—like drinking before noon (excusable only on holiday), allowable only after finishing the daily papers and medical journals. Such a pursuit may rank even lower than an evening's viewing of sterile programmes on television. Structured learning is now a universally accepted method of study: structured reading for pleasure, however, is unusual.

Signing on for four years

To combat our indolence, arrest our inertia, and provide the necessary motivation for self-education in literature, my wife and I penned a letter to the dean of extramural studies at the university, deserving, we thought, a modicum of consideration after two years' attendance at an absorbing biology course which had just ended. Before long, the senior tutor in literature was sipping tea in our garden and promising one term of 10 sessions. There was a possibility of extending this to a full year (two terms) if support and enthusiasm indicated a need in our small town; indeed, he implied that a three-year programme might be feasible.

Certain preliminary arrangements were necessary because the university is over 20 miles away. The lecture room of the modern library vacated by biology was booked for the literature class. My wife became honorary secretary with special responsibility for care and distribution of the books—particularly in the weeks before the beginning of term—and for general liaison between tutor and students. Some pressure was applied—perhaps unfairly—on the ex-members of the biology class to form the nucleus of the new study group—not surprisingly, in retrospect, none of these survived. Possibly Joseph Conrad's maxim that, "a work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line," proved too much to digest, or possibly Joe Orton's black humour in *Loot*, or W H Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *The Dog Beneath The Skin* was too whimsical for the scientific mind.

Nevertheless, the numbers have risen steadily and the average attendance has been about 20. This size has permitted group participation without embarrassment, and is neither too large for audiovisual aids nor too small for the didactic approach. Our charming and tolerant tutor—a PhD—has led us gently into the complexities of English literature, illustrating how

strife-torn Ireland influenced the work of Yeats, how Thomas Hardy's complex personality revealed itself in much of his poetry, how Emily Brontë's battle with personal ill health and family illness coloured her literary output. Without cajolery, sarcasm, ridicule, or victimisation she has encouraged us to complete E M Forster's *A Passage to India*, Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, and comparable classics.

In the first year, we explored the works of modern writers—a democratic decision taken by a pilot committee. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* proved tantalising hints of hidden meanings, and, in sharp contrast, Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* flooded in with a torrent of action and a plethora of words. Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Edna O'Brien, Tom Stoppard—to mention a few of the authors whose works we studied—indicated that modern was interpreted as meaning during or after the second world war.

Eras of chaos and craft

The next year we stepped back to *The Long Weekend*—the period between the two world wars which Robert Graves and Alan Hodge describe so vividly in their book of the same name. We read the novels of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Evelyn Waugh, E M Forster, and J B Priestley. We discovered that this was a period of chaos—economic, moral, and intellectual—and that the novel appeared to be the form of expression least subjected to rules and restrictions. Yet it was in the poetry of this period that we found the deepest meaning. T S Eliot, who completed *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* in 1911, was the first to break away from previous traditions in the opening lines:

Let us go then, you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go through certain half deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .
Oh, do not ask. "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michaelangelo.

Who can read *The Wasteland* and *Gerontion* without feeling that the author was "Neither living nor dead and [I] knew nothing looking into the heart of light, the silence"? In about 1930, the voice of W H Auden was heard for the first time. Soon he was joined by C Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, all poets who believed that the "ivory towers" of the 'twenties should be swept away. They were united in the belief that their duty was to protect Britain from a moral

degeneration which could follow total indoctrination by Nazi Germany.

After the study of a period enveloped by desolation and despair, in the third year we were reprieved from further emotional trauma by turning the clock back to the Victorian era. To live with Dr Lydgate through his personal tribulations in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, or to smile at the machinations of Mr Slope in Trollope's *Barchester Towers* in his thirst for ecclesiastical recognition and honour, was probably as beneficial as the practice of yoga or transcendental meditation. Gerard Manley Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland*—a mystical poem concerning a shipwreck in the Thames estuary—exhibits a deep passion and a human sympathy which may be difficult to share in an age where disasters are commonplace, where jumbo jets kill 300 passengers in a matter of seconds, where Kipling's barrack room ballad, *The Death of Danny Deever*, set against the horrors of Northern Ireland may seem of little import. Yet nothing can detract from the beauty of the language and the craftsmanship of the authors of this Victorian period.

Our list is far from comprehensive since lists unadorned are dull and tedious. We have expanded the shelves of our bookcase—because a book enjoyed is a book worth purchasing. We are gratified that undergraduate guests hasten to our shelves.

Extended study

An unexpected extension of our literature studies has been the acquisition of a small library of the "spoken word" to set beside our collection of records of classical music. We now have W H Auden, C Day Lewis, Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice, Robert Graves, and T S Eliot reading their own works. Other poems by Eliot, Hopkins, and Yeats are read by famous actors.

