
1 A Course in Contemporary World Literature

Contemporary World Literature” was not a subject that I knew much about. I had never taught the class before. I didn’t have a textbook. I didn’t have any prepared curriculum. Yet in a few days, streaming in to meet me in room 12C would be a rowdy group of twenty-nine high school kids. In this mixed lower-track course for sophomores who weren’t taking a writing class and seniors who were avoiding British Literature, student reading levels would range from fourth-grade to college.

Three years earlier I had entered the profession with an English degree and a teaching credential, but otherwise poorly prepared to deal with the students and courses for which I was responsible. My training was primarily in British literature, with an emphasis on the tradition of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the Romantic poets. In my college classes we had attempted to understand the unity of form and meaning in imaginative works of art and contemplated the supposed “eternal truths” that literature revealed to us. How such literature or such truths might be understood by teenagers as significant to their lives was not a subject that, as far as I can tell, crossed the mind of my professors. Even by the restricted standards of the 1970s, my college courses were narrowly focused. The only literature by a woman writer that I was asked to read during those four years were a few short stories by Flannery O’Connor. I never encountered—in fact I wonder now if at that time I had ever heard of—any writing by American minority authors. I had never been asked to read a book published within the last fifty years or written by an author outside of the British-American tradition. In other words, I had never taken a class or even been assigned a text that might be called “world” or even “contemporary” literature.

I learned from the former World Literature teacher that copies of *Old Yeller* were available. I am not especially proud of the fact that to this day I haven’t read *Old Yeller*. Maybe by the time you read this I will have remedied my ignorance. For all I know this presumably heartwarming story about a boy and his dog is the ideal classroom text. At the time, however, *Old Yeller* seemed so far from the exciting promise of “Contemporary World Literature” that I couldn’t envision handing it out.

Instead, I headed to our school’s book room to see what else, if anything, I could find that was not yet reserved by another teacher—all of them senior to me. Unfortunately our ready-to-retire book room warden

was convinced that the fewer books on her shelves, the less work she would have to do, and she consigned unused titles to the flames. Those that remained she was reluctant to let escape. In other words, beyond *Old Yeller*, precious little was available. The only thing I could break away with that might possibly fit the definition of "Contemporary World Literature" was a dusty class set of Elie Wiesel's autobiography, *Night*. So with this book the semester began.

Those who have taught *Night* have some idea what my students and I were in for. Wiesel tells the story of the Jewish Holocaust from his own experience as a fourteen-year-old deported to Auschwitz and separated from his mother and sisters. Desperate to keep his father alive, Elie constantly risks his own well-being in a futile struggle that shakes his faith in God and humanity. Written in a simple and direct testimonial prose, the book allowed students of different reading abilities to enter into the discussion. Their responses and questions varied and included many that I could not answer: How could this have happened? What would I have done if these things happened to me and my family? Why didn't the Jews fight back? (Did they fight back?) Are there things like this happening today that we don't know about? How could we find out? What could we do? Students were responding in an intense and personal way to a story that seemed to be far from their own experience. Moreover, their behavior was unlike that of the other "low-track" high school students I had been teaching. These students were reading ahead, doing the homework, listening to each other in class. They were caring deeply about—and feeling troubled by—what they were learning.

I tried to create a variety of ways for them to turn this interest into a fuller response. In addition to small- and large-group discussions, students also wrote letters to Mr. Wiesel, illustrated scenes that seemed important to them, and created monologues for a number of characters. Several students became involved in research on various aspects of the Holocaust, trying to find answers to questions that arose in the discussion. Through their research and my own, we began to find other materials that would enrich our understanding of Nazi racism. We read a selection from William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* that showed how Hitler created youth movements, influenced schools, controlled the media, and "Nazified" German culture. We watched a re-creation (and translation into English) of one of Hitler's speeches from the video of Albert Speer's controversial *Inside the Third Reich*. (See the list toward the end of this chapter for additional materials for teaching about the Holocaust.) As we learned more about cultural and historical contexts, the Holocaust began to seem less like an abstracted evil and more like a real event in history—

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it began to seem, in other words, not so distant from the present day. This sense significantly increased with the next class event.

