

NOVEL READING TECHNIQUES

Our kids read Mrs. Dalloway as part of summer reading, and write an essay using an old AP Q.3 prompt about regretting the past. During the summer I e-mail the kids some thoughts on stream-of-conscious technique and what each character is wrestling with. (I have the prompt somewhere, and could post it, if needed.) I then have the kids re-read the book after boot camp and after Shakespeare's sonnets and revise their summer essay WITHOUT any comments on the essay from me -- after boot camp they should be able to recognize things that need revising.

In class we set up four lists on the board: main characters, key scenes, unifying elements (the skywriting plane, the limo, Big Ben, et al.), and main themes. Then we choose any character except Clarissa and discuss how that character connects to other characters, the key scenes, the unifying elements, and the themes. As we do this we watch The Hours, discussing how the movie parallels or echoes or reflects the novel. Going back and forth from various characters to various scenes and themes and the movie is a bit like teaching and learning in a stream-of-conscious way.

Mrs. Dalloway is one of my favorite novels, but the majority of kids do not buy into it. Many find the style and structure too demanding; many do not relate, understandably, to the issues of middle-aged people questioning the choices they've made; a handful of young ladies love the book, but most of the young gents do not.

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Greetings, all!

I've taught Mrs. Dalloway a handful of times. Once we ground (grinded? ge-grounded?) through the book, scene after scene: not a success.

But the following approach has worked well. I divide the class into four groups. On the board one group lists all major characters; one lists key scenes (Bourton, afternoon at the Park, Clarissa's party, Lady Bruton's lunch, et al.); one lists unifying elements (Big Ben, the mysterious limousine, the skywriting plane, flowers, et al.); one identifies key themes -- remember, a theme must be arguable, so love or disappointment or aging is not a theme, but a topic.

Then I ask a student, any student, to select any character from the first list, except Clarissa. Then we discuss what we know about that character and how he or she connects to the other three lists. Inevitably, discussing one character flows into other characters; one cannot, for example, discuss Miss Kilman without discussing Elizabeth, or Sally Seton without touching on Hugh Whitbread and Peter Walsh and the party and her outrageous behaviour (sic) at Bourton, and so forth. We save Clarissa, and her wondrous epiphany, for last.

This approach approximates the stream of consciousness narrative voice of the novel itself; basically, it is a stream of consciousness teaching/discussion, flowing and twisting and focusing and morphing much as does the novel. After a couple of days of discussion, we begin watching The Hours, which novel was part of summer reading (along with Alan Lightman's Einstein's Dreams and Tim O'Brien's In the Lake of the Woods -- summer essay involved examining any of the Lightman visions of time and showing how O'Brien and Cunningham use such visions in their novels -- a SparksNote-proof essay, we think). We return to the novel during natural breaks in the movie.

So far, this approach has usually worked well. This year, when we began discussion of Mrs. Dalloway, I wasn't pleased with the care with which my kids had read that novel, so I assigned them to re-read it during the two weeks that encompassed Thanksgiving and then gave them a 50-minute in-class writing assignment. By lottery, they had to show how the passage from Cymbeline, "Fear no more the heat o' the sun Nor the furious winter's rages", applies to either Peter, or Clarissa, or Septimus. Two-thirds of the kids clearly read closely, one-third not, but I then had a grade to back up my sense of who had actually done the reading well.

Anyway, I hope that this approach to the novel works. As an addendum, the novel is slow and difficult. But so are many things worthwhile. I tell the kids that, in advance. I feel no need to apologize for that. And that is why Anna Karenina and To The Lighthouse and Snow and Absalom! Absalom! and Season of Migration to the North and The God of Small Things and The Sea are among my favorite novels.

As always, read the quote from Buffalo Springfield, and have a fine, Druid-filled Winter Solstice.

Edward Yasuna --