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*The English Journal* is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

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The Past as Present:
Reader Response and Literary Study

R. Baird Shuman

When Eugene O'Neill wrote in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, "The past is the present... It's the future, too," or when Marcel Proust wrote in *Guermantes Way*, "The past not merely is not fugitive, it remains the present," they were—perhaps unknowingly—articulating a new historicism that would later, quite indirectly, infect the teaching of literature in significant ways.

What they suggest—and countless thinkers share their views—is that all human existence is built on past existence, but that when people reflect upon the past, they necessarily interpret it in terms of their own immediate present, making it part past, part present. Historical truth is elusive because the present always revises the past. Such also is the case with the study and interpretation of literature.

What the 21st Century Will Demand

In thinking about education for the century ahead, educators cannot afford to fall into the trap of viewing it narrowly in strictly American terms. Society has become so global, so transnational that all national boundaries as we have known them are being challenged. Countries like the United States, Britain, Germany, and France have become such melting pots of people from all over the planet that the ethnicity of each of these countries has been changed inalterably.

Education, Literature, and Society

At all levels, the modern teaching of literature is an act fraught with serious political overtones and consequences. Recent literary theory—particularly Marxist criticism—has paid considerable attention to such overtones and consequences, as have other interpretive movements including the psychoanalytical, deconstructionist, feminist, gay and lesbian, and new historicist.

The critical framework most immediately applicable, however, to elementary and secondary teachers, is reader response. It posits that all readers, by bringing their individual backgrounds and value systems to their reading, create their own texts as they shape their personal, highly individual transactions with the texts they are reading.

Reader-response theory has been around since the 1930s, but since the late 1960s and early 1970s, new life and spirit have been breathed into it. Louise Rosenblatt's pioneering work, *Literature as Exploration*, first published in 1938 and often reprinted since then, signaled a new era in teaching literature.

The social upheavals that ensued in the United States three decades after Rosenblatt's book was first published caused people to rethink substantially the implications of literature study for school populations that were changing drastically. The conservatives held (and still hold) to a body of literature that reflects American culture and its roots in western civilization. In their eyes it is the function of the schools to teach this body of tried-and-true literature—even in the face of a rapidly changing school population—to all students. This is an attempt to make students appreciate the cultural values of their country and to develop a system of personal values consistent with those values.

Others point out, however, that (1) much of the literature in question does not speak directly to the needs, backgrounds, and interests of huge numbers of students who currently attend public schools; (2) many students in school today will
never develop the habit of reading unless someone steers them toward literature that speaks to them directly; (3) the corpus of literature available to readers is growing at a prodigious rate, so any set list of readings will soon become obsolete; and (4) it is not the function of public schools to propagandize for one dominant way of life over another. In a pluralistic society, students need to be educated to deal with a broad variety of people, mores, and customs, not just with those that tout traditional western values (Heller and Morgan 1991).

Inherent in the arguments on both sides is the question of authority. Those in the conservative camp—people like Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind* [1987]), E. D. Hirsch (*Cultural Literacy* [1987]), Lynne Cheney (“The State of the Humanities: A Report to the President, Congress, and People on the State of the Humanities” [1988])—decry what they perceive as the passing of an educational system based on traditional western values. In so doing, they implicitly decry the presence in American schools of students who do not reflect a white, middle-class value system.

Those in the conservative camp appear to think that the great books of the western world will somehow, perhaps magically, transform those who do not espouse the value system of the dominant culture into the kinds of compliant people who will eventually blend easily into what they consider mainstream American society.

### Defining and Refining the Canon

The last decade has brought a considerable broadening in the kinds of books and authors considered part of the literary canon. In elementary and secondary schools, world literature has made substantial inroads, and much of the world literature now available is from the Third World. The canon in American literature has been expanded to include writing by African Americans, Latin Americans, Jewish Americans, Native Americans, and others who constitute the actual fabric of contemporary American society.

The argument persists, however, about whether, in broadening the canon, educators are doing much more than adding to the range of *American* literature. Has the added literature been selected because it is acceptable to middle-class white society or because it truly represents a minority culture on its own terms?

Molefe Kete Asante, chair of Temple University's African American Studies Program, is adamant in saying that the philosophy upon which Temple's program is based "is not merely an aggregation of courses about African people, but the Afrocentric study of African people and phenomenon" (1992, B-6). In saying this, he is challenging a statement by Henry Louis Gates, head of Harvard University's Afro-American Studies Department, that Harvard's program is not Afrocentric.

The sort of question this debate poses has significant implications for anyone who thinks about the place of minority literatures (black and otherwise) in the canon and about the purposes for which they are incorporated. The question up for debate is whether it is sufficient simply to bring works into the canon and little more. The very choice of works to be included becomes, of course, a political decision. Allowing students latitude in selecting what they will read may offer a partial solution, but students at this stage often do not know what is available.

Teachers need to know as much as they can about minority literatures, and they need to be
sure that a broad range of books is easily accessible to their students.

How Much Does the Teacher Have to Read?
Whenever one suggests that a classroom full of students read different books rather than a single book, teachers throw up their hands and ask, "But how can I read all of the books my students are reading?" The answer is, "You probably can't—but does that matter?" If students are engaged in healthy and exciting reading encounters, let them be the experts for the books they are reading. Let them tell the rest of the class about their readings. Let them write index cards, preferably 4" x 6", in which they review their books, and file the cards where other students can refer to them.

That teachers do not have to read every book their students read is not a radical suggestion. Oxford and Cambridge University dons, who do most of their teaching on a tutorial basis, are well-read, intellectually vibrant people who make no pretense of having read every book the students they are tutoring read. This situation has persisted for centuries and has not diminished the quality of education offered undergraduates at these two most celebrated British universities.

Where Do Teachers Stand in the Literary Debate?
As the pundits—most of them safely removed from actual elementary and secondary classroom teaching situations—argue philosophically about how literature can and should be taught in our schools, teachers daily face the necessity of deciding what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. Among the most realistic scholars in the field, Robert Probst, who considers reader-response the most sensible and satisfactory approach to teaching literature at the pre-collegiate level, offers sage advice: "There ought to be some correlation between what students go through as they grow up and what great writers have written about" (1992, 75).

This statement is really at the heart of why literature is an important part of school curricula. It calls for a significant broadening of the literary fare that schools offer. In some school situations, this broadening will encompass literature that is not part of the political agendas of most school districts today; if it is prohibited, however, large numbers of inner-city students, large numbers of minority students, will continue to give up on school and will, by so doing, severely limit their future possibilities.

Schools serve students best when they begin by attending to the immediate concerns of their students. As students' needs are met, the scope of their interests will increase and their true, innate abilities will surface and blossom.

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