

GOING BEYOND COMPREHENSION: APPROACHES TO TEACHING *THE GRADUATE* IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: Teaching literature is a valuable way for learners of English to acquire language. Reading is an essential part of language learning as it provides students with many facets of learning such as vocabulary, grammar, or idioms. The novel *The Graduate* by Charles Webb is especially useful for teachers because of its uncomplicated language which allows teachers to focus on others areas in reading a literary work, for example, literature analysis, character study, focus on the Byronic hero in fiction.

This essay aims to examine features beyond simply providing students tools in which to comprehend a text and with this, find the experience of reading enjoyable and motivating.

Keywords: literature, analysis, teaching, motivation, Byronic hero, symbolism.

1. Introduction

In 1963 a novel about a young man 'a little worried about his future' was published. The young man, Benjamin Braddock, is the main character in the novel, *The Graduate*. It is a popular work, easy to read and understand, and because of this, the book is often used to teach students learning English as a foreign language.

What this paper aims to examine is threefold: to explore how the novel *The Graduate* is so useful as a teaching tool for teachers of English as a foreign language / second language; how the novel can be useful for introducing students to various methods of literary analysis; and finally, how Benjamin Braddock is regarded by modern readers as something akin to a nuisance, perhaps even a 'stalker' when it actually might be that he is a modern Byronic hero and therefore acting on urges beyond society's conventions.

These three themes, while each being addressed separately in their own right, will also appear throughout the essay as they intertwine and act together with each other.

Although there are passages from the book in this essay used to illustrate and explain, it is important to note that this is not a review, but rather an examination into how it can be used in the English language classroom. Also, the paper

focuses on the novel *The Graduate*, and not the film, as it is the English language and literature which is discussed here.

2. *The Graduate* as a teaching tool

As a book for learners of English, *The Graduate* has many clear, positive points. For example, it contains language that is not complex, which is due in part, to a lot of dialogue in the story. The story itself is straightforward: a successful young man returns home, is pressured by his parents to do something with his life, has an affair, falls in love with a young woman and thereafter pursues her.

When the teaching syllabus requires a larger literary work to be taught, it becomes the teacher's choice that governs the reading (even when students are given a choice of three or four novels), which can lead to problems with motivation for reading the work. In this situation it is important to provide effective scaffolding with focus on the story, possible themes, characters, and the film poster / book cover (usually of the stockinged leg of an unseen female in front of a pensive young man) to help to build an understanding of what students will encounter as they read the book.

A further way to counter any feelings of students feeling they are 'forced' to read *The Graduate*, is to show the film prior to reading the book. Sometimes teachers prefer to show a film to students at the end of reading a work as a kind of 'treat'. However, showing a film of a book prior to reading has many advantages for learning. Indeed, *The Graduate* film is especially worthwhile as it is so true to the novel and can be a valuable tool in helping understanding and also building new vocabulary, illustrating grammar and proving students' own hypotheses. Indeed, by giving students the story beforehand, teachers may well find that they can focus more on the language, instead of long lessons devoted to comprehension. True, this method removes much of students attempting to predict vocabulary and the meanings of words as they read, but other strategies can be employed here instead, such as noticing grammar features, idioms, or spelling.

If the teacher also provides snacks and refreshments with a viewing of the film, then students might relax and enjoy the experience more, therefore lessening feelings that they have been 'coerced' into reading a book.

3. Approaches to reading the novel

The theories of reading by Stephen Krashen are useful here to illustrate how reading is an essential part of the language learning process. One area on which Krashen focuses is input and the language students receive, especially that which is just above students' comprehension: comprehensible input +1 - the language stu-

dents already have plus a step slightly higher up. The thought behind comprehensible input +1 is highly valuable in language learning as it helps push students to just beyond where they are while avoiding demotivation through language which is too advanced. Thus, showing the film *The Graduate* before reading the book can function as an aid to comprehensible input, as students, at the very least, will be primed through the visual experience to not only anticipate what will appear in the written story but also gain a better understanding of what is happening as they read.

The Graduate is an extremely useful book for students learning English as there are several approaches the teacher can take in order to give students the best and most rewarding learning experience with this work. It is interesting to explore how the teacher can use the book beyond using it as a work for language acquisition. In fact, *The Graduate* is useful for teachers wanting to introduce students to literary analysis, which can be used with other English language works and also in other subjects.

