

The Literary Influences on Students in a Victorian High School.

1965

One of the difficulties of secondary education is that it has less clearly defined aims than other stages of the formal educational processes. The kindergarten or nursery school has a reasonably clear social aim, the primary school aims first at literacy and numeracy, and the university or technical college at professional training and scholastic discipline. Certainly, none of these aims is simple, and upon analysis they may even appear to be ~~xxxxxx~~ self-contradictory. For example, there may be a conflict in the kindergarten between the need to allow a child to develop his own personality and the need to persuade him to curb his anti-social instincts. The primary school may feel obliged to inhibit literary fluency, either in reading or in writing, in order to ensure a mastery of fundamental processes which it believes important. Alternatively, it may feel compelled to abandon this aim altogether in particular cases in order to cope with social problems which it believed to be of greater urgency. At the university, the obligations of providing vocational training may restrict the opportunities for the more leisurely pursuit of knowledge and inculcation of scholarly discipline. However, at least each of these institutions has a clear aim to start from, however inadequate it may prove in practice.

The secondary school, on the other hand, has no ~~xxxxxx~~ single agreed aim, but rather a multiplicity of roles. For some students, it is the final stage of education, for others, the intermediate stage before university. Some will look to it for vocational training, in book-keeping, woodwork or typing; others, confident that they will learn their vocational skills on the job, expect the school to provide a general education. Still others

need the school to show them the possibilities of employment, and some use it as a place to hide from the hard facts of life. To some it is a springboard for social advancement, to others the judge ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ who sets the seal on their inadequacy, for stupidity is the fault least tolerated in a modern society. The employer will see the school in one role, the parent in another, the teacher in another, and the student in yet another. These roles may overlap or conflict, but they are rarely likely to co-incide. It is this fact which makes any decision either about the curriculum of a particular school or the content of a particular subject in that curriculum difficult to decide, for there is no single standard to which to appeal.

One approach which has been made to this problem of deciding the boundaries of the school curriculum is to examine the needs of the student and then to find the subjects of study which meet these needs. This may be done in an elementary fashion by taking some such topic as road safety or personal hygiene, about the ~~xxxxx~~ need for which there is general agreement, and then finding an opening into which it can be fitted. At a more sophisticated level, this is done in the "core curriculum,"¹ which takes various problems from everyday living and then examines them from all aspects, using ~~the~~^{various} approaches associated with the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ different subjects of the traditional curriculum to see what light each throws on the common problem. Thus, if the problem were "the conditions of successful family life," this topic would be looked at from the point of view of social history, considering what types of family life had been regarded as normal at different periods of history, of economics, considering the effects of differing economic patterns on the family, of morality, and so on.

Arithmetic and commercial principles could be brought into play when considering problems of the family budget, scientific knowledge would be used to determine a correct diet, and literature might play its part in exposing problems of personal relationships. The proposed Victorian secondary health course would seem to be using an approach of this kind,² but it is limited by the fact that it is conceived as yet another single subject in the traditional curriculum. When fully applied, the core curriculum uses this unified approach, through a series of problems, to ~~give the~~ ^{greater part, at least, of} the students' work in all the major subjects. Problems such as the one mentioned, or "how to use your time more effectively," or "how . . . you determine a fair price and good value," are the principle vehicles of study, and the fundamental skills and facts of mathematics, writing, reading, history and geography are learnt incidentally to these tasks which absorb the students' attention and enlist their zeal.

Such a curriculum may be based on a study of either social or psychological needs, or a blend of both, but it will still be open to the objection that its final form lacks any consistency other than of purpose. Some of our suspicion is no doubt due to its strangeness, but nevertheless there ~~ix~~ appears to be something fundamentally absurd in a system of studies which makes no discrimination between the various disciplines and the distinct ways of approaching knowledge. Literature for example may certainly be of value to the student of society, but, as Lewis points out,³ only if he approaches it as literature, and not as just another piece of historical evidence. Indeed, it may be most misleading, as well as unhelpful, to use literature as evidence of a physical fact, or even of a theoretic outlook. Its importance to the historian is not so much in what it tells us of what the author or his contemporaries thought or did, but in what it tells us

of the assumptions on which they worked and of the way in which they thought. But to be understood in this way it must be studied for its own sake, and not merely in relation to a number of "areas of living."