Inspired by the impact of *Night* and the interest it kindled in the students, I contacted the Holocaust Resource Center at our local synagogue. From their librarian I learned that some extermination camp survivors were still alive and living in our area. With a measure of uncertainty, I phoned the number the librarian had given me and asked Diana Golden if she would be willing to speak with my class. Mrs. Golden told me that for forty years following World War II, she had not spoken about her experiences, not even sharing them with her own children. Yet, because a few historians had begun claiming that the Holocaust had never taken place, she was determined that the truth must be told. She said she had been seventeen years old when she was taken to Auschwitz, about the same age, she supposed, as many of my students. "Yes," she said. "I will come to your class."

Nearing seventy, Mrs. Golden was confident and resolute, yet it was clearly difficult for her to talk to us, and, at times, her courageous poise gave way to tears. Rounding up, train cars, Auschwitz in the middle of the night, selection, loss of family, desperate struggle for survival: as my students listened to Mrs. Golden speak, these were no longer events in a book but something that had happened to a real person we were coming to know. The students listened intently, and the questions they had been asking came up again with even greater urgency. I had talked to the class about treating Mrs. Golden respectfully; therefore, I felt a bit uncomfortable when, as time for questions was nearing an end, Sherrie, one of the "low-achieving" sophomores, asked if she could touch the numbers that had been tattooed on Mrs. Golden's arm in the concentration camp.

In response, Mrs. Golden pulled up the sleeve of her dress and rolled over her hand to expose the inside of her forearm. First Sherrie, and then the other students, stepping tentatively out of their desks and across the room, reached out and touched the clearly visible blue numbers marked on Diana Golden's skin.

Mrs. Golden's visit to my World Literature class was an event that I believe none of us will forget. Looking back on it eighteen years later, I recognize that her visit and the teaching of a Holocaust unit also touched something in me that began to enlarge my vision of English teaching. Starting off Contemporary World Literature with *Night*, the Holocaust, and Diana Golden's visit, my students and I were immersed in discussion, writing, questions, and feelings that went beyond the boundaries of English literature study—at least as I, until then, had experienced it. We weren't addressing literary genres or terminology. We weren't climbing a

list of great writers simply "because they were there." We weren't learning writing skills merely to satisfy the academic requirements of the competency test or the next grade level. Instead we were vitally concerned about real people in the real world, about what had happened to them, and about what these events meant to us. We were reading, writing, and learning intensely, about history, literature, culture, racism, and how they intertwined. Above all, and at Sherrie's instigation, students were being touched, and touching others, in ways that I hadn't expected.

As that Holocaust unit drew to a close, I found myself, as usual, rushing to consider what the class would be doing next. Although I didn't understand exactly how things would be different, I realized I had a new level of intensity, involvement, and meaning to aim for. Trying to identify possible materials, I went from our school to bookstores and to the public library. I wanted to build on the themes and issues we had started with, and I hoped to extend them into a broader consideration of "Contemporary World Literature" relevant in some measure to my students and their questions about what was happening *today*. In the 1980s, Cold War tensions were still high. Threat of nuclear war was a subtle given in our lives, something there but rarely brought to the surface. The word *Holocaust* provided a link, I thought, and I came across several collections of contemporary Russian short stories. Photocopying like mad, I made these stories the focus of my next unit, one that allowed us to look at our "enemies" in the "Evil Empire" and discover a human face. We watched the film *Doctor Zhivago*, and students did research projects on Russian life and culture. My library and bookstore forays also led me to read contemporary works from India and Africa written in English, as well as works from Latin America in translation. Literary works, films, essays, photographs, speakers, research, library trips: they all began piling up on each other and extending our curriculum and analysis in many directions. As I feverishly sought ways to teach that could develop the kinds of human connection that were encouraged by *Night*, new worlds of literature, experience, and supplementary materials were opening up.

My journey into more effective teaching included plenty of bumps and potholes, as my experience with Contemporary World Literature illustrates. In an effort to develop a more careful step-by-step scope and sequence for our students, integrate writing and reading into the same courses, and reduce tracking, our English department decided to drop its remaining elective classes in favor of a sequence of grade-level-based, full-year survey courses. Thus, the year after I started teaching Contemporary World Literature, the course was no longer in existence. Although

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individual teachers could vary what they were doing, the content in the new courses was organized by the nationally standardized textbooks with which we were provided. The new understandings and approaches generated from the Holocaust unit did not have an opportunity to mature in a second draft of the course. Nonetheless, teaching Contemporary World Literature showed me ways that my teaching could center on sensitizing students to the experiences of others, help them communicate from heart and mind together, and connect them to pressing social issues.

