

The Literature Program Newsletter

# THE IRREGULAR LITTONIAN

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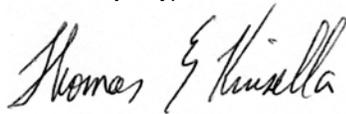
Dear Alums,

The Stockton LITT program flourishes at the close of yet another busy school year. We are growing, having gained two new members last fall, Adalaine Holton, who specializes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, especially African American literatures, and Marion Hussong, who has come to us from Stockton's Education program. Unfortunately, we are losing two colleagues at the end of this term: Brian Stefans, our professor of New Media Studies, has been lured away to UCLA, and Fred Mench is completing his final semester of full-time teaching for the Language and Literature programs. We are searching for Brian's replacement now. Katherine Panagakos, who joined the Lang faculty in January, is Fred's able replacement.

We invite you to join faculty and current students at this year's *Really, Really Big Lit/Lang End-of-Year Workshop Bash*. It will be held on campus at the Townsend Residential Life Center, Friday, April 25th, from 4:30 until 6:00. The menu has been planned and, as always, promises to be tasty.

Instead of sending along the usual round up of "doings," I have cajoled my colleagues into describing short "teaching moments" or snippets of their teaching philosophies. We hope they demonstrate that, when all is said and done, the concerns of the Literature program remain sharply focused on our students.

For the program,



Tom Kinsella

The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

### *Three Teaching Moments and Some Lessons Learned*

Moment One: I am a 22 year old teaching assistant assigned to teach my first college writing class. I am told on the first day simply to hand out a prompt for a writing sample, to allow the class to write, and to collect the samples and dismiss the class. Entering the room, I am nervous beyond my wildest dreams. In an effort to impersonate a real teacher, I am wearing the most serious clothes I own, a navy blue sweater and a long blue and green plaid skirt. I am grateful for the long skirt because my knees are literally knocking together as I



introduce myself and hand out the writing assignment. While the students are writing, I look at them and the information on the roster. All of them are male, all are engineering majors. What I know about engineering would fit on the top of the eraser on one of their pencils. I wonder how on earth I got here and what I can possibly teach them. They write and I worry. Later that evening, as I read their writing samples, I start to breath again. What they know about writing would fit on the cap of the pen I am using to respond to their essays. The next class is devoted to discussing their samples and I am reassured to discover that I have something useful to teach them. It's a good start.

*Lesson One: You probably know more than they do.*

Moment Two: I have been a full-time assistant professor of English for about three years. At the college where I am teaching there are very few English majors, and I frequently get the distinct feeling, especially in my American literature survey, that students are unprepared or uninterested. One night I have a very vivid dream that I am a teacher of the deaf. In the dream, I am totally frustrated because I don't know how to sign or lip read and therefore I have no way to communicate with my students. During the next class meeting, I tell my students about the dream, and ask them what they think it means. I discover from this conversation that the students are feeling frustrated too, with the material and with the pace of the course, which seems too difficult and too fast for them. They ask me if we can slow down, read a bit less and spend more time reviewing. I incorporate some of their suggestions into the rest of the semester, and the class does become more relaxed and little livelier.

*Lesson Two: Sharing responsibility for the success of the class with your students is usually more effective and more satisfying than shouldering it all alone.*

Moment Three: This moment has happened more times than I can count, but here's one example. I have been teaching one of my favorite novels, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. I am reading a student's paper, which focuses on the character of Roger Chillingworth. The student's powerful and sympathetic reading of the character opens him up to me in a way I had never before considered. His paper changes my understanding of Chillingworth; indeed, it changes my understanding of the novel. It also renews my enthusiasm for being a teacher.

*Lesson Three: Our students have much to teach us. And one of the very best things about teaching is being inspired by your students.*

Deb Gussman



One of my courses this past fall dealt with the theme of “coming of age” in multi-ethnic literature. Before the semester began, I thought of a great way to introduce students to the characteristics of the *bildungsroman*, or coming of age story. I would have them write their own *bildungsromans* – fictional or autobiographical. They would read them aloud to the class, and we would talk about point of view, characterization, plot, and tone in order to understand how the formal elements of a literary narrative work to shape its meaning.



