

## **Critical Theory and the Teaching of the English and American Novel in Universities of the Developing World.**

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### **□ ABSTRACT □**

*The authors argue against a teacher's basing his presentation of a novel upon a currently-popular theory of literature such as structuralism, Marxism, deconstructionism, Fruedianism, or the reader-response approach. They, therefore, focus upon the practical grasp of the novel's plot, characterization, and theme by the students. As an illustration, the authors suggest a "key-word" approach which turns the students' attention upon the images and concepts which allow them to organize much more better what they have read. Insofar as a literary theory is either valid or useful, it will arise unbidden form such an approach.*

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يحتاج المؤلفان في هذا الاساتذة الذين يؤسسون تناولهم للعمل الروائي على نظرية حديثة، سائدة، كالبنوية، أو الماركسية، أو التفكيكية ، أو الفرويدية، أو ذلك النمط من التحليل القائم على استجابة القارئ، بدلا من التركيز على استيعاب الطالب العلمي لحبكة الرواية وشخصها وموضوعها وفي ضوء ذلك، يقترح الباحثان التحليل الذي يعتمد على الكلمات - المفاتيح، التي تجنب انتباه الطالب الى الصور المفتاحية، والمفاهيم التي تعمل على تحسين قراءاتهم وتنسيقها.

All study of literature is based upon theory, whether the student or the teacher or the "common reader" is conscious of it or not. Many a theory may be unattached to any particular "school" or critical movement. When one reads a novel to "get" the story, one proceeds upon a theoretical assumption of what is valuable in the novel.

Nevertheless, "the story" is meant much more than the story (the narratological event), unless one is reading for a very literal-minded kind of examiner. One reads to perceive and appreciate the complex of theme, character, humor and irony and yes, titillation, for which most people read a novel. And for students, a novel's "moral" is usually the ultimate goal-not necessarily the moral point of view of F.R. Leavis, but rather for "nugget", that jeweler's carat of pure "meaning", or "nugget" or "worth" that allows the student to file away his prize in his mental library of meanings he can use for examinations, discussions, and ultimately perhaps for his own classroom teaching, if fate determines him in that direction. Such a student's theory of how to approach a novel, as anything else, is based upon his practical needs. When a student is reading in a language not his own, these practical needs become very assertive and demanding.

The teacher of English or American literature in non-English speaking countries is faced, from the outset with a theoretical problem. A teacher of middle age or older is usually a product, in both America and Britain, of the immediate pre-and post-World War II dominion of what is still called for historical purposes "New Criticism". This phenomenon had its origin in different areas of the world, and often proceeds from different assumptions (Cleanth Brooks, Yvor Winters, and Williams Empson differ widely, of course), but in essence, the new Critics sought a value, that is, they assumed that literature had not only a value but a meaning, and saw it as their task to demonstrate by analysis that meaning and to demonstrate and defend that value. The "New Critics" were more or less at one in their technical goal, which was to discover the strength of poetry at its point of greatest tension-in its irony and ambiguity, chiefly in the imagery. By analysis of contrasts and multiplicity of meaning, unobvious awarenesses, suspended judgments, and ironic modes, these critics delighted in turning a poem around and around before the astonished eyes of the student, revealing a depth and range of observation and protection that he had not glimpsed before. Generally speaking, the "New Critics" eschewed the historical. The artifact itself was the object.

The great weakness of the "New Criticism" lies in the fact that though it was analytical, still it was essentially lyrical. It was never as effective in treatment of prose as of poetry, and was less successful in its attempts to deal with the novel. A great influence upon the "New Critics" was T.S. Eliot, who almost single-handedly (with the aid of the editor and scholar, H.J.C. Grieson) popularized the metaphysical poets, whose poetry gave the "New Critics" their greatest opportunities to have their techniques. Eliot's emphasis upon tradition in literary culture, upon literature as a social and moral messenger uniting the generations and centuries of writers, certainly influenced the most powerful and influential English critic of the novel, F.R. Leavis.

The teacher approaching the English novel in a university of a non-English speaking country can draw little comfort from these theoretical approaches. Verbal analysis is impractical even with native speakers, unless a whole semester is available for a single work. Furthermore, seeking to establish more seriousness as a critical position for students, whose concepts of moral seriousness may be widely different from Leavis and his followers, has been a non-starter.