As part of a core curriculum, such a topic as "the uses of political power" might well be studied at fifth or sixth year level in the secondary school. A text which suggests itself for this purpose is Shakespeare's "Macbeth," which deals among other things with the problem of seizing political power and the way the ~~victor~~ victor is imprisoned by his own success. From another point of view, it could be regarded as a study in the need for order in a society, and the contrast between imposed and natural order, or it could be read as a document on the Tudor ~~and Stuart~~ ideology of power. All of these questions are relevant to the play, but they can only be properly understood in relation to the play if we first see the work as a construction of words for a stage. In this context, the audience is invited to sympathise with Macbeth as a man, to apprehend the ~~evil~~ consequences of an evil act (murder) as a physical reality ("Poison'd chalice," a "naked new-born babe," the "horrid deed" ~~felt~~ felt as a grain of grit), and thus to share in Macbeth's moral and intellectual dissolution subsequent to his act of treason. But this response to Shakespeare's play comes only from close attention to the words as literature. In this way we enter into his moral world, and then we can ask the questions which will interest the historian or the politician or the moralist. We might then choose to compare Macbeth's Scotland with Nkrumah's Ghana or Chiang Kai-shek's Formosa, but our comparison will not take the form of comparing the physical conditions for the assumption of personal power or of contrasting the consequences. Shakespeare's text is not an adequate historical authority for such purposes. But if we

have treated the play as literature, have allowed ourselves to respond to the language, the rhythms and imagery, the story and characters as part of an artistic work which is neither part of life nor apart from life, we will be in a better position to understand the attitudes of the modern dictators and their followers. But this understanding will not be of a kind which enables us to pass simple judgements, nor will it necessarily assist us with understanding the historical circumstances of their rise.

For "Macbeth" is no more an illustration of the corrupting influence of power than is "Hamlet" an object lesson for a unit of study on "how to make the best use of your time" or "Lear" for one on "family life" or "mental illness." In each of these plays we learn something of the meaning of nobility and of humanity by sharing in the dissolution of a noble human being. But this human being is a stage being, whose dissolution is presented in a certain way with the intention of affecting us, the audience, in certain ways. Thus, when Macbeth cries:

". . . I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which e'er leaps itself
And falls on the other."

(We see with him the reality of his position, but we also see, as he does not, the imaginative and moral grasp of Macbeth himself which apprehends his situation so concretely. Yet later, when he cries defiance from Dunsinane,

"The mind I sway by and the heart I bear
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear
we hear not his confidence but

the empty braggadocio of mere words, a hollowness emphasisee by the hollow doggerel form.

Moreover, Shakespeare, as to some extent any genuine writer, has a disturbing tendency to lead us far beyond the apparent subject matter. The development of Macbeth's character is only one element of a play which includes the moral problems of choice, the meaning of loyalty, the nature of woman and of love, and the significance of human life. Ross's epitaph for Young Siward, ⁶ pronounced in the interlude while Macbeth himself is slain, in itself raises more questions than could be included in any single "area of living," but again they are questions which can only be properly understood, or even realised, to the extent that we have learnt how to read Shakespeare. Through such reading we develop our own sensitivity to words and to the reality which they define. This may or may not raise our level of moral awareness or our capacity to make moral judgements, but these matters lie beyond the realm of literature. The danger of the core curriculum is that we will start at this point and never in fact study literature as literature. This would not be a complete waste, but it would certainly lose a lot of the potential value to be obtained from a properly disciplined approach to literature as a subject in its own right.

If, then, we seek something different/ from what can be offered by the core curriculum approach, as far as English Literature is concerned, we would seem to be faced with the alternative of starting with the individual subject, examining it to see what it can offer, and, if we are satisfied that it deserves a place in the curriculum on these grounds, developing a syllabus which will realise this potential as far as possible. We can assume that protagonists from other disciplines will be making the same examination of their subject although it might be hoped that the result of such an examination will not be merely a list of subjects to be studied but some sort of ~~system~~ ^{system} of priorities which will ensure that

there is sufficient time to study/^{properly}the subjects chosen.~~xx~~
 Otherwise there is the danger that breadth will be achieved at the expense of depth, and that essential studies will not be mastered because of time devoted to valuable but less important subjects.

In passing, it might be noted that, whereas the core curriculum approach would appear to harmonise with the philosophy of the Dewey school, with its emphasis on adjustment to the demands of life, this approach ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ favours the traditionalist, who looks on education as a means of handing on the wisdom of the past rather than as a way of shaping the future. It can also encourage the tendency to keep subjects in the curriculum only, or at least mainly, because they have been taught in the past. It is always possible to find excuses for doing what we find convenient, and in the field of curriculum planning this is made even easier by the fact that a good teacher can extract value from the most unpromising of courses. Despite the objections to theories of transfer of learning, there are undoubtedly many adults who have gained their insight into human nature at the hands of an inspired drill sergeant, just as there are others who have learnt to read and write and argue as a result of labouring over Latin and Greek texts, but this can be used neither as an argument for the restoration of the classics nor for the restitution of universal military training. The incidental benefits which may be derived from a particular subject do not justify its place in a necessarily limited school curriculum.