On the second day of class, we sat in a circle and students eagerly volunteered to read their stories aloud. As they began sharing their stories, I was surprised that most students chose to write very personal autobiographical narratives. In fact, most chose to write about what they felt were traumatic events in their lives, ranging from adolescent breakups and leaving home for the first time to the

deaths of loved ones and overcoming drug addiction. The students listened intently to each emotionally charged narrative and began to respond with supportive comments. As this happened, I realized that there was a conflict between my pedagogical aim and the interpersonal dynamic that was unfolding. What I had hoped would be an exercise in literary analysis was fast becoming an episode of Oprah. My first impulse was to steer the conversation away from empathy and back toward literary interpretation. But there was a human being sitting in front of me who had just bared his soul to a room of twenty-five people. How could I disrespect his experiences by showing how the meaning of his narrative was shaped by the literary strategies he used? I couldn't do it. I abandoned my plan for critical interpretation and reluctantly allowed the discussion to morph into a support group session.

After class, I felt that my exercise had been a complete failure because we didn't learn anything about the formal qualities of the *bildungsroman*. As I looked back on the exercise later on in the semester, however, I began to wonder if it did have some pedagogical value after all. As they listened to each other's personal narratives, students felt responsible to each other; they felt compelled to respond with empathy and compassion, even though I hadn't directed them to. Maybe they did practice something central to literary interpretation that day – identification with experiences different from their own. While I don't think I'll repeat this particular exercise again, I would like to find new ways to integrate student experience into my courses in meaningful ways. Perhaps more importantly, I would like to find ways to recreate the sense of social responsibility that students so passionately demonstrated during the exercise.

Adalaine Holton

Why do I teach? Apparently, I need to. When I was in graduate school, I would have told you that teaching paid the bills, was the necessary evil that allowed a person to pursue her scholarship. This from someone who was always ambivalent about scholarship, about academia. When I finally emerged from graduate school, I faced a difficult job market. I had landed a one-year appointment at Fordham, only to come in second for the tenure-track job. While this was a blow to my ego, I had a fallback position. Through a friend's encouragement, I had been doing some freelance copyediting. My friend had established her own business and I figured I could do so as well. If the academic career didn't pan out, I could be a copyeditor. This looked like the path I would, in fact, be following. In 1994 I got a job as a copyeditor at a New York ad agency, specializing in medical and pharmaceutical products. There were lots of good things about this job. It was in New York, and I loved going into the city every day. I developed a new copyediting specialty that was more lucrative than the sort I had been doing. I could read novels on the train and I had a mile and a half walk from Penn Station to 38<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue that kept me in shape. My colleagues were smart, interesting people, many of whom were interested in books and art and culture. I had no papers to grade; I had no work to take home. Things were great.



Except that as time went on, I missed teaching – which surprised me. I would never have thought that teaching was the part of academia I loved best. Perhaps because I went to a research university where scholarship was privileged, where I took the bulk of my classes with academic stars, an academic career took a particular shape in my mind. I took no classes in teaching or pedagogy, though I did submit to periodic reviews of my students' portfolios in Composition classes and helped write assignments with other faculty for core Literature courses. I thought I was a good teacher; both students and administrators gave me good feedback. But being a good teacher just wasn't the coin of the realm. I don't remember talking much about teaching with my friends – at least not talking about curriculum and pedagogy. I knew that I was good at making a classroom a comfortable place for discussion and that I could transmit my love of literature to students in a way that could get them excited about it. But what I remember talking about with my peers was what a drag it was to grade papers.

Ultimately, I was lucky enough to find a job at an institution that valued teaching and allowed me figure out my place in academia as a teacher/scholar. At Stockton, I have colleagues who love to talk about curriculum, who are always comparing pedagogical techniques, who regard teaching not just as an add-on to scholarship, but as the central part of the academic mission. I still bitch about grading papers, but I now know that, for me, being an academic doesn't mean having to teach, it means getting to teach.

Lisa Honaker



*“Lit Meth” with Jake and Elwood or  
The Whatever Works Approach to Studying  
Literary Terminology*

“All theory is gray!” sighs Goethe (1749-1832) in his tragedy, *Faust I*. Goethe had a knack for keen observation, and he certainly was right on target with this comment on the joys of theoretical learning. Our students would likely agree that literary theory can be a bit ... Well, I am not going to try to improve on Goethe's eloquence, so there you have it: Theory is gray.