What do modern and post-modern critical positions offer the teacher preparing to present an English or American novel to a class of Arab or Chinese students? In our opinion, the structuralists, in their earlier verbal formalism, offer little use for the same reasons that their descendants, in part, the "New Critics" offer little. In their emphasis upon the mechanical aspects of structure, the choices of openings and closures, etc., they do little more than that which offer intriguing plot analyses, more rewarding in discussion of short stories than of the novel. The post-structuralists and deconstructionists, especially the whole reader-response criticism, pose great for the teacher of literature in non-English-speaking countries. Where the "New Critics" yearned to hold up a poetic gem for admiration and the Leavists wished to attune the student to the purpose and vision of literature is as insubstantial as Prospero's vision or the emperor new clothes. The student, particularly a non-native speaker, who has worked hard to acquire his ability in language, is most likely to be left by the deconstructionists with a mixed feeling of despair and disgust. To be told that a novel means everything or nothing or something between does not placate the Chinese or Arab student. The Chinese is likely to grind his teeth, and the Maghribi to go on strike and boycott the class. The Chinese or Arab can tolerate, though not believe, the idea that literature does not or should not *mean* anything, but to be told that, in addition, it cannot *be* is far too much. The Chinese, being practical, knows better. Any human artifact must both *mean* and *be*. The Arab has always seen poetry as the fullest form of communication.

For seminars and courses in literary criticism at an advanced level, pure theory is of course a proper subject in itself. But the teacher of the novel, in particular, must deal with a hard reality. That reality is that before he can "deconstruct", he must demonstrate the existence of patterns before he can dwell upon their contradictions. Furthermore, with students whose abilities are stretched to the breaking point to finish, say *Robinson Crusoe* in four or five weeks, it is neither helpful nor merciful to tell them that plain "author-intended" themes and assumptions in the book are undercut by limitation in the character of Crusoe or Defoe himself who is a man seeing a word through the eyes of another man. We are not saying that a teacher should not challenge his students, nor show them that there is more in a novel than the arrangement of incidents resulting in a certain conclusion. But the first requirement is surely that the student understands clearly what Defoe tells him has happened and Crusoe's interpretation of events. Only much later can the teacher even begin to suggest that there are interesting ironies in the work of which Defoe himself perhaps was vaguely aware. In other words, the act of narration itself imposes certain relationships which might not have been intended by the author; furthermore, the student himself, at times, is justified in bringing his own culture and experience to bear not just in "understanding" a novel, but in criticizing it as well.

Because of the difficulties imposed by language, culture and religion, we would argue that the teacher of literature, in non-English-speaking countries as well as English-speaking ones, be ruled by practical considerations rather than theoretical ones. The surface must be understood before plumbing its depths, if there is no time for further development, than the student is left with *something* in his outstretched hands. At least, he might have superficial grasp of the work which can, with luck, be deepened. If a teacher attempts to plunge him into theoretical depths at the beginning, the chances are very strong that the student will end up with nothing or with a hazy incomprehensible

almost nightmarish experience, from which he knows only that appearance is not reality, something he had suspected all along. Such is all too often the result of enthusiastic lectures by teachers still flushed with the intellectual excitement for their graduate schools seminars.

We are not suggesting that teaching the novel to non-native speakers should be a dull lead of students through the narrative with a few comments on character and theme in addition to some observations on the place of the book in the development of the novel. On the contrary, we feel that the more complex novels set their own rules as to how should be read and, hence, taught. Some aspects of the various critical approaches available to the teacher will frequently and naturally assert themselves without the teacher himself imposing an approach.

We would suggest that approaches to the novel succeed best when they are word-centered. The student needs a path through the labyrinth of many thousands of words of the average novel. As themes and characters are centered upon repeated words, these words, which readily declare themselves, should be given great emphasize. They are clues which may lead the student through the maze. The better students will quickly see for themselves that vital and repeated key-words have the tendency to expand and dilate their meanings to encompass finally the whole novel. Such students will discover that they have, inadvertently, been indulging in a bit of post-modernist criticism without knowing it.

Such a word-centered approach is not the same thing as image-or-symbol-hunting, though the words selected may indeed be images and hence symbols. If such words are well selected they will reveal structure, theme, and characterization. This approach may lead to a very interesting situation in which classroom discussion leads to theory instead of the other way round.