I allowed what I was learning from Contemporary World Literature to spill over into my other classes. My department chair agreed to purchase a class set of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and I introduced it into my British literature class. We watched movies about South Africa and read my British literature class. We watched movies about South Africa and read history and contemporary essays. As with *Night* I realized I needed to respect my students' responses and allow their questions and interests to set directions for where our discussion and reading would take us. The divestment debate (did U.S. companies need to leave South Africa in order to fight apartheid?) was going on in Congress, and the class expressed an interest in the issue. Thus we read newspaper articles and magazine essays and debated what stand the United States should take on the issue. While I had an opinion, in this discussion it was important for me to hold it back, to let students explore the complexities and make up their own minds. We didn't come to a consensus on divestment, but their reading of *Cry, the Beloved Country* was becoming all the more compelling and relevant. And, as they learned about apartheid keeping White and Black people ignorant of each other in South Africa, my suburban middle-class White students began to ask about the segregation that was still evident in our community.

In a hallway closet I found an out-of-use class set of John Hersey's book, *Hiroshima*, and started using it in Freshman Language Arts along with a variety of essays, speakers, and films that addressed what we could do today about the nuclear threat. As I expanded the kinds of texts that were read in my classes, addressed present-day issues, and developed integrated thematic units, my teaching was moving away from a narrow emphasis on the literature I had read in high school and college. The more I strayed from the textbooks, the more risks I took, the more I found material in which the students could develop a passionate interest, the greater excitement and relevance my courses seemed to take on—and the more my students were willing to read, write, and work.

Still I felt a reluctance to let go of traditional curriculum and approaches. My own high school experience, my undergraduate education, and the weighty and authoritative organization of the textbooks I was

given made me doubt the innovations I was making. Had I strayed from what literature classes were supposed to be? Were students learning the “right stuff”? I still valued the classics, but how could I integrate the new worlds of literature I had glimpsed? What changes could I make? How far should, or could, I go? What was the content of language arts classes *supposed* to be, anyway? Who had decided? Why?

Contemporary World Literature and the experimentation I was doing in other classes made it plain that all students, and especially those struggling in school, needed to discover that everyone, even the most persecuted or oppressed, has a voice that can and should be heard and respected. I saw that for the White and relatively affluent American young people in my upper-track courses, comparing their experiences with people different from themselves was a revelation. Somehow the media and the insulation of their suburban community led many to believe that their experience was “normal,” that everyone else in the world was either like them—or wanted to be like them. Although it was preliminary and haphazard, Contemporary World Literature also convinced me of the value of focusing on the content of literature and of carefully linking materials together in historically meaningful ways, ways that would generate student interest and make possible a wide variety of responses. This approach helped me better connect reading, writing, and speaking. It helped me make my teaching simultaneously relevant to issues in the contemporary world and respectful of my students’ independent and critical thinking.

Although at the time I didn’t have a name for the kind of teaching I was beginning to do, today I would call it a form of “response-based cultural studies,” one that draws on both the “reader response” work pioneered many years ago by Louise Rosenblatt and the emerging “cultural studies” approaches rapidly affecting literature and cultural study around the world. My first experiments with response-based cultural studies were almost chance events, but, as I have learned more about literary theory and history, reader response and cultural studies have come increasingly to provide a base for careful thinking about English teaching—both the way I have been trained and the teaching I am trying to do.

Reader Response

Although they may not recognize themselves as enacting a literary theory, teachers who encourage students to develop and explore their personal re-

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Responses to literature are putting the “reader response” theory into practice. Rather than lecture, recitation, or the discovery of some predetermined meaning, reader response teachers favor small- and large-group discussions, literature circles, creative writing, and dramatic and artistic activities that help students engage actively with what they read and express their individual responses and understandings—just the kind of activities my students became involved in with *Night*. First set forward as a coherent theory of reading by Louise Rosenblatt in the now-famous book *Literature as Exploration* (1938), reader response emphasizes that the way a work of literature is understood depends upon the interaction between reader and text and upon the presumably unique personal meaning that readers create for themselves.

Because this approach respects student reactions and insights and focuses on the interactive process of their learning, reader response is an important theory for teachers to know about. Rosenblatt herself emphasized teaching contemporary literature more likely to engage student interest and passion. She also understood that the more reader-response teachers can draw student experiences into the classroom—the more self-aware students become—the better readers they are likely to be. As a movement for the reform of English teaching, reader response has helped teachers move away from telling students what to think or herding them all to the same “correct” interpretation.