The compilations on radio—*With Great Pleasure*, for example, and Thursday's *Time for Verse*—fill us with a warm glow of enjoyment, almost complacency, as we nod sagely (shades of Pooter?) at the celebrity's catholic choice, his erudition, his breadth of mind, and his sense of humour. We appreciate

Robert Robinson's acerbic wit when interviewing famous authors in BBC 2's *Book Programme*, and enjoy Frank Delaney's soft Irish brogue in his enthusiastic and comprehensive review in Radio 3's *Bookshelf*.

The fourth year augurs well. We are moving laterally to American literature and our tutor has posed these provocative questions in the poster to advertise the forthcoming course: "Why is the best English literature being written in America? Why are American poets and novelists still excited by the possibilities of language while their British counterparts fall silent? . . . We shall see American writers creating their own language and myth and discovering their own history—coming to terms with Puritanism, slavery, the Civil War, political corruption, and the melting pot of European immigration."

At the end of this four-year course we will have no degrees or diplomas—not even an "A" level or "O" level—to produce for hours spent in our pursuit of literary knowledge. But was it pursuit of knowledge, or was it to fulfil a need? Nathaniel Hawthorne provides sufficient justification in *The Scarlet Letter*:

Then, moreover, the white locks of age were sometimes found to be the thatch of an intellectual tenement in good repair. But as respects the majority of my corps of veterans there will be no wrong done if I characterise them generally as a set of wearisome old souls who had gathered nothing worth preservation from their varied experience of life. They seemed to have flung away all the golden grain of practical wisdom which they had enjoyed so many opportunities of harvesting, and most carefully to have stored their memories with the husks. They spoke with far more interest and unction of the morning breakfast or yesterday's, today's, or tomorrow's dinner than of the shipwreck of forty or fifty years ago, and all the world's wonders which they had witnessed with their youthful eyes.

Before the Great Reaper cuts the last sheaf, perhaps we can claim with Elizabeth Barrett Browning that:

Nought man could do have I left undone
And you see my harvest which I reap
This very day, now a year is run.

Is it generally safe to use glazed pottery as eating and drinking vessels?

All pottery and porcelain is glazed with a lead silicate glaze, which is applied under strict industrial conditions. Once the pottery is fired the lead glaze is firmly adherent. Any amount of the glaze detaching from the pottery is minimal and can readily be dealt with by the body metabolism. There is no evidence of lead intoxication or any pathogenicity deriving from the use of glazed pottery.

A 10-month-old baby given talampicillin (Talpen) syrup for a febrile upper respiratory tract infection developed a generalised maculopapular rash thought to be caused by the drug. Is it safe to give penicillin in the future and if so in what form?

Talampicillin is an ester of ampicillin, which after absorption is rapidly hydrolysed to ampicillin. Ampicillin and its analogues produce two main types of rash: an urticarial type characteristic of penicillin hypersensitivity and an erythematous macular or maculopapular rash. The latter usually appears between seven and ten days after starting treatment, and the incidence is increased in patients with infectious mononucleosis, lymphomas, and viral infections. The erythematous rash is generally believed not to be a sign of classic penicillin allergy, and published evidence¹ suggests that in most patients the rash does not reappear with subsequent exposure to ampicillin or other penicillins. Ampicillin (and talampicillin), however, may produce allergic reactions as do all penicillins, and occasionally an erythematous rash may be a sign of allergy. Unfortunately, there is no reliable way of predicting which patients with an erythematous rash will react to penicillins in the future, but the risk is greater in those with a history of atopy or allergy to other drugs. A family history of atopy or drug allergy may also increase the risk. If there is no atopic or allergic history it will probably be safe to give any penicillin in the

future. As severe allergic reactions are more commonly associated with parenteral than with oral administration it would seem sensible to use the oral route in the first instance. It is, of course, important not to make a false diagnosis of penicillin allergy, as this may deprive the child of valuable treatment in the future.

¹ Kagan, B M, *Western Journal of Medicine*, 1977, **126**, 333.

A 39-year-old woman's first baby has spina bifida. What is the likelihood of a second baby having the same lesions?

The recurrence risk of neural tube malformation (spina bifida or anencephaly) varies with the birth frequency of neural tube malformations in the population. In South Wales with a birth frequency approaching 8 per 1000 the recurrence risk was 5.2%; in Metropolitan London with a birth frequency approaching 3 per 1000 the recurrence risk was 4.5%.¹

¹ Carter, C O, *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, 1974, **16**, suppl 32.

Is baclofen of value in the management of spasticity and spasm of voluntary muscles resulting from traumatic lesions of the spinal cord?

The simple answer to this question is: "Try it and see." Baclofen is of considerable value to some patients who have spasticity and spasm of involuntary muscles, whether this results from trauma, multiple sclerosis, or pressure on the cord from other causes. It should be introduced slowly and increased to maximum tolerated doses. It is not always beneficial, and no satisfactory explanation has appeared to date, but it is certainly worth trying and should not be omitted from any list of drugs that are useful in dealing with this type of case.