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# Teaching a Large Course On Contemporary Fiction

by Richard Ohmann

IMAGE BY DOM FOU VIA UNSPLASH

There are no doubt many ways to teach literature as a socialist. I imagine that the most natural way for many of us -- and the way that permits the closest approximation in the classroom to socialist practice -- is through a small or middle-sized elective course, with a subject like literature and revolution or images of women in literature. The topic will guarantee some students who are socially committed, or who at least have a personal investment, and a few tourists. The teacher can count on intensity, and with skill and luck help the students see that the logical outlet for their intensity is socialism. Such a course can also be taught dialectically: for instance, on the model Brent Harold developed in "Beyond Student Centered Teaching: The Dialectical Materialist Form of a Literature Course," *College English,* 34 (1972), pp. 200-212. I've worked in courses like this. Within Wesleyan's relaxed curriculum it's even possible for me to set up a study group explicitly in socialism, and have it count as a course. And freshman English and other staples may be inflected toward socialist ideas and practice, even in fairly repressive settings.

But I also think we should involve ourselves in large lecture courses. These exist perforce in most literary offerings. The depression has lately created, and will continue to create; more of them. For internal political reasons, many departments want to have some courses with big enrollments. And to teachers like us, the large course offers one obvious advantage: a chance to reach many students with a political approach to literature. Disadvantages are equally obvious: the alienating format of the lecture; the necessity of choosing a subject that will draw lots of students, rather than one that will naturally sponsor political discussion; the certainty that many of the students will be, precisely, tourists.

With these considerations in mind, I drew up a plan last year for English 283, "Contemporary Fiction as Part of Contemporary American Culture":

> Fiction by such writers as Pynchon, Salinger, Kerouac, Kesey, Plath, Vonnegut, Roth, Jong, Brautigan, Heinlein. What makes for critical and popular success? How does the reading of novels relate to consumption of other imaginative forms -- TV shows and commercials, films, popular songs, comics, magazine literature, plays? What functions do these works have in capitalist society?

A few more than 120 students took the course, and I gave lectures two or three times each week: no pretense of its being other than a lecture course. But every other Friday I scheduled two discussion sections, one with me and one with an undergraduate TA (who did a splendid job). I told students to come to these sessions only if they liked discussion; about half came, so we had bulky but sometimes useful groups of 30. In addition, I left time at the end of some lectures, and encouraged people to challenge my arguments, or state positions different from mine. I also held ample office hours, and got to know 40 or 50 students that way, including most of the politically committed ones. But I want to emphasize that the format of the course was rather conservative. My only serious move away from depersonalization was to assign two medium-sized papers and a take-home exam (students could do a journal in place of the first paper, and I encouraged collaborative work). This entailed a back-breaking load of work, especially at the semester's end, although Paul Goldstein, my TA, did some of the reading. I think it was worth the effort, because in this way I was able to respond to students' ideas. So much for mechanics of the course; back now to its content.

My intention was, not to survey political novels, or the ones I like best, or novels that meet some ahistorical standard of excellence, but to consider those that are in one way or another central to American bourgeois culture, and to help students understand that culture through their reading of the novels. So I picked the books fairly mechanically, according to these criteria:

- Written by an American
- Published since 1960
- Either a best seller in hardback, or a success in paperback over the long run, especially with young people
- Taken seriously by reviewers and the critical establishment, though not necessarily liked by all

This last criterion meant excluding fiction of the Harold Robbins-Jacqueline Susann type, though I did touch on *Love Story* and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* for contrast (also *Stranger in a Strange Land,* to have one representative of science fiction). Here is the main reading list:

- Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*
- Updike, *Rabbit Redux*
- Bellow, *Herzog*
- McCarthy, *The Group*
- Roth, *Portnoy 's Complaint*
- Dickey, *Deliverance*
- Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*
- Jong, *Fear of Flying*
- Plath, *The Bell Jar*
- Heller, *Something Happened*
- (all of the above were best sellers)
- Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
- Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America*
- Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*
- Mailer, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

Mailer's novel is a dubious candidate on criterion (3), but I wanted one of his books on the list. Otherwise, all the books are both popular and included within the range that intellectuals read, criticize, argue about. Many are well on their way to becoming part of the collegiate literary canon.

Why? What are the tests a novel must pass to be influential within this part of our culture? These questions ran through the whole course, and they seem to me important ones, for anyone who is interested in artists and the public, literature and ideology, culture and power.

For one kind of answer, I examined fairly closely the way a book becomes a best seller: the economics of publishing, the politics of reviewing and advertising, the social class and values of the primary audience. (On best sellers, the most helpful work I found was, unfortunately, a recent French doctoral dissertation, *Le best seller aux États Unis,* by Simone Beserman. Richard Kostelanetz's *The End of Intelligent Writing* is politically wild, but has much good information about New York publishing and reviewing.) Essentially, for a novel to have this kind of success it must sell many hardbound copies within the first few weeks after publication. This gets it on the best seller list, at which point people buy it *because* it is a best seller. To achieve this initial impact, it must be bought, read, and talked about (more buyers learn of books they want to read by word of mouth than from any other single source) by a particular public: upper-middle-class people, mainly in and around New York. Advertising and publicity of the talk-show variety get the news to this readership, along with reviews in a very few periodicals, especially the Sunday *Times.* Since the rest of the reading public follows these leaders, best-selling fiction must somehow reinforce or appeal to their tastes and values. Hence, perhaps, the odd combi nation of fashionable intellectualism, sexual openness, and rock-bottom bourgeois ideas that characterizes most of the novels.