At the same time, however, an exclusively reader-response approach does have limitations. Rosenblatt’s followers have tended to romanticize both the effect of literature and the individual uniqueness of student response. Because of the focus on reader rather than text, reader response tends not to be very helpful when it comes to thinking about content for English courses, about how we choose among “great” works, about why we might prefer the literary canon to popular texts or vice versa. Indeed, some reader-response-based classrooms, such as the one described by Nancie Atwell in the first edition of her fabulous book *In the Middle*, focus entirely on students as independent readers with no common texts for analysis and discussion. By itself, then, a knowledge of reader-response theory would not have provided answers to the questions I was having about curriculum after teaching Contemporary World Literature. Reader response doesn’t facilitate our thinking about how we define “cultural literacy,” how and why we should select literature for study, nor even what “literature” is and how our definitions have changed over time. Yet, as reader response takes us into the interaction between reader and text, it opens the door to a variety of approaches that further and more compellingly elaborate the connection between literature and lives.

Cultural Studies

The very limitations of reader response are precisely the strengths of a cultural studies approach. Cultural studies emphasizes the integration of literary works, even the most canonical, with the whole range of cultural expression. In the classroom, cultural studies calls for up-to-date and engaging thematic curriculums where culture, social structures, and historical circumstances are explored side by side with a particular emphasis on how those issues touch real people in the present day. While it draws on the insights and interests of "multiculturalism," cultural studies is both broader in its inclusion of issues of social class, women's studies, and popular culture, and more critical in its emphasis on social change. Thus the cultural studies movement explores not only the high literary culture that has been the traditional domain of English teaching, but also the lives of people whose voices, perspectives, and experiences are seen as the very stuff of which culture is made. As I came to learn about cultural studies, I began to realize that I had already started doing it in *Contemporary World Literature* and my other courses.

In exploring a particular issue or theme, a cultural studies approach might involve doing a close and careful reading of one or more literary works, along with studying a television program, doing library research, and reading prose essays. Research papers can be combined with literary analysis, personal reflection, and argumentation. A cultural studies approach might lead us to compare traditional canonical authors with contemporary popular materials, including the mass media. Cultural studies invites a wide variety of new and potentially invigorating writing into teaching, such as interviews, ethnography, testimonials, surveys, film, and media analysis. It urges us to be self-reflective but not cavalier about the disciplines we work in. While mixing genres and crossing disciplinary boundaries, cultural studies spurs us also to consider how the establishment of genres and disciplines has functioned historically.

Thus cultural studies fosters critical thinking and activism as it wrestles with how we see ourselves and others in the process of understanding and acting in society. The perspectives of "marginal" groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and working-class people are important in cultural studies. Valuable in themselves, they also help us better understand dominant ways of seeing. Thus cultural studies is interested in ethical, moral, and social questions. Emerging from British social theory, studies of American popular culture (such as television and film), and new forms of literary scholarship (such as multicultural studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies), cultural studies is increasingly shaping the university-level study of literature, generating academic conferences, publications, and new ways of

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thinking about the job of English teaching. Cultural studies serves as an umbrella category inclusive of many of the new theories and approaches we will examine in this book.

Yet cultural studies also needs reader response if it is to avoid the danger of “political correctness”—when teachers dictate, legislate, or otherwise pressure students to hold particular opinions rather than respecting their insights, experiences, ideas, and perspectives. As we further explore the concept of cultural studies in subsequent chapters, I hope to show that bringing reader response and cultural studies approaches together offers exciting possibilities for the language arts teaching of the future.

Many teachers have already begun to integrate reader response and cultural studies approaches. I have found that an understanding of response-based cultural studies has enhanced my sensitivity and openness to students, increased my range of freedom and choice, and inspired me to become a more aware and a braver teacher. It has helped me carefully and systematically build on the kind of teaching I began in the Holocaust unit mainly by a stroke of luck. Those of us who have been teaching for any length of time have seen dramatic changes inspired by the new research in composition studies and the widespread integration of a writing process approach. A response-based cultural studies approach to English teaching is at least equally important and has the potential to transform our curriculum and purpose.

A couple of years after teaching Contemporary World Literature, I had a conversation with a stranger that led me to take the next step on my journey toward integrating these new approaches into the world of my students. This encounter, and its implications, provide the focus for Chapter 2.

Resources for Teaching about the Holocaust

There is an enormous body of fine materials for teaching about the Holocaust. Here is a short list of high-quality and frequently used resources.