We don't even have to delve into the foggy maelstrom of complex literary theory: Even the simple stuff of daily literary exploration can be stuffy, dry, not to mention confusing to students. I certainly struggled with the terminology as an undergraduate and graduate student. Most of my professors simply used the jargon and cared little whether we understood it or not. It was expected of us to resort to the appropriate encyclopedias (no internet yet!) and figure it all out on our own time. Students who were naturally inclined toward panic and anxiety (such as yours truly) brought those hefty tomes to class, concealing them in backpacks, to be hastily perused during the class break or whenever the prof wasn't looking. Less easily intimidated students made a twice-weekly pilgrimage to the reference shelves of the library to look up all the iffy terms in their notes that were adorned with multicolored exclamation and question marks, passive-aggressive skull-and-crossbones doodles, and related marginalia.

Why didn't our professors simply explain the jargon to us? I can't answer that question. I do think that a good book on literary terminology is a great idea for any student, but I also believe that it is my job as a professor to try to figure out an effective way to help my students understand the meaning behind the language of literary criticism.

While theory may be gray, popular culture is not. Films, televisions, talk shows, and the online world offer us perfectly good examples to help bring some color to the chromatically challenged stuff. I am not deterred by the fact that most TV shows and many films are decidedly fluffy compared to the literary texts that we study in our classrooms. The structures and mechanisms involved in telling a story are still the same, and if pop culture helps our students to understand them, then so be it.

Need a quick way to introduce the concept of a picaresque novel while plowing through such classics as Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* or Defoe's *Moll Flanders*? Simply walk the students through their memories of watching Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*. They will understand the paratactic arrangement of the individual anecdotes stringing together the story of Forrest's life: We quickly realize that it does not really matter whether Forrest joins Bubba in the shrimping business before he invents the Smiley Face, or whether he takes up running before table tennis. The individual vignettes of his life could be viewed out of order and the story would still work, because Forrest never changes. Hence the circular structure of the picaresque story: The film begins and ends on the park bench. Neither money nor fame nor life's many formative experiences affect who Forrest is as a person. And he certainly features the unusual pedigree, unusual appearance, and quirky demeanor of the picaresque hero, who holds a mirror up to society by interacting with varied institutions of the social order of his time.

How can we use popular culture to help students practice various modes of literary interpretation? As an example, let's take a quick feminist look at the folktale "Cinderella" by the Brothers Grimm. In this version of the tale, which occurs in many variations in most cultures around the globe, Cindy attends three balls and needs to come up with a more and more gorgeous outfit each time to keep impressing the prince and beating out the competition of all the eligible maidens in the kingdom. Anyone who has seen the "reality show" *The Bachelor*, where 25 women compete for a man that they don't even know can quickly understand what is really going on in this story. In *The Bachelor* the contestants' outfits and hair get fancier and more elegant every week. Glass slippers turn into bikinis and the women don't eat to avoid gaining weight for the inevitable on-camera whirlpool romps with their bachelor. The tournament is fierce: Those who fail to impress are weeded from the contest and sent packing. The plight of Cinderella is never over. It repeats itself in perpetuity until we begin to recognize the true message behind this story and decide to stop the insanity.

One of my favorite tools for teaching literary terminology and structure is the movie *The Blues Brothers*, starring Dan Aykroyd and the late John Belushi. I refer to it so often in introductory classes that I recommend that students who have never seen this film watch it during the first week of the semester. There are more painful homework assignments, I guess.

