

Application of Literary Theory in Teaching Literature—A Case Study From “Approaching Fiction” in China Youth University of Political Studies

YANG Chun

China Youth University of Political Studies, Beijing, China

For most universities and colleges in China, literary theory is taught at the graduate level of literary studies. Most English teachers think literary theory is such a complex field with jargon-ridden disciplines and concepts that it is often considered as “a hot potato” in classroom teaching. Based on a case study from “Approaching Fiction” in China Youth University of Political Studies (CYUPS), the present paper claims that application of literary theory in teaching literature not only greatly broadens students’ horizon but also deepens their interpretation and understanding of literary works. With proper selection of teaching material and carefully designed teaching approaches, application of critical theory plays an increasingly important role in the undergraduate literature classroom.

Keywords: literary theory, application, literature, Approaching Fiction

Introduction

There is a debate among English teachers in China on whether it is proper to use literary theory to teach literature for undergraduate English majors. Most English teachers think literary theory is such a complex field with jargon-ridden disciplines and concepts that it is often considered as “a hot potato” in classroom teaching and they think it is better to be taught at the graduate level of literary studies. The typical textbooks for literature class in a mandated curriculum for undergraduate English majors are *Selected Readings in English Literature* published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House, *History and Anthology of American Literature* published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and *The Scholar’s Library for the Study of American Literature* published by Nankai University Press. Even though the selected texts in these textbooks are different, the structure of these textbooks are almost the same, composed of biographical information of the author, brief introduction of the work, an excerpt of the work, and some explanations of the language points of the work. Most teachers in literature class choose to use the approach that is not linked to any one literary theory but focus on the background information of the authors, the words and expressions of each text, as well as the structure and craft of each text. Thus the literature courses offered at most universities and colleges are taught merely at the level of learning general information and developing literal understanding.

Admittedly, such courses do help students a lot in their acquisition of the English language, but as a veteran English teacher who has taught literature for undergraduate English majors for many years, the author

YANG Chun, associate professor, master, Foreign Language Department, China Youth University of Political Studies.

of the present paper thinks that there are several drawbacks in such teaching practice. Firstly, the teaching method in literature class overlaps too much with other language learning courses, such as Intensive Reading class and Extensive Reading class, where many literary works such as short stories are studied. Too much overlap kills the interest of study. Students tend to treat literature learning as the extension of Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading, with too many facts and language points to memorize. Secondly, this teaching method is not good for the development of critical thinking since critical thinking needs the ability to think logically, creatively and profoundly and such ability can be best acquired through theory learning. Thirdly, lack of basic understanding of literary theory in interpretation and appreciation of literary works results in limitation in the analysis of the literary works. Most students are still at loss as to how they can effectively analyze a literary work by themselves and when they choose literature as the subject of their thesis; they barely know how to write academic research paper with the support of some literary theories except repeatedly retelling the plot of the texts or simply analyzing the elements of the stories such as character, setting, theme, or figures of speech.

To tackle the drawbacks mentioned above, an application of literary theory is an indispensable part of English literature teaching since students can benefit a lot from understanding critical theory, as Lois Tyson points out in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (2006) that,

Theory can help us learn to see ourselves and our world in valuable new ways, ways that can influence how we educate our children, both as parents and teachers, ... how we react to others with whom we do not agree on social, religious, and political issue; and how we recognize and deal with our own motives, fears, and desires, And if we believe that human productions—not just literature but also, for example, film, music, art, science, technology, and architecture—are outgrowths of human experience and therefore reflect human desire, conflict, and potential, then we can learn to interpret those productions in order to learn something important about ourselves as a species. Critical theory, I think you will find, provides excellent tools for that endeavor, tools that not only can show us our world and ourselves through new and valuable lenses but also can strengthen our ability to think logically, creatively, and with a good deal of insight. (Tyson, 2006, pp. 2-3)

Based on the case study from “Approaching Fiction” in CYUPS (China Youth University of Political Studies), the present paper aims at probing into some effective teaching strategies of introducing literary theory into English literature class in hope of cultivating both students’ literary sensibilities and their critical power when reading literary works as well as improving the current literature teaching for undergraduate English majors in China

A Case Study in “Approaching Fiction” Class

“Approaching Fiction” is an optional course for junior English majors in CYUPS who have already acquired some basic literary knowledge from their previous study. They are already familiar with the literary elements such as character, setting, plot, theme, point of view, as well as some artistic crafts such as irony, foreshadowing, flashback, symbolism, so on and so forth in literary works. They also have read many literary works such as short stories, experts of novels, poems, and some dramas in their English and American literature class. When they choose “Approaching Fiction”, they always challenge me with the question of “what is new in your class?”