A similar bottleneck exists between publication of a novel and its acceptance as significant in academic and intellectual circles. The Sunday *Times,* again, has through its review the most power, with a handful of other journals as secondary taste makers: the *New York Review,* the *New Republic, Commentary,* the *New Yorker,* etc. In short, a small number of people -- editors, reviewers, buyers -- of fairly uniform class background have most of the say in deciding which novels will be seen as important, as a necessary part of conversation and culture, and which ones will not be seen at all.

There is a limit, of course, to how much analysis of this sort can be dealt out through lectures. I gave only two. The main approach to my questions, in a literature course, must be through the novels themselves -- how they render life in bourgeois society, what dissatisfactions they express, what accommodations they offer, how they pass on bourgeois values (as most do) to their readers, how narrative form and personal style convey ideology.

But these are not the questions most students bring with them into such a course. The students are fans of (say) Vonnegut or Salinger, and want to pursue their enthusiasm. Or they want academic time for reading fiction they've heard about. Or they want a light course to balance their pre-med labors. And whatever motives of this kind bring them to the course, most also want wisdom, insight into their own lives, understanding of the possibilities afforded them by America. An unrelieved political critique of the novels -- many of which are ideologically puerile -- would insult the legitimate interests of students and defeat the hopes they have for a nourishing connection to fiction. Besides, almost all the novels manage at least some achievement in art and insight *(Deliverance* is the only one in which I found absolutely no redeeming social value); their failures are in part honorable, and can only be understood as proceeding from serious engagement with the task of figuring out how to live decently in America. Besides again, even with Wesleyan's upper middle-class and relatively verbal students, I couldn't assume appreciation of the novels on their own terms.

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So I adopted an approach that might be unsympathetically described as building the novels up in order to knock them down. But I think the strategy is warranted. Looking closely at what's good in one of these novels almost invariably means following some insight into the difficulty of living a good life on the terms offered by our society. (Many of the novelists would probably let it go at "living a good life," but since they take America as a given, the mimesis of capitalism is always there.) This is, to put it crudely, the *problem* posed by each novel, often revealingly. Most go on to hint at solutions, and here's where I think they fall apart. They displace politics and offer personal or anarchist or pre-industrial remedies for human sorrows that are rooted in advanced capitalist, industrial society.

I can't spell this out here; you probably agree any how. But for an instance, in the course I gave an early lecture on *The Catcher in the Rye* (only six out of my 120 students admitted not having read it). The book's power comes from Holden's sensitivity, his clarity of observation and language, and his entirely sharable longing for kinder human relationships. Contrary to what Salinger criticism has mainly held, Holden's revulsion fastens on divisions of class and the nastiness they produce (check through the things he stigmatizes as "phony"). But there's another strain in his critique, too -- a rejection not just of class society and the mores of the bourgeoisie, but of the conventions and sharing that are necessary to any society at all. Hence his vision of living as a deaf-mute in a cabin in the West. Having beautifully rendered some of the dissonance of bourgeois society, Salinger offers Holden and us a choice between it and no society at all, excluding other obvious possibilities, and excluding anything but individual action. With the choice posed this way, Holden naturally will make his way back to bourgeois society: any rejection of it, in this framework, is neurotic and self-destructive. The end of the novel betrays· the main body of it -- as so often in these works, for lack of political understanding adequate to the author's social

intuition. (Carol Ohmann and I have argued this at length in an article called "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye,"* in *Critical Inquiry,* Autumn, 1976.) To talk about the novel in this way is to grant its obvious appeal, understand that appeal socially and politically, and so make possible a critique of its failures which is at once moral, political, and esthetic.

I think that similar strategies for coping with bourgeois reality can be found in most of these novels. They give us central characters whose lives aren't working out well, for reasons that can easily be seen as social: Franny Glass nauseated by the striving for individual superiority that is the burden of her class; Rabbit Angstrom defeated by contradictions between the American dream and its embodiment in his dead-end working-class job and dull, imitation-suburban family life; Esther Greenwood stifled by the dehumanizing adult roles made available to her as a woman; Moses Herzog tasting the ashes of his intellectual and romantic ambitions and his rise, through world-conquering ideas, out of poverty; Oedipa Maas caught between the tedium and false cheeriness of Tupperware parties and the horror of seeing how society actually works. Often the novelists, with varying degrees of consciousness, choose to conceptualize such difficulties in terms of the central character's neurosis, breakdown, personal maladjustment. This happens in all the books just mentioned, to one degree or another, as well as in *Portnoy's Complaint, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, The Group, Breakfast of Champions, Fear of Flying,* and *Something Happened.*

Every novel on this list gets at some strain in capitalist society; some are fairly explicit about that. But because politics is always excluded imaginatively as a response, the books offer a variety of inadequate or disheartening "solutions."

