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# Opening Literature Learning: Teaching the 'Classic' Novel

ANDREW LENG

As the millenium approaches rapidly, the English 'classic' novel—increasingly ably supported by its proliferating cinematic and video incarnations—appears destined to remain the popular phenomenon that it originated as. Furthermore, whilst it is a commonplace of post-structuralist, and especially post-colonialist criticism, that the reading and more especially, the teaching, of English classics, such as 'Shakespeare' and the nineteenth-century realist novel, was probably the most pervasive form of British cultural imperialism - nonetheless we continue to criticise and to teach these canonical works. Thus, for example, paradoxically, canonical western novels, such as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), remain central to the writings of the postcolonialist critic, Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (1978) remains the most influential critique of Eurocentrism.

Bearing these considerations in mind, and particularly in view of the fact that from 1997 the Open University in Singapore will be offering its students two courses which focus on the nineteenth-century realist novel, it seems appropriate to consider the implications of what classic novels we choose to teach, and how and why we teach them. Therefore I shall:

- review the Open University's course, *The Nineteenth Century Novel and Its Legacy*, which was launched in the 1970s
- preview its new course, *Approaching Literature*, which includes a section on "The Realist Novel"
- briefly, consider how these approaches to the teaching of realist fiction to part-time students might relate to how full-time students are taught in an institution like NIE.

## Course 1: The Nineteenth Century Novel and Its Legacy (1973, revised 1982)

The second level arts course, "The Nineteenth Century Novel and Its Legacy", exemplifies the open learning approach to literature pioneered by the Open University in the 1970s. It is divided into 32 Units/Course Guides, which contain teaching materials on 16 novels, which are arranged chronologically, and in 3 groupings:

1. There is a core of 6 nineteenth-century English novels, beginning with *Mansfield Park*, and ending with Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), plus a seventh text, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873-6) which is treated as the definitive 'realist' novel.
2. There are 4 'Continental' novels, e.g. Balzac's *Cousin Bette* (1846) and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884).
3. The course concludes with 5 Modernist texts which are designated Legacies, such as *Heart of Darkness* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915).

Various broad teaching approaches to the realist novel are implicit in these selections and groupings. So, for example:

- Students are encouraged to compare English realist fiction with its 'Continental' counterpart, in terms of its provincialism and treatment (or non-treatment) of taboo subjects.
- The "Legacies" grouping is similarly used to highlight, by contrast, the nature of its nineteenth-century forerunners: issues raised include the Modernist reaction against the 'moral-decision' novel and the advent of formal experimentation.

## The Open Teaching Methodology and Related Critical Approaches

The Units of teaching materials supplied to students are of two kinds: those which cover general issues, such as "Poor Relations and Rich Publishers", and those devoted to individual novels.

Units follow a 'Question'/Discussion' format designed to elicit an interactive response to the text and teaching materials from the student.

Thus in the pair of Units on Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), such issues as the book's 'Narrative Technique' and its status as a 'Novel or Romance?', are handled in this way. And, in addition to the Unit's author, Graham Holderness, engaging in this form of simulated dialogue with the student, materials by other critics who use alternative approaches are included, to extend the debate beyond his particular perspective. Accordingly, the first Unit on *Wuthering Heights* includes a selection of 4 extracts representing the 'Views' of 4 critics on the subject of Catherine and Heathcliff's love, which students are invited to consider the merits of, before in the second Unit being given Holderness's opinion of the extracts.

Whilst these teaching materials are thus designed to encourage students to form their own judgments, it is nonetheless true that, by definition, no system of instruction can ever be entirely 'open': inevitably Units have to 'lead their witnesses' sufficiently strongly to achieve the course's objectives. Consequently although the Open University has for the past 25 years been in the vanguard of tertiary institutions committed to raising their students' awareness of the ideological implications of what they study and how they study it, this is not to say that its courses are thus completely immunised from having ideological blindspots of their own.

Accordingly from a 1990s perspective we might raise our eyebrows at both the arbitrariness and the appropriative implications of designating *Huckleberry Finn* a 'Continental' novel, and Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), a 'British' one. Furthermore, whilst the Open University's fundamentally Marxist approach to literature is in many ways enabling, and certainly highly applicable to the study of the bourgeois genre of the realist novel, nevertheless the absence of any substantial feminist consideration of the novel from this early course is problematic.