As one of the receptive skills, the demands of reading on the student can be limited to understanding a text, perhaps followed by a discussion in class, or maybe even a written task. Therefore, the production comes after the work has been read. In *The Graduate* however, where the language is uncomplicated and where there is often a lot of dialogue with minimal description to reveal characters' feelings, the reader is placed in a position where they have to imagine these scenes themselves. Consider, for example, the scene where, after the affair has been going on for some time, Benjamin insists that he and Mrs. Robinson talk instead of just getting into bed together. In this scene the language can actually be regarded as almost being too straightforward, description reduced to a few frowns, a shrug, or a raised eyebrow. There are long stretches of dialogue with no additional description of mood or tone so there is a risk that the reader might miss on a more complete reading experience because the mood or emotions of the characters speaking are not described at all. In the scene where Benjamin wants to know more about Mrs. Robinson and presses her to talk more about how she manages the affair, about her life, and so on (which she finds tiresome and pointless to discuss with him), the reader only learns of her feelings through what she says, not how she says it.

Again, having shown the film to students beforehand also provides the opportunity for reflection on what is shown in this scene thus providing the description. For instance, the word 'frowning' which is often used as an emotional indicator in the book benefits with the subtle, hurt tones in the voice of Anne Bancroft as Mrs. Robinson.

How might the language teacher approach such scenes, which are crucial to the story, yet seem to lack description beyond what is spoken by the characters? In this case, the teacher might consider having students interact with the text by, for example, completing a 'fill in the gaps' task in scenes where description is lacking,

which could be done by adding description to the dialogue, or writing a kind of 'stage direction'. Teachers can ask students to produce written descriptions of, for example, Mrs. Robinson's responses, other than raising her eyebrows or shrugging her shoulders to Benjamin's questions.

By asking students to respond to what they are reading can help give the novel a new depth and from that, more understanding. By having students become more involved in using the text in a more creative way, they receive the opportunity of contributing and interacting with what they are reading, and therefore creating opportunities for them to become more engaged in the text they have been assigned to read.

4. Using *The Graduate* as a work of literature.

In many ways it is possible to question the literary merits of *The Graduate*. True, the story is dynamic and interesting, but the narrator gives the reader very little in the way of character description, or much - if any - character development. Further, the novel is written in a simple, uncomplicated language that presents little challenge for the reader.

However, there are several elements in the story that are valuable for the teacher of English as a foreign language which can be used to help students with learning English. By introducing different approaches in text analysis students receive another tool in reading a work and also methods of how to analyse a larger text.

Indeed, it is this that makes *The Graduate* such an interesting story for teaching. There is a problem and a resolution, which is, in essence, Benjamin wants the girl (Elaine, the daughter of the Robinsons) and finally gets her. However, the reader only gets to know the characters through their actions or through passage of dialogue that sometimes contain little description. Additionally, there is a risk of the reader becoming frustrated as many questions seem to be left unanswered: Why is Ben worried about his future? Who is Elaine and why does she suddenly accept Ben on their first date after he treats her so badly? What is it in her personality that allows her to forgive and finally accept Ben after finding out he has had sex with her mother and even worse, when she is later told it was rape? (Later she accepts this was not the case and dismisses it after hearing from Ben it was not true). Why does she suddenly accept Ben's insistence on marriage after his continual plaguing of her in Berkeley? And finally, at Elaine's wedding to Carl Smith, Ben abruptly crashes in and she rushes to him, screaming his name in the church. (Although it would seem to be a marriage to Smith 'a friend of the family' that she is forced to accept, one can ask further: why does Elaine lamely accept her situation, at such short notice, when it is discovered Ben is pursuing her in Berkeley?)

As the characters in the book are not 'fleshed out' in any detail, the reader has to surmise what the character might actually be feeling through actions or what they say. However, there is one expression which recurs constantly throughout the book: 'frowning'. *The Graduate* is full of 'frowns' which appears continuously throughout the book, (it could be tempting, on a rainy autumn afternoon, to count the amount of times 'frown' appears in the book). Here it is possible for the teacher to invite students to find other ways of describing characters' expressions in order to indicate how they might react emotionally or be feeling in a specific scene or situation.

