DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 022 741 TE 000 429

By-Borden, Arthur R., Jr.

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Pub Date Oct 67

Note-7p.

Journal Cit-Arizona English Bulletin; v10 n1 p11-6 Oct 1967

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.36

Descriptors-COLLEGE INSTRUCTION, EFFECTIVE TEACHING, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *EVALUATION TECHNIQUES, LITERARY ANALYSIS, LITERATURE, *POETRY, SECONDARY EDUCATION, STUDENT TESTING, *TESTING, TESTING PROBLEMS

Identifiers-Advanced Placement Examination

Experience in evaluating responses to poetry in the Advanced Placement Examination can offer guidelines for the effective testing of students on poetry without reducing their interest in the art. For advanced secondary or first-year college students, teachers should avoid approaches and tests that are concerned with (1) extraneous biographical, historical, and scholarly knowledge, (2) psychological, political, or religious implications, and (3) impressionism. Such elimination leaves only formalistic criticism to evaluate student responses. This objective approach may be a discussion in which the student analyzes how poetic and linguistic techniques contribute to the "whole meaning," or it may take the form of structured questions on the poem. The best solution--a compromise between these two objective analyses--tests the student's knowledge of the devices a poet may use without encouraging him to read material into the poem. Ideally, the test leads the student to analyze the poem as precisely as possible without destroying his interest in it. (LH)

ARIZONA ENGLISH bulletin

Volume 10 - - - Number 1

October 1967

ON THE READING OF POETRY IN RELATIONSHIP TO TESTING

Arthur R. Borden, Jr., Dean, Division of Humanities and
Professor of English, New College, Sarasota, Florida

When I was asked to speak to you, it was suggested that, from my ten years' experience with the Advanced Placement Program, I might talk to you about the trials and tribulations of an Advanced Placement Examination reader of poetry; that is, I might concentrate on methods and problems of evaluating responses to poetry. During the past few weeks, as I went back over the poetry questions of the Advanced Placement examinations given in the past ten years, it occurred to me that a better focus for my remarks might be somewhat broader, including a few hints to you as teachers, drawn from the many thousand candidate responses, which might lead your student to a more intelligent reading of poetry.

What is an intelligent reading of poetry? I understand that you have been doing a good deal of poetry analysis, and the question may therefore appear unnecessary. But if I state it in another way perhaps we can make something of it. As teachers of poetry, when we test the student, what are we looking for? And later I shall ask, how do we get it? Assuming that we are all talking about the student who is being introduced to a serious study of poetry either in the first

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(Reprinted from REFLECTION ON HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH, Edited by Gary Tate, published by The University of Tulsa, 1966, by permission of Arthur R. Borden, Jr., Gary Tate, and the University of Tulsa.)

year of college or in an Advanced Placement, an honors, or a similar course in the secondary schools--in other words, a student who is young, perhaps interested, but unsophisticated--we can eliminate some approaches which may be interesting enough to the Ph.D. scholar or the avant garde critic. And please do not think that I am saying that these two professional groups, with their approaches, do not have a place, nor that I am saying that they cannot be of enormous help to us as teachers. I am merely saying that all knowledge snatched up or absorbed by the teacher, whether by a frantic rifling of case books or through an NDEA Institute, is not necessarily to be spewed out haphazardly on the neophyte.

As a first elimination, we should not be looking for scholarly paraphernalia --particularly biographical or historical data and textual emendation. There are occasions, of course, when some background is essential to the understanding of a poem. This year on the Advanced Placement Examination the poem was Edwin Muir's The Return, a poem about Penelope and the suitors, and their activities while awaiting the return of Ulysses. In order to key in the students deficient in their study of Homer, all the background was painstakingly and appropriately explained as a headnote to the question. Two years ago the poem was Ben Jonson's elegy On His First Son. This was a difficult poem, not rich in obvious images, and containing words common in the sixteenth century but not today. The author's name and the date of the poem were carefully given as well as some gloss of the more abstruse words. But it is not of these props or this use that I am talking. A good poem continues to live with some help of background information, despite difficulties of time and cultural background. It is the emphasis on the identification of the dark lady of Shakespeare's sonnets or Wordsworth's breakfast on the morning he came to compose the Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey --these are the things we should eliminate. This faulty emphasis showed up in the examination of the Ben Jonson poem I have just mentioned. We asked the students at the end of the analysis to characterize Ben Jonson as he appeared in the poem. We expected them to talk about qualities of restraint, tenderness, or perhaps stoicism. But too often we were told that he had been a bricklayer. I don't remember that that information was in the poem.