In order to offer “something new” for the students, a list of objectives of this course should be clearly stated to the students. Different from their previous language-oriented literature class, “Approaching Fiction” focuses on the following list of objectives:

- (1) Students will develop the skills in support of analyzing literature;
- (2) Students will identify literature terms and examine how these terms contribute to craft of writing;

- (3) Students will develop discussion skills that enable them to converse with peers about the literature they read;
- (4) Students will cultivate love for literature and think logically, cogently, and creatively;
- (5) Students will develop a curiosity for the unknown, and observe the world around them critically and objectively;
- (6) Students will discover connections with the literature they read: text to self, text to text, and text to world;
- (7) Students will develop the power to discern how writers through their creative impulses convey to us their insights into human destiny, human life, and how social concern is involved in a specific form of human imagination.

To fulfill the grand objectives of the course, it is obvious that the language-oriented literature teaching method is far from adequate. Students need to get access to the multi-disciplinary knowledge concerning literature to elevate their ability to interpreting, appreciating, and analyzing literary works. From this perspective, introducing literary theory to the literature class is quite necessary since the more students grow in their capacity to understand theory, to think more broadly and more deeply about human experience and the world of ideas, the more they “will be capable of appreciating the rich density, the varied texture and shades of meaning, available in literary works” (Tyson, 2006, p. 4).

But when students know that in “Approaching Fiction” class, they are going to learn some literary theory, instead of exhibiting excitement and joy, many of whom are intimidated. “Why should we bother to learn about critical theories?”, “Is it really worth the trouble?”, and “Will not all those abstract concepts interfere with my natural, personal interpretation of literature?” are some of their frequently asked questions. Thus how to offer both accessible in language and comparatively broad in scope literary theory to students is another problem in application of theory in literature class.

Psychology and brain research indicates that students learn best when they are faced with a moderate challenge (Bess, 1997, p. 23). For these newcomers to the field of theory, learning material from books that offer high-tech summaries full of obscure theoretical concepts is not proper. Besides, it is impossible to cover a thorough literary criticism from Plato to the present within 16 weeks with two class periods per week. Based on some introductory books on literary theory and literary criticism such as *Modern Literary Theory and Ancient Texts: An Introduction* by Thomas A. Schmitz (2007), *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* by Lois Tyson (2006), *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Literature* (2004), and *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (1999), the learning material for students focuses on literary theory in the 20th century and theories will be applied to one literary text respectively.

Table 1

Theory and the Text

Time	Theory	Text
Week 1-2	Feminist Criticism	<i>The Chrysanthemums</i> (by John Steinbeck)
Week 3-4	Psychoanalytic Criticism	<i>Young Goodman Brown</i> (by Nathaniel Hawthorne)
Week 5-6	Reader-Response and Reception Theory	<i>A Rose for Emily</i> (by William Faulkner)
Week 7-8	New Historical and Cultural Criticism	<i>Heart of Darkness</i> (by Joseph Conrad)
Week 9-10	Structuralist Criticism	<i>The Great Gatsby</i> (by F. Scott Fitzgerald)
Week 11-12	African American Criticism	<i>The Land</i> (by Mildred D. Taylor)
Week 13-14	Mythological and Archetypal Approaches	<i>Homeless Bird</i> (by Gloria Whelan)
Week 15-16	Postcolonial Criticism	<i>The Absolute True Diary of a Part-time Indian</i> (by Sherman Alexie)

Students are required to read the text a week before the class instruction, and when they attend the class, they have already solved the language problems in the text. In class, before the introduction of the theory, a student is invited to give a presentation about the pre-reading of the text, which usually addresses the following questions:

What happened?

Who was involved?

What was the conflict?

Did the conflict have significance on the character?

Is there anything in the text interest you? And why?

Does the story have a theme? If it does, describe it.

What is the writing craft in the story?

After the presentation, there is a group discussion about the questions raised above. In the group discussion, every student is encouraged to share his understanding and different interpretations are welcomed. In support of understanding the text, teacher will summarize students' ideas and give some reference interpretations after the group discussion. After the presentation and group discussion, most students will get comparatively thorough understanding about the plot, character, conflict, theme, and writing craft of the text. It is time for the teacher to introduce the literary theory to further expand their interpretation of the text.

