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Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), pp. 17-18

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/820469>

Accessed: 13/09/2011 11:50

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ONE PERSON'S OPINION

Through a Glass Darkly: Prejudice in the Classroom

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Recently I had a moment of cowardice in the classroom. I ran from a fight, not because I'd never fought before, but because, being an old veteran, I didn't want to fight the same fight all over again (though that may be the very essence of teaching). I didn't tell my class that Tennessee Williams was homosexual until we had finished our discussion of *The Glass Menagerie*. The reason was obvious to me at the time—I didn't want the play to be interpreted entirely as a play about homosexuality. Doubtless that would make a good discussion, especially among our working-class students, giving many of them the chance to air their homophobia. And an essay on that topic in the right hands would be brilliant. But in the wrong hands it would be a disaster. I salvaged my conscience by discussing other biographical details, such as Williams' relationship with his unstable sister Rose, the model for Laura.

But now that I think back about what I did, I realize the subject is a much broader one. The problem is not just about discussing literature as biography, it's also about interpreting literature as having, as Robert Scholes calls it, a "real, deep, secret, hidden meaning." The class, like many high school English classes, serves as an introduction to

literature, and perhaps will be the only exposure to literature some students are ever going to have. The class might also be an entry for students who find they like literature and so become college English majors, decide they like the town, and settle down. So I want the readings to be enjoyable for them, relevant to their lives, not just exercises in what they expect literature to be—a private language, a meaningless game like some kind of verbal math, an esoteric exercise in wringing "truth" from something they can't ordinarily understand.

As Philip Larkin says, a teacher's job is either explaining that what seems complicated is really simple, or that what seems simple is really complicated.

So I see two options when I teach this class—to show what literature is, and how it "works," a look behind the scenes to show the gears meshing—natural for me since I teach creative writing—or to make the class about literature as life and living in the world and the importance of family experience. Naturally, I usually steer a course somewhere between the two—between *here's what the story really means*, and *what do you think it means*, between lecture and discussion, criticism and appreciation, between life and art. And these discussions often focus on racism, sexism, ageism, or all three as in Toni Cade Bambara's "My Man Ovanne." I do want to talk about all

of these issues. So why do I hesitate to talk about the writer's life in terms of them? Do I want to talk about how the fact of a writer's lesbianism, drunkenness, Catholicism, bad marriages, Jewishness, or drug dependency have helped create the story? Should I also discuss how sobriety, heterosexuality, Republicanism affect a story? Do I really want to start down that slippery slope? Already, I get final papers that discuss Jane Austen in terms of her being a frustrated old maid. Do I really want to read thirty-five essays on all the ways we know Shakespeare's sonnets are about homosexual love? Do I want the students to even read them that way?

Unfortunately, our students seem to seize on such facts as a way of explaining whatever they read. Their readings become simplistic: Oh, here's something I understand. I can and have explained patiently, and I have discussed at length, the relationship between a writer's life and work, how complicated that relationship is, so when I get one of those essays, how screwed up Tom is because he was homosexual, what do I do then? Lecture on political correctness? Grade them down because their reading is shallow and reductive? Let them have their say, letting the text mean to them whatever it means because it's unstable anyway? This is talk show mentality, where everyone has an opinion and all opinions are equal. And it makes for very slow going.

All of these issues come down to a practical pedagogical one. At what point do you introduce the relevance of a writer's life, and how do you assess the value of that relevance? How much time can I give to endless discussions and arguments about such questions, noble though they may be? I confess I'd often rather discuss point of view or imagery than moderate what might degenerate into a Phil Donahue session. Yes, such discussions are valuable, but do I have the time? Does all meaning have to be negotiated? Do I always have to arrive at knowledge collaboratively?

So do I open this Pandora's box? I'm not sure one can have just a little discussion, a brief aside, about Williams' sexual orientation, William Faulkner's racial attitudes, Ernest Hemingway's sexism and hunting, Flannery O'Connor's Catholicism, Alice Munro's feminism. I know I'm mixing normal behaviors and progressive attitudes with retrograde and undesirable ones, but aren't all influences, good or bad, still influences—and therefore equally worthy of discussion?

So I'm in a fix. Do I concentrate on the beauty and integrity of the work, or introduce what could be distractions, lenses that immediately begin to distort what the student sees, creating excuses for their inattention and carelessness? Forget our prejudices for a moment; what about theirs? Do I teach at those prejudices, or around them? Certainly, many of our colleagues welcome these digressions, and consider them the main road, the meat you want to get to from the beginning. Where else would you want to get to in a class dealing with contemporary women writers? But when I think of my classes as endless discussions of social problems, my heart fails. Certainly classes should engage social problems, but social problems in the work or in the writer's life?

Williams was gay. Should I tell them that O'Connor was Catholic? That Ezra Pound was anti-Semitic? And when? Before I even begin? Like a disclaimer or apology? What if a student asks, when told Elizabeth Bishop was a lesbian, is this relevant? I don't know what I could answer. It might even look as if I were applying a prior *ad hominem* argument, as if to say, now I'm going to read the work of a Lesbian Poet. Now, this Gary Soto is a Chicano Poet. Here's a poem by Yehuda Amichai, who is Jewish. All of you know, of course, that Joy Harjo is a Lesbian Native American. So what? Sometimes, by headlining this way, I feel like I'm giving away the ending of *The Crying Game*.

Instead, let them, a little voice in us says, read this work by a Human Being before you start telling them what kind. If you don't, you'll make the students think they need to know the author was Indian in order to understand or appreciate the work, that literature isn't real until you know who wrote it and why, which undermines all that is best in literature, its ability to transcend differences, and demonstrate the fundamental similarities of humans.

Yet not telling them seems as if I'm trying to hide something—which I am in some ways. The question seems to be that since I have to work with their prejudices and my own, what is the best way to do it? To tell them about Williams' life and then blithely proceed to the play as if his homosexuality shouldn't be a problem to them if they're as sophisticated as I am? Or to study *The Glass Menagerie* without reference to Williams' life, and then tell them about his mother and sister Rose? And then tell them about his homosexuality and ask them how this changes their view of the play? Does this new reading conflict with their old one? Is it compatible? Does it change the way you feel about the

play? Do you see references to homosexuality that you didn't see before? How can a play be not personal and personal at the same time? How political and not political? How does what I know change what we see, as an audience and as people?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but for me, they are good questions. They go to the heart of pedagogy—what are we trying to teach, and why? And what is *each* of us trying to teach, and should it be the same?

Here's a good question when discussing *The Glass Menagerie*: Given that Tennessee Williams was gay, why *isn't* Tom's sexuality an explicit part of the play?

But, for me, it's a question that works better at the end of the discussion than at the beginning.