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# TEACHING PRACTICAL CRITICISM

# What is practical criticism?

- ⦿ The term practical criticism is perhaps not the most accurate.
- ⦿ Does impractical criticism exist?
- ⦿ Other terms: close analysis, close reading.
- ⦿ This activity can be defined as criticism based on the close analysis of a text in isolation.

# What is practical criticism?

- ◎ I.A. Richards called for a certain kind of detailed work on a text guided by a set of clear principles.
- ◎ The New Critics dismissed the study of literature in terms of history, morality, or any purpose outside it. They insisted upon close attention to the text itself and the virtual exclusion of anything other than the words on the page.

# What is practical criticism?

- From the 1960s onwards the idea of an unmediated response to a text all but disappeared.
- There is now a recognition that we always bring a whole range of assumptions to any text and judge it by a complex set of critical principles.
- Nowadays practical criticism is seen as a basic ability to comprehend a text and the foundation for all literary criticism.

# Bolstering students' confidence

- ⦿ Practical criticism is dreaded by most students.
- ⦿ Being an academic activity it has established rules and procedures that students need to familiarise themselves with.
- ⦿ All of us know far more about literature than we might assume. Most students are aware of the patterns and ideas that come up in literature again and again.
- ⦿ Demythologise the unseen text and encourage students to make use of their knowledge and skills in order to understand the text and build a response.

# Problematic approaches?

- ⦿ The essay that consists of paragraph after paragraph explaining the content of the poem and then finishes with an extra paragraph about the formal qualities of the text.
- ⦿ The essay that is over-intricate in structure, devoting a paragraph to each one of the stylistic or figurative elements found in the text.

# The Almond Tree

All the way to the hospital  
the lights were green as peppermints.  
Trees of black iron broke into leaf  
ahead of me, as if  
I were the lucky prince  
in an enchanted wood  
summoning summer with my whistle,  
banishing winter with a nod.

# Understanding a poem

- ① Encourage students to search for a central tension or opposition in the poem, a tension that will probably make itself apparent in the opening lines.
- ② By spotting a tension in a poem students will immediately be provided with a framework for shaping their subsequent impressions of the text as a whole.

# Patterns of opposition

- ◎ Positive impressions / negative impressions
- ◎ Pleasant images / nasty images
- ◎ Harmony / lack of harmony
- ◎ Pattern / lack of pattern
- ◎ Order / disorder
- ◎ Love / death

# Understanding a poem: Six steps

1. Students read the poem and think about it, using their own literary and world knowledge in the process.
2. Students summarise the poem, establishing a sense of the central opposition in the poem, and setting up the controlling idea for the essay as a whole.
3. Students look more closely at the opening of the poem, trying to see how the poet brings the theme to life.

# Understanding a poem: Six steps

4. Students look at another section of the poem, trying to build on their analysis of the poem's details.
5. Students look at how the poem concludes.
6. Students sum up their sense of the poem as a whole.

# Poetry: Building a response

- ⦿ The six steps will allow students to build an appropriate response.
- ⦿ Once students have established a sense of the central tension in a poem they have in effect defined the subject of the poem.
- ⦿ During their analysis of the poem students should be encouraged to look at how the poet brings this idea to life, how both sides of the opposition have been developed, and how the two play off against each other.

# Poetry: Building a response

- ◎ Students should be encouraged to examine how the diction used and the arrangement of words into patterns bring to life the central tension.
- ◎ In building their response students will gradually see how the poet complicates the central tension.

# Building a response: Strategies

- ① Students build their response in paragraph steps.
- ② Students summarise the poem and establish a central tension.
- ③ Students establish their own sense of the larger issue in the poem.
- ④ Students examine how the diction and figurative language bring the tension in the poem to life.

# Building a response: Strategies

- ◎ Students try to see how the poem's structure complements and helps define the subject matter of the poem.
- ◎ Students focus on details but at every stage pull back, trying to add to the case they're building.
- ◎ At the end of each paragraph students should be able to add to their overall sense of the 'issue' in the poem.

# Building a response: Cumulative Approach

1. Students read the poem.
2. Students form an initial response.
3. Students show how details relate to their initial response.
4. Students show how details advance their overall understanding of the poem.

# Poetry: Shaping an essay

- ◎ Students should be shown how to use the essay's structure as a means of structuring and directing their thoughts.
- ◎ The first paragraph should be used to get hold of the poem as a whole, in particular establishing a sense of the central tension in the text.
- ◎ After the first paragraph students should always combine a discussion of content with one of technique.

# Poetry: Shaping an essay

- ⦿ It might be sometimes logical to structure the essay according to the stanzas forming part of a poem.
- ⦿ At the same time students should be encouraged to think of their essay as a means of building a case and hence each paragraph will need to advance their case about the poem as a whole.
- ⦿ The conclusion is where students pull the threads together, hopefully after having done justice to the complexity and interest of the poem in question.

# Prose

- ⦿ Prose practical criticism is a highly contrived academic exercise.
- ⦿ Students have the impression that prose practical criticism doesn't offer the reader much to write about and they feel that there is something odd about looking at a random extract.
- ⦿ We need to assume that the set passage does have some internal coherence, e.g. openings of novels or chapters, passages setting up a novel's themes or introducing its main characters.

# Understanding a prose passage: Six steps

- ⦿ Prose practical criticism is practice in the skill of close reading, and practice in the skill of extrapolating a larger case from close reading.
- ⦿ The method for analysing a poem matches closely the method for prose.

# Understanding a prose passage: Strategies

- Encourage students to look for a tension in the passage since this will allow them to get hold of the passage as a whole, e.g. conflict between individuals and the social order.
- Students think about how the passage presents a sense of the constitution and condition of society.
- If there are no characters, students focus on what the passage is saying about nature, about how fragile the social order is.

# Understanding a prose passage: Strategies

- ◎ Students interpret the details in the light of the overall tension they established.
- ◎ Students think about the implications of the details, how they point to the wider issues embodied in the particular examples in the text.

# Prose: Building a response

- ◎ Students build their response in paragraph steps.
- ◎ Students keep in mind that they need to focus on the author's distinctive way of treating familiar issues.
- ◎ Students start by summarising the passage and establishing a central tension so as to set up the controlling idea for their essay.

# Prose: Building a response

- ◎ Students examine the opening of the passage, trying to see how the diction used brings the theme to life.
- ◎ Students move on to the next section, building their analysis by looking at the details but then pulling back to comment on the larger issues.
- ◎ Students proceed logically, pushing their ideas on the basis of the evidence in the text.

# Prose: Building a response

- ⦿ At the end of each paragraph students should be able to add to their overall sense of the issues in the passage.
- ⦿ By the end of their analysis they should have achieved a sense of what the passage is saying and how it works.

# Prose: Shaping an essay

- ◎ Students use a six-paragraph essay structure to control their analysis, building their response step by step and working from the evidence in the text to the larger issues.
- ◎ Students merge their discussion of content and style.
- ◎ Students recreate the reading process but avoid story telling.

# Sources

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