The film has it all. *Themes and motives*, anyone? We have a *quest*: the boys need to get the back taxes for their convent orphanage to city hall in an impossibly short time frame. They fit the established motif of the *Just Thieves*, convicted felons both, who nevertheless follow a certain code of honor to save their orphanage from foreclosure. Need to explain the meaning and function of the term “*foil*”? Why, take a look at Elwood (who only ever eats two slices of dry toast for any meal) and Joliet Jake (who orders two whole fried chickens, ten different side orders and a couple of milkshakes at Aretha Franklin’s diner.) Could they be more different in personality? Point proven. *Pattern of action*? Just watch Jake and Elwood getting “the band back together” as the stakes get higher, culminating in the monumental car chase that makes up the entire final quarter of the movie. *Retardation*? Imagine a scene of utter suspense and chaos as Jake and Elwood dodge hundreds of cops, national guardsmen and civilian pursuers. Just as the moment when the audience (ready for *catharsis*!) wants to heave a sigh of relief, because the brothers have finally arrived at the tax assessor’s office with the money, we read a sign on the door: “Back in five minutes!” Do you need to explain the meaning and dramatic function of the term “*intermezzo*”? Look no further than James Brown’s frothing performance as a soulful minister, Ray Charles’s cameo as a salesman of used musical instruments, or the very intimidating Aretha Franklin as the owner of a soul food restaurant, who musically warns her man to “better think!” before leaving her to tour with the Blues Brothers’ band again. And, we have an *epilogue*, as we cut to Jake and Elwood, back at Joliet prison after their arrest, “Jailhouse Rock.”

I challenge you to sit down with your old notes from “Lit Meth” and a *Blues Brothers* DVD to see how many relevant applications you can find! As a matter of fact, I am sure you are prepared and ready now to conclude our little exploration into the lighter side of literary terminology with a pop quiz:

*Drawing on our interpretation of the film Forrest Gump as a picaro story, trace the picaresque aspects of The Blues Brothers.*

Give it a try! It’s all in there. And you’ll get 20 points extra credit for your effort!

Marion Hussong



*Indoctrination*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) lists only one definition for “indoctrination”: “Instruction; formal teaching. Also spec., the ‘instruction’ of prisoners of war, etc., in Communist doctrines, ideas, etc.; = BRAINWASHING.” The OED’s definition suggests that formal instruction always carries the taint of “brainwashing.” It also hints that there is a fine line between being a student and a prisoner of war and between being a teacher and a torturer. Anyone who has been a student knows this aspect of learning – its rewarding and painful aspects. In today’s lingo educators might call this process the “tough love” we give our students. I see indoctrination into the field’s conventions as the ticket into the “literacy club” for my students.<sup>1</sup> This club jumps with culture (high and low)—but the tickets aren’t free.



Perhaps as you read this some of you are remembering the times at Stockton when your indoctrination into literary studies tightened against your brain like a vice grip: the OED paper in *Literary Methodologies* or the first day you sat down to write that *Senior Seminar* paper. Or maybe you are remembering the first time one of us – probably in an off-hand way – said that was a smart insight: “You should speak more in class.” Suddenly, your toe was in the door. This aspect of indoctrination into a field of study seems to translate across majors, whether you are studying mathematics or literature.

Increasingly, fields in the humanities are being scrutinized more closely (by students, lawmakers, political pundits, parents, administrators, and fellow teachers) for the ways in which we indoctrinate students. My own classroom is not immune. The issue of indoctrination has come up in my classes – implicitly or explicitly – since I began teaching in part because, like many of my colleagues, I assign texts and authors both clearly inside and outside the traditional canon. We also frequently grapple in my classes with themes related to justice, democracy, and identity. This pedagogy, which positions diverse voices and approaches to literature as central to rather than marginal to the accepted canon of literature and literary education, makes some students and other individuals curious, if

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1 I am consciously riffing on Frank Smith’s metaphor of the “literacy club,” which he describes in his book *Joining the Literacy Club: Further Essays into Education*.

not downright anxious. Folks are looking for an explanation: just what are you teaching when you are teaching literature?

Simply quoting Matthew Arnold – saying we are engaged in “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world” – just doesn’t quite cut it anymore. I am a feminist pedagogue that asks her students to examine the art *and* politics of aesthetics. A key challenge educators committed to a diverse curriculum continually face is making visible the politics embedded in all texts (not just the ones we happen to agree or disagree with). No text or author or approach to teaching literature, in this sense, is innocent or neutral.

When I do my best work as a teacher my students leave my classes with a firm grasp of the literature’s aesthetic construction, its varieties, and its history; they also leave more self-aware of the choices they make as consumers and evaluators of literature and culture. These are the essential skills I wish to indoctrinate in my students because I am pretty sure we are all tested on our ability to apply them on a daily basis for the rest of our lives.