Yet, it is this aspect of the narration that gives *The Graduate* such substance as a useful tool for the English-language classroom. Though the narration often leaves the reader having to 'fill in the gaps' and ascertain for themselves what drives the characters to act as they do, so much is omitted from the narration that there are passages that shine brightly in the work, acting as 'beacons' for teachers to use for discussion.

Indeed, for all its apparent simplicity, there are elements in *The Graduate* that make it a worthwhile book to introduce students to analysing larger works of literature. As mentioned, there are passages that are heavy in dialogue, but lack much description. However, there are places in the book that contain features that teachers can use in a classroom to illustrate how simple comments or the mention of objects can play a significant role in a story. By showing and discussing selected parts in a work, students can become aware that often there is a reason for actions or objects contained within a scene. Three such examples in the work that can be used to demonstrate this are: when the Robinsons visit the Braddocks after the affair has begun; the restaurant scene during Ben's pursuit of Elaine, where he looks at her from behind a 'huge green M' painted on the restaurant window; and the scene where Elaine visits Ben and watches him packing his belongings.

In the scene where the Robinsons have been invited for dinner Benjamin is noticeably uncomfortable while both families sit together in the living room. His discomfort arouses his mother's suspicions and, as if to divert her attention, Mrs. Robinson crosses the room and asks about a lamp - itself a symbol for shining a light on a situation - and where one similar could be found. Mrs. Braddock replies that it was a gift, adding she would 'keep her eye' open. The scene ends with Mrs. Robinson saying that she and her husband 'should run'. In this example, students can be shown how simple dialogue and use of focus on objects can be used, instead of description, as a means to reveal how characters interact in a situation, in this case, the suspicions of Ben's mother and how Mrs. Robinson reacts.

Later in the book, Benjamin dates Elaine Robinson, to the dismay of her mother. He falls in love with Elaine, but she finds out about the affair and moves away to study at Berkeley. Undeterred, Ben moves to the city to be near Elaine and

there follows a long phase where he stubbornly pursues her, which modern readers might consider as him actually stalking Elaine, which will be discussed in more detail below.

One long piece describes Ben following Elaine in various situations. In one scene where he sees Elaine standing waiting for a bus, he quickly goes into a restaurant situated by the bus stop. On the window of the restaurant are large letters painted on the glass. Ben hides behind these letters, but there is one letter in particular, a 'huge green M' that is mentioned three times in the passage. Ben peers around it, sits straight in his chair with the M directly between his face and Elaine's. Finally when her bus arrives, Ben stands up and looks over the top of the M. There are many points that students can work with here, for example, the colour of the letter, the M itself, how Ben uses the M when looking at Elaine through the window. The M being repeated many times suggests that the author is deliberately making the reader focus on one feature in the excerpt and perhaps the M stands for 'mother' thus is a symbol for Mrs. Robinson who is 'green with envy' because Benjamin has chosen Elaine instead of her.

The story develops from Ben pursuing Elaine to her going to find him at his lodgings and a long discussion ensues where she discovers the truth about what happened between her mother and Benjamin. Discovering that her mother was complicit is unbearable and she screams out, prompting Ben's landlord to investigate who then decides that Ben has to move out of his premises.

Benjamin begins packing and various items are described as he looks for his things by a bureau: a marble covered in dust; a red plastic ruler, a belt, itself a present from his grandmother. Students can be asked here if they notice the mention of dust in this passage and what it might symbolise. The marble, found under the bureau is dusty, and Ben places back again after looking at it for a moment. The red ruler is also dusty and Benjamin knocks it on the metal frame of the bed in an attempt to remove some of the dust before placing the item into his suitcase. Further, students can be asked to consider why these things are included in the novel, and possible reasons for their inclusion.

Ben thoroughly examines the bureau to check he has got all of his belongings. Importantly, there is emphasis on the drawers, and here the teacher can introduce students to ideas about Freudian analysis in literature explaining the Superego, Ego, and Id.

With examples such as these, it is possible to suggest that *The Graduate* is an ideal book for learners of English which can take them beyond simple comprehension exercises to a deeper focus on literary analysis. Naturally, it can be argued that this can be said of many works but what makes this book so useful as a teaching tool is its accessibility for readers. The language is uncomplicated, and because of this,

there are more opportunities for teachers to present other features to their students as there will be less need to only focus on comprehension.