We have chosen for illustration what is arguably the most often used English novel for the students in non-English-speaking countries, *Robinson Crusoe*. In our opinion, the best analysis of Defoe's book is still that of Ian Watt in *The Rise of The Novel*. *Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. In his literary-historical sense, Watt discusses the elements of the book which go to make it a novel. Its emphasis upon the original, the individual, the economic and the sense of fate, all of which derive, in large measure, from Defoe's own dissenting background and from the religious, economic, and political revolution that both caused and derived from the English Civil War. For Watt, the sum total of these emphases is *realism* conveyed by the novel's style. In the usual view, the style is rather poor, disjointed and breathless. In short, what a reader might expect of a merchant-mariner unaccustomed to expressing himself in prose, however, adept he might be in drawing up accounts. Also conveyed in the style is that Crusoe is a painstakingly exact observer and accountant who is careful to assess his experience and to give an account of his own life, both from his economic background and training and from a youthful training in religious habit and thinking. This metaphor of a giving a true account is a typical puritan-dissenting metaphor which finds expression in Milton's great sonnet "On his Blindness":

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one Talent which is death to hide,

Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
*My true account*, least he returning chide,

Such an ideological background might of course be difficult to present if the novel course is being taught with no previous "History of English Literature" or survey course. Usually such exist, and, though full understanding is hardly possible, enough can reasonably be expected.

To such an introductory lecture or pair of lectures, we normally add some material on obvious subjects such as the literature of discovery in the 17th century with a passing reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which Defoe makes clear in the episodes in which the captain and Friday lure the mutinous sailors deeper and deeper into the forest of the island, reflecting Ariel's similar function to disperse and confuse the minions Stephano and Trinculo. Normally, we then proceed to structure, style and theme, in that order.

By structure, we mean, of course, not only plot, but the *shaping* of the narrative, in relation to style and theme, so that the three concerns naturally occur in close proximity to one another. The obvious thing to point out, to prepare the students, is the circular structure of the novel: the departure-return from Hull to Hull away from the island and back to the island; the circular relations with friends, particularly the Portuguese captain and widow of the English captain. The circular structure is underlined by Defoe's frequent reference to famous stories which give, in their resonance, additional circular structure to the story: the parable of the prodigal son, the story of Job, and the story of Jonah.

Another aspect of the narrative is found in the obvious word *account*. This is a word often found in narratives and biographies of the 17th and 18th centuries. It means, of course, both story and tally. Defoe uses it constantly in both senses, and *account* is a good word with which to key the student's approach to the novel. *Robinson Crouse* is an account. In the sense of a narrative, it is also a tally of the good and the less good of the life of Robinson Crusoe, in exactly the sense Milton uses it in his sonnet "On His Blindness" Crusoe approaches all his adventures with an eye to the evolution of the adventures, the Evil and the Good, as he weighs the disadvantages and advantages of his position when marooned on his island. It is his *accounting* almost in a commercial sense that is the heart of the psychological realism in the novel of which Ian Watt speaks so effectively. It is also at the heart of Crusoe's increasing confessionism as he balances his accounts with God. The metaphor of accounting is thus Defoe's figure for 1) the story itself, 2) Crusoe's trial-and-error efforts to keep himself alive, 3) Crusoe's motivations for his actions, 4) Crusoe's attempt to understand his actions and rationalizations, 5) Crusoe's ongoing analysis of his relation with God. All themes, in the novel, are tied to the concept of accounting in their presentation as well as in their analysis. The novel itself is an account ledger. This figure arises naturally from Defoe's commercial and economic preoccupation. In other words, it arises naturally from 17th century Puritan concerns with the reaction between commercial success and the pursuit of God's will. However there is no fiction, before Defoe or after, until the rise of Marxist influence on literature, in which

the commercial man's approach to his life and the next one is so rigidly and specifically imagined in this economic metaphor.

The image of accounting is a natural boon to the teacher of *Robinson Crusoe*. The novel, because of its details, is actually diffuse and repetitive; therefore, may present some problems to non-native readers in particular.

Still, the frequent accounts provide excellent periodic summaries and analysis which give the students a handle on the narrative and on the psychological and spiritual development of Crusoe himself. A good example of Crusoe's accounting works, in a swift-moving narrative, is found on pp. 205-6. Here, Crusoe is detailing how Friday came to join him on the island. For some pages, Crusoe has been debating with himself as what to should the cannibals return.