Kristin Jacobson



### *The Flyer Committee*

I have a confession and then a secret to tell you. First the confession: when I attend Stockton’s graduation ceremony at the end of each term and proudly watch Literature majors receive their degrees, I find that a surprising number are unknown to me. How did they get past me? Second, the secret: I am the flier committee. Although the secret is a joy, the confession pains me. Let me try to explain the link I see between the two.

I first served as Litt/Lang coordinator in 1992-93, and the earliest Bash flyer that I have located dates from December 1992, when



I had been on campus for just over 3 years. It isn't really a flyer, more of a memo to the faculty asking them to announce the Bash (colorfully) to their classes. But by the next year the Flyer committee had come into being and flyers were generated two or three per Bash.

For the next 10 years I wrote fliers twice a year (until 2002) and then once a year – a seasonal flurry of strange and silly announcements meant to entice students to our end of term student/faculty party. For more than fifteen years I have spent valuable time near the end of the semester reading fliers verbatim at the beginning of classes. I dramatize my readings, tell the class my views on the Bash (the sweetest thing we do at Stockton), and in most years coyly (but transparently) build the mystery of the unnamed and unknowable flier committee. I still do this – the next flier is due out in a day or two.

Why do I write flyers? I do so because the events they announce reinforce our community. Of course every literature class builds community. *Research*, *Shakespeare*, and *Senior Seminar* are especially good at it. But events such as the unveiling of *Stockpot*, the *Visiting Writers Series*, student-sponsored poetry slams and new media showcases – events such as the Bash – these arc across our classrooms and bring large numbers of us together in the same space. We are not teachers and students at these events, but lovers of literature. With 350 majors and 9 faculty members, the LITT program is bigger than it has ever been. It would be easy for the program to grow impersonal. To combat this I announce events and encourage students to attend; in a small way, I hope flyers add to the community, too.

These days I also make bookmarks. Most of you received two of them along with the US Postal service mailing we sent out this semester. Many of you will remember that at commencement faculty members stand in line to congratulate each graduate (the second sweetest thing we do at Stockton). I've started to hand out "Graduating" bookmarks to each grad who comes down from the stage, diploma in hand. Occasionally I make Literary themed magnets as well. Fliers, bookmarks, magnets. If I had the resources I'd be handing out stenciled pencils, key-rings, t-shirts and hats. And all would be a variation on the same theme. "Whoever likes literature might enjoy this." And those who enjoy literature, who have made it part of their life, are my compatriots whether I know them, have had them in class, or not.

Tom Kinsella

\*\*The *OED* gives two acceptable spellings: flier and flyer.



The day after I returned from six months traveling through South-East Asia, I received a call at my parent's house from Carnegie Mellon asking where I was. While still recovering from jet lag, I learned that I was to start graduate school and teach a class in less than a week. My lost application to their Cultural Studies program had miraculously been found, processed, and accepted.

I was given an 8 a.m. section of *Strategies for Writing*. Though I knew since the 8th grade that I wanted to be a teacher, the thought of my first day of class petrified me.



I went to the classroom the night before, trying to rehearse my entrance. If I could just get through the first five minutes, I knew I would be okay. But how could I start class, when all I wanted to do was look at the students' faces, to get a sense of who I'd be teaching, before I had to perform? Frantic, I stayed in that classroom for hours, practicing various opening lines. Then I suddenly came up with a solution.

The next morning, I didn't dress up at all. I came to class a few minutes early and sat in one of the student chairs. Back then, I was a youthful 25 – no one gave me a second look as they shuffled in. I waited until the class was full, looking casually around at the tired but intriguing faces.

It reached eight o'clock, then a few minutes after. I stayed seated, curious now what would happen. Finally a girl beside me said, "Maybe he's not coming."

That's when I jumped up and shouted, "Okay, I want to start class."

Everyone was startled, and then they laughed. A ripple of comments spread through the room.

I hadn't planned it, but the rest of the lesson became instantly clear to me. "I want to start by talking about what assumptions we come to the classroom with." This started a good discussion about students' expectations of a class, which naturally led to a discussion about the topic I had planned: What are our assumptions as readers and writers?

