

Great works from a comparative perspective: a methodological approach

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Abstract—In this paper I shall put forward some methodological issues concerning the Master’s course “Clàssics de l’humanisme cristià, del XIX al XX”, with the aim of improving student’s learning from reading 19th century classics.

Key words: great works, realism, comparative literature

I. INTRODUCTION

May I start off with some basic questions? What does the activity of reading literary classics mean for our students today? How can literature help to improve our world knowledge? Does literature make us a better person? Does it help to learn about the human condition and, if so, in which ways? This may sound naïf questions to start off a Master course under the heading of “Classics of Humanism – Fiction from 19th towards the 20th century”. Facing, then, a course aimed at understanding great works within the European tradition, I come back to the basics of the method of close reading to apply some categories and concepts and rediscover a number of great books for suitable for today’s students at master’s level. Close reading should not exclude the analysis of literary works in their historical context, the biographical context, or the author’s intentions. Since our literary course focuses on the human condition, literature is taken to mean a cure for our egotism, a field that allows to link up with the other, and the comparative approach greatly enriches such a horizon.

II. CASE STUDIES

Focus shall be placed on reading. Available timetable (3 hours/week x 7 weeks) does not allow for a whole history of literature of the 19th and 20th centuries through their classics. A limitation is obviously needed. My starting point shall be a mainstream current – REALISM, in its development in some of the most advanced literary traditions: FRENCH, ENGLISH, and RUSSIAN.

Preliminaries:

- Introductions for each *aire culturelle* shall be provided.
- Realism and classics: Western canon under review.
- Mapping out the great traditions and their connections.

Selecting authors and texts:

Let me show now how I proceed in the adventure of going through a set of great works in our European tradition: DOSTOIEVSKI – Memories from the Underground. DICKENS – Hard Times. BALZAC - Eugénie Grandet. FLAUBERT – Un coeur simple. CHEKHOV – short stories. CONTEMPORARY author.

Procedure:

TEXT ANALYSIS	READER RESPONSE	COMPARATIVE APPROACH
Thematic guideline	Sympathy Otherness	Horizontal / vertical axis
Narrative technique	Human relationships	Resonances Connections
Description	Emotional engagement	Tradition – cultural variety
Style	Commentary-passages (on personal selection)	Circulation-French-English-Russian
Character People	Horizon of expectations	Literature – Life

CATEGORIES (e. g.)	APPLIED
Flat/round character (Forster)	all / various degrees
Objectivity (Various)	all/ variation

Representation / verisimilitude (Auerbach)	all / variation (style & mode)
Humour (Various)	all / various degrees
Vertical transcendence (Girard): Aesthetic vs religious experience	all / variation in degree and mode

III. EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

I organized teacher's guide contents following La Salle's guidelines given at preliminary sessions addressed to teachers in September 2023. The result was this planning table:

Sesión	Seminario	Taller	Proyecto	Evaluación continua
Sesión 1. 23/10	Acogida Presentación GD Objetivos	Clásicos / cánones Selección es Literatura y género	Comparativo Realidad / ficción	Tareas de evaluación: presentación, comentario lecturas, TFC
Sesión 2. 30/10	Realismos. Auerbach Ruso, inglés, francés	Dostoievski, <i>Memorias del subsuelo</i>	Categorías análisis	Comentario lectura/Participación
Sesión 3. 6/11	Literatura y contexto Revolución Ind.	Dostoievski/Dickens <i>Hard Times</i>	Comparativo horizontal XIX (Inglés)	Comentario lectura Exposición
Sesión 4. 13/11	Realismo francés. Evolución hasta Flaubert. Psicologismo	Dostoievski/Flaubert <i>Un coeur simple</i>	Comparativo horizontal XIX (francés)	Comentario/expo/participación / debate
Sesión 5. 20/11	Realismo ruso (cont.) Psicologismo. Moral.	Análisis de un cuento de Chéjov	Comparativo horizontal XIX francés - ruso.	Comentario/participación/ debate
Sesión 6. 27/11	Realismo francés. Balzac. Comedia humana.	Análisis Eugénie Grandet, novela.	Pervivencia del realismo en el XX.	Comentario de novela Discusión
Sesión 7. 4/12	Posteridad del realismo /Experimentaciones	Novela s. XX. The Quiet American	Realismo y géneros.	EXPOSICIONES TFC

WHAT DO I GATHER FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

- CATEGORIES: analysis proved fine, with improvements to be made towards systematization.

- TRANSCENDENCE (Girard): taking it as a recurrent thread has worked out well in all case studies.
- HORIZONTAL AXIS: proved fine, with improvements on the length of works to be studied. To be completed with a more systematic approach to formal comparative analysis.
- VERTICAL AXIS: proved weak. It may be worth cutting it off in a seven-week course.
- CALENDAR: seven sessions are not enough to ensure a full development of contents unless some changes are implemented as for length of works selected, as well as for limiting approach to horizontal axis (19th century classics only).
- PRESENTATIONS: it proved a powerful tool, covering a range of approaches always based on the comparison of literary texts: on a thematic line (marriage: Balzac-Austen), on the melancholy theme and symbolic uses of language and landscape (Chekhov-Joyce), or on the emergence of female characters in contrast (Maupassant). A degree of feedback, however, is required to be implemented through a template of corrections and suggestions.

CONCLUSIONS

1) Teaching literature through a selection of great books has been an enriching experience. Classics of the 19th century may teach us a great lesson: they suggest interesting insights into our comprehension of the human condition; reading and comparing them has enlivened our critical spirit towards life. 2) Close reading is not incompatible neither with literary theory nor literary criticism. On the contrary, I shall argue that all of them can go hand in hand. 3) Close reading can also combine beautifully with a comparative approach to great works in literature.

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