So although Holderness convincingly argues that the extract from Terry Eagleton's influential *Myths of Power* (1975) is the most persuasive of his selection of 4 alternative readings of the Cathy/Heathcliff relationship included in the *Wuthering Heights* Units, nonetheless the subsequent failure to add to the revised edition of these Units the famous attack of the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective (1977) on Eagleton's Heathcliff-centred reading of the novel

is a disappointing, but not atypical, omission. In this respect "The Nineteenth Century Novel and Its Legacy" is very much a product of the time of its conception.

## **Course 2: Approaching Literature: "The Realist Novel" (1995-6)**

Perhaps implicitly recognizing some of the limitations of their older course on the nineteenth-century novel, this year in the UK the Open University introduced its new Approaching Literature course, one quarter of which will consider the phenomenon of "The Realist Novel". The other 3 sections of the course deal with:

- "Literature and Gender"
- "Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon"
- "Romantic Writings"

From this list it is clear that the Approaching Literature course encompasses 4 current ways of approaching literature:

1. Through the concept of genre represented by the novel.
2. Through the application of a critical theory: feminism.
3. Through a consideration of the idea of the 'great author' (Shakespeare) and the related issue of canonical and non-canonical authors, such as Aphra Behn.
4. Through the study of a literary period: Romanticism.

Though there is not the space here to consider all the implications of this course's format, apropos of the novel segment it is clear that there will be some stimulating overlap and complementarity with the feminism and Romanticism sections especially, and that the course's foregrounding of 4 ways in which literature is classified and approached critically and pedagogically is also ambitious and thought-provoking.

Besides differing significantly from the earlier course because of the inclusion of the novel within this broader framework, two features of the "Realist Novel" section itself are particularly noteworthy:

1. The introduction of *Frankenstein* to represent the subversive, 'alternative', nineteenth-century Gothic tradition. [The 3 other set novels are: Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Great Expectations*, and Ivan Turgenev's *Father's and Sons* (1862).]
2. The greater range of its critical approaches and their fuller integration with the treatment and teaching of the novels themselves. For example, extracts from Said's discussion of *Great Expectations* from *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) and Roland Barthes's discussion of "The Reality Effect" (from *The Rustle of Language*, 1967) are anthologized in the *Course Reader* (ed. Dennis Walder).

### **Implications for Teaching the Realist Novel to Full-time Students**

To my mind the greatest of the many virtues of the Open University system is an entirely practical, logistical one: every student has equal access to the critical readings, because they are each sent the same substantial pack of teaching materials, including the Course Reader(s) and audio-visual materials. I imagine that only the richest (American?) universities could even dream of guaranteeing all of their students such a facility.

This aside, how compatible are the approaches of Open Learning courses and those aimed at the teaching of full-time students? At present, the 5 novels I teach at NIE in the "Nineteenth-Century Novel" course are: *Mansfield Park*, *Frankenstein*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848), Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).

This combination aims to be varied but integrated, giving equal weight to the 'Gothic' strand by including both *Frankenstein* and *Dr Jekyll* to facilitate a consideration of both 'female' and 'male' versions of the Gothic. Furthermore, whilst being another variant on the female Gothic form, the psychological and social realism of *Jane Eyre* make it an ideal 'mediating' text between the 'realist' and 'Gothic' traditions. By starting the course with three woman novelists there is also probably a greater emphasis on feminism than either of the 2 Open University 'novel' courses offers.

Like many of my colleagues, in order to establish a balance between my output and the students' input, each two hour teaching sessions is divided in half, with the first half usually being a lecture, and the second a student presentation. In the case of *Frankenstein* for example, my lectures focus on the Gothic, and the novel's structure and narrative techniques, and students present on the topics of "the creature's role and viewpoint" and "the presentation of women".

One possibility raised by the format and content of the Open University's new "Realist Novel" segment is to incorporate a sequence of critical readings, though this approach raises the hoary problems of time availability, student access to secondary materials, and how to apportion 'responsibility' for interpreting and applying those critical approaches between the lecturer and the students. Also: would sufficient numbers of students read and assimilate enough of the novels and their corresponding critical readings to make this kind of interactive approach viable? Or: would the critical extracts remain, decidedly, 'secondary' reading?

Despite these reservations, in considering how to update this course, I can see that the selective introduction of, say, extracts from Said's discussion of *Mansfield Park* in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) - highlighting both his post-colonialism and his ambivalence towards the Western canon - and even perhaps the Marxist-Feminist Collective's attack on Eagleton's reading of the Brontes, could greatly enrich it, provided that the course did not become overambitious and that students were not overrun with reading, or overwhelmed by 'theory'...

## References

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