Print Materials

- *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank tells the true story of a sensitive and talented Jewish girl hiding out with her family in Amsterdam before her capture and death in Bergen-Belsen.
- *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, edited by Hana Volavková, is a moving collection of drawings and poems by children in the Terezín Concentration Camp.

- Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning exploration of the experience of a survivor and his son, written in a mature comic book format.
- *Night* by Elie Wiesel is the testimony of a teenager transported with his family to Auschwitz and Buchenwald.
- *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William L. Shirer offers a readable, comprehensive history of the Nazi regime written by an American correspondent who lived in Germany in the 1930s. My students read the sections "The Nazification of Culture," "The Control of Press, Radio, Films," and "Education in the Third Reich" (241–56).
- Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* is one of the best-known and most powerful survivor testimonies.
- Todd Strasser's novel *The Wave: The Classroom Experiment That Went Too Far*, and the film made from it, demonstrate to American students that fascism can happen in America in a school like theirs.

Films

- *Anne Frank Remembered* interviews Anne's friends, family, and protectors to depict her life before hiding, in the annex, her capture, the Auschwitz camp, and her death in Bergen-Belsen.
- *Night and Fog* by Alain Resnais is an overpowering, unrelenting, and unforgettable short film that uses extensive documentary footage. If you show this film you may want to make viewing optional.
- Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* is a Hollywood historical recreation that finds a hero amidst the Holocaust story.
- *Sboah* by Claude Lanzmann includes more than four hours of interviews with survivors and others; an abridged version is also available.

Web Sites for Teaching about the Holocaust

- The "Auschwitz Alphabet" Web site provided by Jonathan Blumen has clear and specific information about the camp and how it functioned: <http://www.spectacle.org/695/ausch.html>.
- Al Filreis, professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, maintains a "Literature of the Holocaust" site that offers a rich list of resources, including materials from other genocides in addition to that of the Jews during the Nazi period: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/holhome.html>.
- The Florida Center for Instructional Technology offers "A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust" at <http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/Holocaust/>.

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- The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies is maintained by the Yale University Library, and portions of testimonies can be downloaded. See <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/homepage.html>. The Nizkor Project has a collection of Holocaust materials, including videos. See the project's Web site at <http://www.nizkor.org/>.
- The Simon Wiesenthal Center's Web site includes a page where questions can be submitted to Holocaust survivors. The site can be found at <http://www.wiesenthal.com/>.
- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has extensive online materials for teachers and students: <http://www.ushmm.org/>. They offer summer programs and internships for teachers.

Readings in Reader Response

- *How Porcupines Make Love III* by Alan C. Purves, Theresa Rogers, and Anna O. Soter is a theoretical and practical guide to reader response approaches to literature teaching for secondary teachers.
- *Literature as Exploration* by Louise Rosenblatt still makes excellent reading and is the classic text in American reader response.
- *Literature for Democracy: Reading as a Social Act* by Gordon Pradl explores the democratic possibilities of reader response teaching.
- *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* by Richard Beach is one of a series of books published by NCTE to acquaint teachers with literary theory.
- "You Gotta BE the Book": *Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents* by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm shows how a passionate middle school teacher can turn on even the most reluctant readers.

Readings in Cultural Studies

- *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* by Patrick Brantlinger offers an example of cultural studies scholarship in British literature.
- *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, is an enormous and influential collection of academic cultural studies essays that has something for everyone.
- *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom*, edited by James Berlin and Michael J. Vivion, is a collection of essays by English professors about how to integrate cultural studies approaches into their departments and courses. It includes essays on cultural studies

teaching in composition and literature courses, including Shakespeare.

- Antony Easthope's *Literary into Cultural Studies* draws on British cultural theory to make a clear argument that literary studies needs to become cultural studies.
- *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* by Douglas Kellner is a good introduction to cultural studies as it is practiced and theorized by academics. Examples of the media culture that Kellner analyzes include *Rambo*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, the Gulf War, Spike Lee films, advertising in general, and the cultural phenomenon generated by Madonna.
- *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, is a collection of approachable essays by leading practitioners of the major schools of literary scholarship and theory.
- *Reshaping High School English* by Bruce Pirie examines the potential impact of new literary theory for high school teaching and is a good lead-in to a cultural studies approach.
- In *Translating the Curriculum: Multiculturalism into Cultural Studies*, Susan Huddleston Edgerton elucidates the theoretical background of cultural studies and draws on her own classroom experiences to address how educators can develop meaningful approaches to teaching literature and autobiography.

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