5. Benjamin Braddock: Byronic Hero?

Is Benjamin Braddock a hero or not? On the surface, he might fit into the traditional idea of a hero on an epic journey in order to find himself and his role in life. Does he learn anything, even when his 'quest' (that is, 'winning' the love of Elaine) is successfully accomplished? Is there any indication that he progresses through the novel? Again, not really, though perhaps his breaking away from the constraints and obligations imposed on him by his family is a kind of learning, but this seems too vague to make him truly heroic. Indeed, a modern interpretation of *The Graduate* might conclude that his behaviour as he pursues Elaine to be far from heroic, and instead his actions and behaviour appear to be more those of a 'stalker' (there is even a short clip on YouTube titled, 'The Graduate' - Stalking Elaine').

However, it is worth considering that he is perhaps adhering to the values and characteristics of another type of hero - one that students might find particularly useful when analysing other works, namely, the Byronic hero. It is important to note here that for reasons of space, a deep, detailed history of the evolution of the Byronic hero is not possible. Instead the focus will be on the literary character created by Lord Byron (hence the character's title). This character is the culmination of centuries of evolution from the Noble Outlaw to the Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to Prometheus to Faust arriving at the Gothic Hero and culminating in the Byronic hero.

Before investigating the various elements it is interesting to observe that he lacks a trait peculiar to Byronic heroes, the 'gnashing of teeth', which many such characters do when enraged or frustrated. It is possible though, that 'gnashing' has been replaced in *The Graduate* with the many 'frowns' found throughout the novel.

Byronic heroes are defiant individuals, driven by their convictions. They suffer greatly and often harbour a 'secret sin'. Another important element in the Byronic hero is isolation. If Ben is 'Byronic', then there are legitimate reasons for his actions, and perhaps even result in modern readers not classing him a 'stalker'.

As with the Byronic hero, Ben is isolated - he is alone. Friends are never mentioned, nor anyone but his family or their friends. Although lauded by his parents because of his successes at college, or perhaps because of this, Benjamin feels an acute isolation. As if to highlight his plight, before his first meeting with Mrs. Robinson at the hotel, Benjamin is involved in an amusing scene where he gets mixed-up with guests at the aptly named 'Singleman' party.

It can even be asked if Mrs. Robinson can be considered Byronic too. She is also isolated, something made more apparent by her name, Robinson, which evokes

thoughts of Robinson Crusoe, the character famously stranded on a desert island, which provides another valuable indicator for the teacher wanting students to notice reasons for items being included in a text, in this instance, the importance of names in literature. Further, for all their intimacy, albeit only physical, Ben only refers to her as 'Mrs. Robinson', adding to the sense of isolation. (It is later revealed through a telegram sent to Benjamin that her initials are 'G L', but that is all).

It is Elaine, whose name means 'bright, shining light', who allows Ben to finally see something which can release him from isolation, and perhaps even give him meaning in life, suggesting that perhaps this is the reason for his eager pursuit of her.

In Byronic terms, his 'secret sin', could, perhaps ought to be, the affair with Mrs. Robinson. Yet this is something of very little importance to him, almost nothing. As he later says to Mr. Robinson, 'we could have been shaking hands'. The affair causes Benjamin far less anguish than his later pursuit of Elaine for this is where he suffers great agonies, yet so strong are his convictions that she will marry him, he is defiant towards anyone who stands between him and his goal. Indeed, his convictions even includes going against what Elaine wants, until the very end, when she falls for him and they run away together.

So, it is possible to suggest to modern readers that Benjamin is a character who is shaped by features that comply with the Byronic hero, and it is these traits and actions that determine his actions. Far from being a stalker, as modern readers might see him, perhaps Benjamin Braddock is another link in a literary tradition.

6. Conclusion

Works of literature are vital for learners of a foreign language as reading is essential in language learning, providing students with authentic examples of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and the spelling of words. The language in *The Graduate* is not complex which makes it especially accessible to many learners and because of this, teachers have the opportunity to show students other aspects into reading beyond comprehension and language learning tasks, such as literary analysis.

Discussions about the book can include noticing differences in reading a work in the 21st century than in the 1960s, allowing examinations of areas in literature such as the Byronic hero as an attempt to illustrate how characters function within a work.

Finally, it is hoped that through approaching *The Graduate* as a work with many layers, students will be equipped to use what they learn in the English language classroom both with other English works and also in other subjects.

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