At first, in his horror at the cannibal feast, he determines to kill them all. Then, gradually, as he reflects upon European customs of war, he comes to see that, when the virtues are balanced against the vices, there isn't much to choose between the two cultures in their capacities for committing atrocities. He then resolves simply to let them alone, both because they have not injured him, and because they might injure him should he reveal his presence by attacking them. When the cannibals arrive for their feast, bringing Friday, another situation arises. The new situation has been prepared for by a dream startlingly like what actually happens. Crusoe has not much time to think because, as he is watching their activity, the man who is to become Friday breaks free and runs towards where Crusoe is hiding.

He is immediately followed by two others who chase him. In the two paragraphs following, Crusoe gives us three separate reasons for the action he eventually takes. First, the escape is the underdog, the lone man against many, with whom Crusoe naturally has an affinity. Second, the matter may be taken out of his hands since they are all running directly toward him. Third, this may be his opportunity to get the servant foreshadowed in his dream. Thus, the intervention he makes is the result of an accounting of reasons set in the scale against his original intention not to interfere.

Every major episode in the novel, involving voluntary action on Crusoe's part, is prepared for in this way. The student finds it easy to deal with Crusoe's own analyses of his actions. Motive is always clear. Questions like "What is Crusoe's accounting for his actions here?" and "How does this accounting prepare for the actions that follow?" give the student excellent practice in dealing with plot development as well as in seeing how Defoe constructs the psychological character of his hero.

The most obvious use of the accounting image is in the near-literal account of Crusoe's economic development. One of the most fascinating aspects of the novel is the slow, logical development of Crusoe's economic growth as he moves, by trial and error, from almost total incompetence to remarkable achievement. He moves from total dependence upon the salvation of the cargo of his ship to total independence. Each step of movement is carefully accounted for, mathematically and symbolically. Finally this systemic materialism, which fascinated Karl Marx so much, brings the story to a point at which, economically speaking, Crusoe is at the end of his tether. Defoe has presented to us a convincing account of an economic development which has become burdensome in its very complexity- a two-crop area, a vineyard, two-store houses, a huge number of

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\* See Ian Watt, *The Rise of The Novel*, pp. 81-95.

goats, and an estate. In short much larger than an average English farm, and much closer to the property of a manor house in Yorkshire. In the manufacture of clothing, furniture, cheese, etc., as well as in the caring for animals of various kinds, Crusoe has reached the pinnacle of achievement for a single human being. He is, in effect, king, with all responsibility that entails, as he observes whimsically, (p. 157). It would be quite pointless for him to continue accumulation for one man. Crusoe has reached the point of economic development at which expansion must be curtailed, or must be continued to meet additional needs of consumption and means of production. It is no accident that, five pages later, the famous "print of a man's naked foot" makes its appearance. In fact, with this foot print, the political theme of the novel begins.

In addition to the accounting image of the novel carried by Defoe throughout his story other powerful images occur which provide useful tools for concentrating a student's attention. We have always found this single footprint a wonderful occasion for introducing the student to the fascinating world of analysis. The footprint almost exactly divides the novel into halves. As we said, it introduces the political theme to supplement and broaden the economic theme of the novel. From this point on, Defoe's love for bargain and signed agreement, which is an interesting feature of the earlier part of the novel (on p. 57 Crusoe's "letters" and "full accounts" seal his relations with the Portuguese captain and the widow of the English captain) become very prominent. On p. 157 Crusoe is the figurative king.

Thereafter, he becomes by steps an almost literal king, but always by agreements reached after discussion with first, the Spaniard, and second, the English Captain of the mutinied ship. From the "man's naked foot" to the "unwritten constitution" of Crusoe's liberal monarchy we have an opportunity to examine Defoe's Whig Utopia- its entrepreneurial economic basis, its authority which is based upon agreement between the governor and the governed, and its liberty of conscience to have any religion or none. Such an English Utopia did not actually exist in Defoe's lifetime, nor for a century later; however, as one of the oppressed dissenters, Defoe was clearly passionately committed to such a system, as we were many prominent Whigs in opposition to the great Tory satirists, Swift and Pope.

The "naked foot" is quite relevant to discussion for its dramatic effects, i.e., the irony. It is to see Crusoe, who for years has been yearning for the sight of another man, now begin to conceal and fortify himself against man. It is also relevant to the anthropological and anthological implications. It is important to realize that the very word "naked" implies "savage", particularly in view of the enormous amount of largely pointless efforts by Crusoe to clothe himself in a mock-European fashion. However, we usually choose to emphasize the political implications as more likely to arouse the student's interest and independent thought. One thing that the teacher of literature must adjust himself to so early is the limitation of time, for one could easily lecture for a year on a novel like *Rubinson Crusoe* without exhausting its many theme. The teacher must always content himself with brief recognition of the many possible topics before concentrating upon a very few in order to focus the student's attention.

