

Teaching “The Storm” and Its Aftermath

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When I first heard about the Maribor summer school, I felt reluctant to participate and to offer my teaching experience to this enterprise, although I was really curious and intrigued by it. My reluctance was mainly associated with the universal feeling of anxiety of “the first-time”. Maribor was a first-time for me, and like any such experience it was memorable, fruitful, profitable and valuable. I do not mean a first-time teaching experience, since teaching is how I make my living, but the first time teaching an international group of students.

Once I decided to be part of the summer school, the experience had three main stages: the pre-summer school period, the Maribor experience, and the post-summer school reflexive period. The most immediate issue to consider in the first stage was the field and topic on which I would deliver my lecture. Because my field of study is literature, I decided to stick to this province, but it is a vast area of knowledge, so there was the need to consider a concrete topic. Bearing in mind that it was a summer school, I deemed it appropriate to select a literature piece that would be short, interesting, unforgettable, sensational, and valuable. This is how I came up with the idea to teach the landmark short story, “The Storm,” written by Kate Chopin. The preparation of a useful lesson plan was the next challenging item on my agenda.

There are a number of teachers and lecturers who do not like to prepare detailed lesson plans, as these are not easy to adhere to in the classroom, for many reasons, as it actually happened with mine. However, lesson plans are a useful and helpful tool in the teaching profession. However, preparing a lesson plan for a class of students that you know very well is not the same as preparing one for a group of students that you do not know anything about. Still, I had to highlight some important points about the teaching plan: the first was whether to use technology in the classroom.

Literature can be taught using the traditional methods without making use of technology, as some technology-skeptic professors do, but it can also be taught using technology as a helpful tool. One thing is certain: over-reliance on technology can sometimes backfire, but complete avoidance of it makes the class a tedious experience in today’s digital world. Bearing this view in mind, I decided to use the audio version of the story and a power point presentation, hopeful that this would be enough to whet the students’ appetite. My first epiphany came with the audio version. It was a professional reading of the story downloadable for free on the internet, and it turned out to be a very useful tool for two main reasons.

First, it brought literature into the literature class. What literature professors do in literature classes is literary study, not literature *per se*, and as Rene Wellek and Austin Warren write in their landmark book, *Theory of Literature*, there is a clear distinction between the two: literature “is creative, an art,” whereas literary study “if not precisely a science, it is a species of learning” (Wellek and Warren 15). Thus finding ways to increase the dose of literature in classroom discussion is an advisable experience. Another way I thought would increase this dose of literature in class was to include passages from the story and invite the students to explicate and interpret them together. Secondly, the audio version combined with photocopied handouts of the story, which I anticipated not all the students would have read, made the students listen carefully; in that classroom you could have heard a pin drop.

The other important element in the lesson plan was to focus on the story’s main themes and ideas, as well as the story’s structure and to highlight the author’s masterful combinations of what and how. The mark of a truly talented writer is the unique harmony

between the message and the style and structure selected to convey it, and there is perfect harmony between content and form in “The Storm”.

My approach to teaching short stories is traditional; I like to provide some background information about the historical context and the author. Kate Chopin was an early feminist writer who enjoyed upsetting the applecart and making the conservative readers of her time furious with her bold stories and her novel *The Awakening*, so it was important to share with the students some key features of her fictional art. In teaching this part, I usually use the simple strategy of making the students curious, believing that curiosity is a powerful drive for the students.

“The Storm” has a prequel entitled “At the ‘Cadian Ball,” but it can be read on its own. Readers, however, get the full flavor of the story when they read both of them. “The Storm” has always been considered a sensational story, evoking strong feelings in readers, and as it is often the case with sensational stories they can be easily misread and the author’s message not fully perceived. I wanted the students to avoid judging the main character, Calixta, and to concentrate their efforts on trying to understand her, hence the selected passages to explicate. The selected passages directed the students’ attention to the poetic details which had significant psychological interpretations.

The Maribor experience was illuminating and enjoyable. The summer school coincided with the Lent Festival, which was an interesting annual event in the cultural life of the city. The irony of fate was that it was a first-time experience for me, and I was the first professor to start the summer school program. However, contrary to what I expected, I did not feel nervous at all and I believe it was due to the hospitality of the colleagues and students. The arrangements for the summer school were very good.

It was difficult to stick to the lesson plan because I had included many more issues to discuss than it was possible to cover in the 90-minute class that I was supposed to teach. The students seemed very interested in the controversial themes that the story treats: infidelity, marriage, sex, love and happiness. They were keen on sharing their own views, and their eager participation in the discussion increased my satisfaction. I finished my discussion on time and felt happy and relieved.

I had my second teaching epiphany during the post-summer school period. Two of the colleagues who were present in the classroom discussion told me that they had enjoyed it and that the way I handled the class was very good. However, the final slide in my lecture had felt more like preaching than teaching. These remarks made me examine the last part of the lecture again. My colleagues were partly right. The way I had formulated some of my conclusions did make them sound like preaching more than teaching. My idea was to formulate the conclusions in a simple and comprehensible way for the students to grasp. The underpinning idea holding the whole discussion together was that “unhappiness is one of the causes of unfaithfulness in marriage”. Here I would like to include the messages which I had pinpointed in that lecture:

Marry the person you really love; if you “marry in haste, you will ‘betray’ at leisure.”

“The road not taken” becomes a source of temptation and unhappiness; then adultery lures you just around the corner.

Be there for your partner when “there is a storm”.

Invest attention and time in your marriage.

Don’t forget: love and sex are the two most important components of marriage—not the only ones.

It is only when we have everything that we are happy; having everything is impossible therefore unhappiness rules.

Unhappiness gradually paves the way to adultery.

The conclusions I had worked out did put the message across to the students, and they could be considered didactic teaching. However, what matters most is whether they are wrong, and whether they are based in the story. These are not erroneous ideas, and they are based on the story. However, in hindsight, it would have been much better had I invited the students to draw their own conclusions first and then shared my own, something that I skipped under the pressure of time.

What enriches literary study is the different interpretations that we have for one and the same story. They stem from our cultural background, education, age, taste, values and gender. Exchanging views with students and colleagues who come from such different backdrops is illuminating. The aspect that I really enjoyed during the lecture was the students' active and eager participation in the discussion. Their contribution with ideas and interpretations for the passages I had selected for explication was welcome, and this fact contributed to my enjoyment of the lecture.

In conclusion, the summer school in Maribor was indeed a valuable, enjoyable and illuminating teaching experience. Students and professors from different cultural backgrounds came together to teach, learn and share each other's practice.

Works cited

Wellek, R; Warren A. *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. New York: Brace & World, Inc., 1970.