Since most students are newcomers to the field of literary theory, the introduction of the theory focuses on two parts, and they are part of basic terms and part of questions for application. Let us take Postcolonial Criticism as an example:

Table 2

Postcolonial Criticism

Basic terms	Colonialism; Neocolonialism; Internal colonialism (or domestic); Post-colonialism; Orientalism; Euro-centrism; Cultural colonization; Colonialist ideology; Metropolitan; Othering; Double consciousness; Hybridity; Mimicry; Unhomeliness; Ambivalence.
Questions for application	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does the text explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression? (political, cultural, economic, ideological, ...). 2. What does the text reveal about the problematic of postcolonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness, unhomeliness? 3. What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference—the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity in shaping characters' perceptions of themselves, others, and the world in which they live? 4. What does the text reveal about the anti-colonialist resistance? What does the text suggest about the forces that promote or inhibit resistance? How does the text suggest that resistance can be achieved and sustained by an individual or a group?

After the introduction of the theory, students return to the text again and find out the evidences in the text to justify their interpretations from the perspective of theory.

With the introduction of the literary theory to the literature class, students are really aware of “something new” and useful in understanding literary works. After an experimental practice of this teaching method of a semester, both the appreciation and analysis ability of the students have been enhanced. Besides, their negative attitudes towards literary theory have greatly changed. In an after class survey, one of the students says: “Literary theory opens a new window for me to see the literary world. Now instead of waiting for the teacher to tell me what the text means, I can read it, appreciate it, and analyze it with my own interpretation” (personal communication).

Reflections on Application of Literary Theory in Teaching Literature

After an experimental teaching of applying theory to interpreting and analyzing literary in literature class, the author of the present paper personally perceives the significant role literary theory plays in the undergraduate classroom. In order to make the class teaching more effective, based on the experiences of applying theory to literature class, there are several points need to be taken into consideration.

Firstly, it is the selection of literary theory to be taught in class. It is universally acknowledged that the field of literary criticism theory is so broad that it has a history of at least 2,500 years ranging from Plato and Aristotle, through Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, Johnson to the great modern figures such as Locke, Hume, Freud, Yeats, and Sartre. Literary theory is multi-disciplinary and it has integral connections with philosophy, religion, politics, morality, and culture which are richly related to almost all the aspects of people's lives. Selection of literary theory to be taught in class should be based on the student's language level (English is not their native language for Chinese undergraduates) and previous knowledge level. For Chinese newcomers to the field of literary theory, the choice of introducing literary theory of introductory level is proper.

Secondly, it is the selection of text to be analyzed in class. The purpose of studying literary theory is not to study theory for theory's sake but to improve our sensibility of understanding and appreciating literary works.

Although, hypothetically at least, every literary work can be interpreted using every critical framework, and some literary works lend themselves more readily to some literary theories than to others, and the attempt to read a text using an incompatible framework can be a relatively fruitless endeavor that risk distorting elements of the text, the theory, or both, as we try to make them fit each other. (Tyson, 2006, p. 5)

Thus in selecting the text, attention should be paid to whether the text is fruitfully applied to the literary theory or not. Besides, for Chinese newcomers to the field of literary theory, short stories and some novels from Young Adult Literature are more suitable than some longer works such as *Great Expectations*, *The Scarlet Letters*, *of Mice and Men*, so on and so forth, since short texts will allow students adequate time to read the texts with more in-depth understanding, which is helpful for them to apply theory to the analysis of the texts.

Thirdly, it is the teaching method to be applied in class. Literary theory tends to be abstract and complex which will impress the students with the feelings of boring and dull. In order to activate the atmosphere in class, teacher needs to develop some class activities such as presentation, group discussion, in-class reading, video-watching, etc., to arouse students' interests in study the literary theory. Besides, a short quiz in class about some basic literary concepts is also necessary.

Conclusion

In *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction* (2011), Habib Rafey once claimed that,

It is surely naïve to think that we are all endowed with some superior sensibility which can automatically discern which writers are great and which are mediocre. We do not even know for certain how the ancient Greek of Homer was pronounced; ... How would we ever, independently, arrive at any estimation of these writers or their backgrounds or their contributions without a body of critical apparatus, without a tradition of critical experience and interpretation, to help us? (Habib, 2011, p. 2)

Indeed literary theory can help students to broaden their horizon and get deeper understanding of literary works. What the teacher needs to do is to select the teaching material properly and patiently guide them. With carefully designed teaching strategies, application of critical theory will play an increasingly important role in the undergraduate literature classroom.

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