We have dealt so far with the figure of *accounting* as an approach to Defoe's method of narration as well as a key to the kind of realism Defoe creates in both materials and psychological senses. We have chosen the "naked foot" image to introduce the



political to the economic and religious themes of the novel. To conclude our illustrative method of analysis, we now turn to the dominant concept of "deliverance".

"Deliverance is used in several senses. At the physical level, it means "rescue" or "escape", which preoccupies Crusoe's thoughts earlier in the novel and through his first years on the island. At the psychological and religious levels, it signifies a deliverance from the self. The primary meaning of "deliverance, nevertheless, is Biblical manifest in the deliverance of the Prodigal Son, of Job, and of Jonah from the personal will to the will of God.

The Biblical sense of deliverance is achieved by Crusoe when he realizes the folly and injustice of blaming God and his fate or lot for his misfortunes. Realizing this, and taking responsibility himself for his mistakes, he comes to see that Divine Providence has in fact been merciful. Deliverance comes in strengthening of the heart. That is why Crusoe finds comfort in Psalm (27:14):

Wait on the Lord, and be of good cheer, and he shall  
strengthen thy heart; wait, I say, on the *Lord*. (*Crusoe*,  
165)

Furthermore, deliverance comes in the abandoning of the ego, and above all, in the slowly growing capacity for contentment with man's place in life and with the world around him. Crusoe's practice, for his earliest years, has been to reject the world around him and seek a newer, to scorn contentment-that greatest boon of human existence. He has always been a victim of "the general plague of mankind"; (*Crusoe*, 198) the inability to be content, best expressed in George Herbert's poem, "The pulley". Beginning approximately with page 165, Crusoe's slow awareness of contentment begins to grow and continues to grow, notwithstanding numerous setbacks, to the end of the novel:

And thus I have given the first part of a life of fortune and  
adventure, a life of Providence's chequer-work, and of a  
variety which the world will seldom be able to show the  
like of: beginning foolishly, but closing much more happily  
than any part of it ever gave me leave so much as to hope  
for. (*Crusoe*, 297)

This, then, is the deliverance in the spiritual and psychological aspect of the novel. It is what is promised by the Editor in his preface:

The story is told...with a religious application of events to  
the uses to which wise men always apply them, viz. to the  
instruction of others by this example, and to justify and  
honour the wisdom of Providence in all the variety of our  
circumstances.... (*Crusoe*, 25)

This is the overt didacticism which supplies the narrative sub-structure of the novel.

But there is a social deliverance as well as Crusoe is delivered from himself to the society of his fellow men, as his little kingdom grows in an extraordinary display of tolerance and social optimism. The narrow, selfish character Defoe has presented us alerts considerably, as he is ultimately impressed by the general decency of mankind, even of the cannibals in the persons of Friday and his father.

By providing the student with word-and-concept guides, the teacher can focus the student's reading and give him things to look for in the thousands of words that will pass before his eyes; words, images, episodes, characters which may jar discordantly in his imagination as he tries to grasp the plot. It gives him tools of analysis and means of interpretation. As they begin to see how the novel "works", the brighter students will become aware of the inadequacies of such relatively simple devices, and will find additional "words-guides" for themselves. In fact, there is an additional advantage that must be spoken about. We have discovered that the student's progress through the novel is faster when he can grasp such aids for ordering and storing episodes in his mind. Of course, we also discuss the plot, in class, and the significance of episodes, as ordinarily done; nevertheless, we find that the students are better able to do much of this themselves by discussion in class, if they have "read with a purpose", as we have suggested.

If the teacher *wants* to introduce his students to the varieties of literary theory, then we have found no better methods than what we have discussed. In fact, without fanfare, such a key-word approach has in itself illustrated a structuralist analysis and provided an access to a deconstructionist analysis. The beginning of an Empsonian parsing of ambiguity are hand-in-hand with a Leavisite examination of a writer's moral seriousness. We can only be said to have ignored a Lacanesque Freudianism, to which we are happy to plead guilty. The image of *accounting* alone brings us to both structuralism and deconstructionist view; consequently, to say nothing about the Marxian analysis. The important thing, we dare say, is that we have provided the student with a possession, concepts which he can understand and which provide his mind and memory with a shape, direction, and context for what he has read.

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