Nathan Long

I had an interesting Kafka class last semester. We were discussing “In the Penal Colony.” Before discussing anything (though we had had a longish, general Kafka discussion in the last session), I had them write down who they thought the “old commander” represented in one or two words. I grouped them according to their replies – the groups were God (religious allegory), a fascist Dictator (political allegory), the old value system (social allegory) and the government (kind of a mix of social and political). I was hoping someone picked the unconscious, or the creative urge, or conversely, reality a la Plato’s cave, but didn’t force anyone to take a position.



I then played Jim Lehrer and we had a debate. In each round, one group had a minute to formulate a position – they had to articulate the position to the class as if it was exclusive of any other position. There were topics for each round – the officer, the condemned man, the meaning of the writing on the skin, etc. The first group picked a spokesperson, who had a minute to articulate the position. The next group then had 20 seconds to formulate a response – I called it a rebuttal but often they didn’t get to that – and 45 seconds to articulate. Then the third group had 20 seconds to formulate a response and 45 seconds to articulate. I specified that they should quote from the text to support their arguments. The fourth group then had to judge the other groups – the best group got a 3, the second best a 2, the third a 1.

It was pretty wild. The students who knew how to write and quote usually won, and the ones who didn’t quite know how to frame their argument often lost. Just like it should be. And the ones that pulled out long quotes but didn’t tie it into an argument ran out of time (though I wasn’t strict on that). No one really “lost” – after 6 rounds, the winner, God, had only won by 1 point.

It gave the poorer students a good way of seeing how other student’s think, but also be part of their world. They also really utilized the group discussion time efficiently – I didn’t have to walk around the room and pester them. In fact, outside of the end of the class when I wrapped up, I said practically nothing. Oddly, the dictator group, which had four of my best students in it, actually formulated an argument that I totally disagreed with regarding the condemned man, and the judge for that round actually gave them a 1 for it – i.e. they figured it out for themselves.

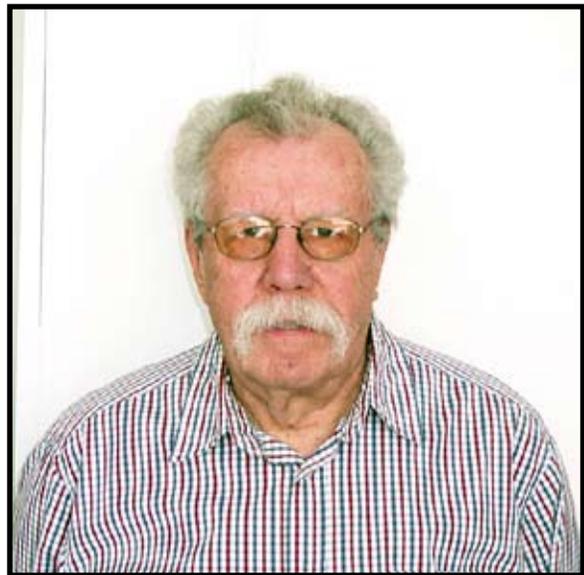
I'll end this story by saying that this was a particularly good exercise for Kafka, since there I was, the person they usually think of as "the judge" – initially they all looked right at me when making their cases – and all I did was smile or nod once in a while. They stopped looking at me eventually, especially as I held the stopwatch (a cell phone) so it probably made them more nervous. It would have really been Kafka-esque if I could have projected the ticking seconds on the screen, but the computer in the room wouldn't let the Java applet run. And of course, Kafka's stories accept almost all of these perspectives simultaneously, so there being no true ending to the discussion outside of an arbitrary point system was quite fitting.

Brian Stefans



### *Triangles, Ms. Piercy and Madam Bovary*

This year marks my 42<sup>nd</sup> year of full time teaching. I could, of course, regale all of you with stories of successes and, yes, failures in that span of years. But what stands out above all other experiences is the narrative about the very first time I taught. During the five years of my graduate experience, I mostly taught composition. Most graduate students were T.A.'s – the University desperately needed us to teach writing to 3000 Freshmen and we need the paltry salary to stay in the Program.