But the traditionalist has a lot to be said in his favour. Too much emphasis on adjustment to life as it is currently lived leads to a shallow course of studies with neither roots in the past nor direction for the future. Moreover, ~~with~~ too much concern with the community today and with preparing for the individual's role in this society can lead to pressures for conformity which can be far more dangerous, because more insidious and backed by a more extensive and premissive morality, than the apparently rigid code of the nineteenth century English public school. The modern idea that you can do what you like provided what you like is normal is less likely to lead to healthy rebellion than ^{was} the Victorian assumption that what you[^] naturally inclined to was sin and that this inclination could only be cured by regular beating. The modern morality is summed up in the word "socialisation," ⁷ which describes that ultimately inhuman utopia of the psychologist who sees all disagreement as sin or disease and envisages a life of complete harmony marred neither by conflict nor by individuality.

It is, however, evident that before an individual can play a part in a society he must come to understand and to share in its culture and traditions. Otherwise, he will be unable ~~to~~ even to communicate with his fellows, for language is one of the primary determinants of culture. With language, we acquire not only a way of expressing ourselves, but also an entire pattern of looking at things and ordering our impressions. ⁸ Fortunately, we absorb our culture as we acquire our language, but if we are to become individuals, and not merely members of society, we must

become aware of the cultural pattern within which we live, and learn to understand it not as a divinely ordained pattern of the right, nor as an haphazard arrangement of contemporary circumstances, but as an organic growth arising logically from historical, geographic and economic determinants, and itself joining with these factors to define both the opportunities and the limitations of the future. The anthropologist obtains this understanding by cutting himself off from his own kind and learning to live in a totally different society. He virtually has to go through the process of growing up and being educated again, but this time it is a part of his training and he is watching as well as participating, and thus comes to understand himself. This knowledge he brings back to use on the problems of his own society.⁹

It would possibly be of value to the teacher to have a similar training, but regardless of that, his task is both to further the students' absorption in his own culture and to lead him on to an objective study of this culture. This achievement is possibly one of the fruits of the study of a foreign language, but it is if anything even more relevant to the study of literature. For, as we have seen, to read a ~~pxxy~~ work of literature is to enter into another existence, a reality apart from our own but related to it. Yet this entering is in fact a mental event, occurring in the reader's mind. The words of the author enter his consciousness and mould it, and his sensitivity, to their pattern. Afterwards, as he ~~xxxxxx~~ weighs and judges his experience, he adjusts his attitudes to take into account this new awareness.

But this description applies, of course, only to the ~~irritated~~ developed reader. Another person may merely absorb his literary experiences as so much entertainment, to be forgotten as soon as it is finished. Yet, because he does not consciously assess his experience, its effect may well be greater. For his understanding of the world is governed by the language with which he describes it,¹⁰ and the meaning he gives to ~~these~~ this language is determined by the context in which he has heard or seen the words previously. Thus, advertisers determine what a word means to the majority of people,¹¹ and then use the word constantly in this sense, to the exclusion of all other meanings and shades of meaning it may have. The person whose language has been entirely shaped by unconscious absorption ~~will~~ not only ^{will} possess a blunted intellectual instrument but also will have a blurred understanding of his world beyond immediate practical issues. Ideas like love, hate, pride, debate, comfort will mean little to him.

It is primarily on these grounds that we can justify the study of literature as a single subject. It is through literature that we can understand ourselves as individuals in society, by allowing our consciousness to be shaped by the words of other men, and it is through literature that our awareness of language can be shaped. If, then, we decide that literature has a place in the school curriculum, as a subject in its own right or as part of a general English language course, we must decide exactly what the general principles of literature as a discipline may be before we can know how it should be studied.

This conclusion will not of course follow if we wish to include literature in our curriculum ^{only} for the sake of the pleasure it offers, or as an example of the use of the language by masters. Both of these aims are proper to the study of literature, and if the first of these at least is not achieved it is doubtful if anything else can be. But literature is far more than a diversion and an example, and if its full value is to be realised it must be studied as well as read. Certainly, it is probably not until late in his secondary schooling that we can expect the average student to be able to make clear critical distinctions in words, but if he is to be brought to this point it is important that from the earliest age he be asked to think about his experience and to look beyond the immediate enjoyment. To say this is to say no more than that the teacher himself must understand the principles of his subject, but that it is a matter for his own skill and judgement how much of that understanding he communicates explicitly to the pupil.