1. The distressed character undergoes a kind of therapy, and learns to accept the world: *Franny and Zooey, The Bell Jar, Rabbit Redux, Herzog,* perhaps *Portnoy 's Complaint, Fear of Flying.* Often he or she makes it with the aid of a family or a family-like group (the family, as the best shield against the nastiness of capitalism, may also be the most powerful diversion from politics in our society).
2. The hero conquers social reality through individual achievement *(Deliverance,* and a bit of this in *Why Are We in Vietnam?)* or imagination *(Trout Fishing in America).*
3. Society is replaced by a pre-industrial idyll or by anarchist spontaneity *( Trout Fishing in America, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Herzog;* Mailer and Vonnegut also toy with this nostalgia, but can't believe in it).
4. There's no solution, and we're left looking into the void *(Something Happened, Breakfast of Champions, The Crying of Lot 49, The Group).*

In short, I believe that most of the novels, and the sympathetic responses they often get from students should be treated with respect up to a point. Almost all render bourgeois society with some critical insight, personal and social, and with some art -- in a way quite beyond *Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Love Story,* and most best sellers scorned by academic people. But the insight falls short, and the art is often flawed by failure to follow the insight far enough, not to mention by narrowness of historical scope and by the divorce of ideas and feelings from material life. If this point is kept in view, many students can make good connections between their experience of the fiction and their experience of America.

I tried to strengthen these connections by constantly shuttling between novels and other imaginative forms, and between literary criticism and social analysis. I included a fair amount about TV, helped by Horace Newcomb's *TV: The Most Popular Art,* with its keen analysis of narrative formulas (situation and domestic comedy, westerns, doctor shows, cop shows, etc.) as resolutions of social problems, and of the family as our main image of security and well-being. We did most of this in discussion sections, where I could draw on the students' wide experience of TV, their awareness of its conventions, and their healthy cynicism. Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness,* also a text in the course, offers more insight on bourgeois neuroses and on the destructiveness of individualism. I gave a couple of lectures on American spectator sport as a surrogate for community and for politics; this tied in with the evolution of mass society, with the question of what people get from the entertainments they choose (including fiction), and with the exaltation of physical achievement by Dickey, Updike, and Mailer. A number of the novels render sexuality in detail that would have been restricted to pornography twenty years ago: a close look at the results led to lectures and discussion of sexual politics, the nature and uses of pornography itself, the sexual revolution, and Marcuse's hypothesis about the co-optation of political rebellion through the eroticization of culture. I extended the exploration of power offered by Pynchon, Heller, Vonnegut, and Mailer through discussion of Domhoff s *Who Rules America* and more recent marxist accounts.

Needless to say, I'm an amateur on all these matters, but if anything, that was a help: it diminished the authority that traditionally resides behind the lectern, helped show that I was getting into terrain not adequately covered by professionals, and encouraged students to explore with me and take seriously their own cultural intuitions. These goals were also furthered in a way I hadn't anticipated by another tactic I tried in the course: inviting students to collaborate in small groups on papers or on class presentations. The class was so large that only three groups were bold enough to volunteer for the latter task, but from them we got excellent presentations on pop sex (Dr. Reuben, etc.), the ideology of Walt Disney's enterprise, and that of popular and rock music.

What can students learn from a course like this? An antidote to formalism, which is not "mere" sociology. A way to read fiction, answering their wish that it help them think and feel about their lives, but in a way that is not ahistorical and private. A sense of how fiction conveys ideology and serves one or another class. A politicizing of form, style, image, convention. Some demystification of art. A

suggestion of how our cultural marketplace works. And (I'd be disingenuous not to mention this) some appreciation of how a socialist professor thinks about the world. Most students, I judge from their valuations, found themselves taking the course more seriously than they expected to. Only a few admitted to thinking my approach that of a philistine or monomaniac. I could tell from the papers and journals they wrote that some were rethinking their relationships to books and to history.

The failures and disappointments? Not enough personal engagement, dialectic, struggle. Perhaps half the students relatively passive, treating lectures as entertainment (or the reverse) and writing safe papers. My own tendency, not always successfully overcome, toward abstraction and academically elegant formulations. My wish, *never* successfully overcome, to be liked and admired by that big audience, a wish that made me recoil from angering them, and so limited my power to start motion in them. Not just for me, I believe, but for most of us who spent our youth being Good Students, putting on solo performances, being judged for our dazzling or ingratiating qualities, the role of lecturer stirs old anxieties that reinforce academic convention and make socialist teaching hard.

But I want to do more teaching in this format, and think that most of us should, who have loud enough voices and the chance to take over or invent popular courses. Many students are responsive to ideas developed in such courses, so long as they perceive the ideas to be the main thing, rather than just material to be objectively tested. And lecture courses do exist, to repeat myself. We should learn to use the form as well as we can, rather than wishing it out of existence.

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