In my first year, I was not hired as a T.A. so I became what was called a "Reader." This meant that I "read" a professor's exams and gave a tentative grade – which the professor reviewed. I did not have to attend each class though I was encouraged to do so that I would have some idea about what a correct answer would be for the test. It was not exactly a cushy job but it helped pay the bills.

The teacher I read for was Ms. Josephine Piercy. She was a quintessential old-fashioned teacher. She was kind to a fault, smelled of powder and an unnamable perfume, wore

dresses that were decades out of style and had a somewhat disconcerting habit of grabbing your knee when she spoke to you. I loved her.

She almost always accepted my grades, allowed me to miss her classes when they were covering a text I knew, was kind and supportive, and I think felt fortunate to have a male reader who cared about what she did.

I can't remember that she ever called me with the exception of one night when she called coughing and sneezing. I stated my concerns about her health and suggested that I would go to the class the next morning and announce her absence. That would, she said, be fine except she wanted me to take the class and teach the text she was working on. I protested that I had never taught a class, that I had no idea what to prepare and that I knew the students would not want me there – all to no avail. She insisted that I teach the class, that I would be fine, and that she couldn't think of a better way to start teaching.

I was even more shocked and troubled when I asked what text she was teaching and she replied that it was *Madam Bovary*. Now I had never read the novel and didn't have a single idea about what I might say. She recommended that I skim it and hung up in a coughing spasm.

I cannot express to you my panic about teaching a text I had never read to a class I had only seen a few times for a whole hour with thirty students ready to pounce on me as a poor substitute or to get up and leave the classroom altogether.

I had a good friend who was in Comparative Literature and because she knew such difficult subjects as French novels, I thought she might be able to give me a crash course on the novel and author. I called her, expressed my panic, and she told me that she had just read an article on the plot structure of the novel and that I should come to her apartment, get the journal, read it and cover it in the morning's class.

I did exactly that staying up most of the night reading the article – which was excellent – and get my notes ready to teach. Basically, the article claimed that *Madam Bovary* had a plot structure shaped like a triangle wherein events on one side were replicated on the other side. For example, Emma was married on the left side of the triangle and on the right was buried in her wedding dress.

I was even more panicked the next morning. I was trapped, in that I had promised Ms. Piercy that I would take the class, that I would examine the text as she had, and that I would do my best for the full hour.

I clearly remember walking into the class; I waited until just before the class was to start thinking that that would help avoid questions or student unrest. The moans were audible when I walked to the front of the class, laid down the book and my notes. I explained that Ms. Piercy was ill and that I was taking her place. More groans. Pushing through their disappointment, I turned to the blackboard and drew a very nice, equilateral triangle writing above it “The Plot Structure in *Madam Bovary*.”

At that moment, I turned and looked at the class and there were thirty replications of triangles in thirty notebooks on every desk in the room. My god! I thought. What incredible power! I write on the board and they copy every one of my words. So that is what teaching is. It was one of the great rushes of my life.

Somehow, I worked through the rest of the hour; as a matter of fact, I probably could have lectured for two hours I had so much material. I can't remember much after the initial moments but Ms. Piercy later thanked me and said the students she talked with had been impressed. I doubt I would have minded if they had said I hadn't taught them anything at all – I was that dazzled.

It didn't take me long to find out – once I began to teach Composition – that teaching isn't power over others but, instead, is a kind of friendly give and take to get to the truth. I learned also not to over prepare, not to be so rigid lecturing that I would miss the questions asked or unasked but still on their faces. I learned to read a class, to know when to speak and when not to. I never lost my love of drawing geometric shapes, arrows, lines and any other visual aid that helps me to make a point. So what I learned that day wasn't what I took away from the experience. What I took away has sustained me for all these years: this is one helluva job and I am fortunate beyond words to have been thrown in the deep end of the pool. God bless Ms. Piercy.

Ken Tompkins



The Literature web pages:  
<http://titania.stockton.edu/literature/>

Write us!

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If you know Litt/Lang graduates who are not receiving this newsletter, please ask them to send a message to [Thomas.Kinsella@stockton.edu](mailto:Thomas.Kinsella@stockton.edu). They will be placed on the alum list and receive *The Irregular Littonian* plus other occasional mailings.