A second elimination. We should probably not stress psychological, political, or religious implications (those areas commonly called life values). How unconsciously Freudian was D. H. Lawrence, or did he love his father more than his mother? In this direction real trouble lies. Nine years ago, the Advanced Placement examination presented a sonnet from Auden's Journey to a War, a sequence stemming from Auden's observation of the Sino-Japanese War immediately preceding World War II. The sonnet comments upon a Chinese soldier, "abandoned by his general and his lice," left in his quilted uniform to die. We had forgotten how times and history change. Auden was sympathizing with the poor soldier, who, a mere cipher (or comma, as Auden called him), added meaning to our existence. But in the meantime the Chinese People's Republic had taken over; the Chinese were no longer our allies, and we had modified our antipathies against the Japanese. Again and again we got interpretations which suggested that Auden was bitter against those filthy Chinese exploiters who had wealth enough to die in the luxury of a quilted garment and who, to put it bluntly, damn well deserved to die. You may say that the weakness here is to be laid at the door of the history teacher of poetry. But the fault is that the students were not reading that poem. Where the poet's sympathies lay is clear in the poem.

Or three years ago, when the Advanced Placement examination offered Emily Dickinson's poem A Backward Look we received more than one objection (from teachers) that, since the poem mentioned a last communion, we were demanding knowledge of a special kind of religious ceremonial and were therefore unfair to

students of a religious persuasion to which the eucharist is foreign. Our reply to teachers who objected was that students who concentrated on a special knowledge of religious ceremonial generally lost the poem somewhere and wandered off into irrelevancies. And that is, I think, the main objection to a concentration on these elements in an elementary course in poetry--that they lead to irrelevancies and a misunderstanding of what poetry is and what poetry does.

A third elimination. In an intelligent reading of poetry we are definitely not looking for the impressionistic. You know--"Here is a poem about molasses. I love molasses. It makes me feel good all over." It is perhaps beside the point, but thinking of that illustration of impressionism reminds me of another kind of test I was once unhappily involved in, in which students were asked to write an essay on an important decision they had made, and one budding young athlete wrote that he had decided to give up drinking because it runs down your body. At any rate, when faced with the artistry of a poem, important as the development of sensitivity to life in general may be, it is the emotional response that is to be recognized. Much as we may want students to understand and express their own adjustment to life, let's reserve this for exercises in creative writing.

If we eliminate 1) extraneous biographical, historical, and scholarly paraphernalia, 2) undue attention to life values, and 3) impressionism, what are we left with? All I can think of is the formidable term formalistic criticism, the objective criteria our philosopher colleagues refer to in courses in aesthetics as aesthetic form and aesthetic surface. In other words, the analysis of literature is to concentrate on what is still called after more than thirty years the new criticism.

Two years ago, when I was about to embark on a year's travel for the College Board to find out what was going on in English in the colleges and secondary schools through the country, I asked the then chairman of the Advanced Placement Committee in English what I should ask teachers. He replied: "Ask them if they are still dedicated to the pseudo-scientific method of the New Critics, or if the pendulum has swung back toward a more humane, less belletristic approach." The question, worded that way, was so loaded as to be worthless in my investigation. Naturally everyone said that, valuable as the concentration demanded by the New Critics continued to be and dedicated as his institution was to a thorough analysis of poetry, every English teacher in his institution included a larger view of poetry as the total expression of man's best thoughts and so forth. I do not mean to be completely sarcastic. It <u>is</u> significant that throughout the country teachers generally are aware that poetry is not merely an object out there to be operated on, that it has life and is a way of life. Despite the eliminations I have just suggested, we should be aware that the response to literature includes more than an ability to enumerate subject, theme, tone, attitude, images, and all the elements that the thoroughgoing books of new critical method have up to now so excellently presented us with.

If this is so, then a national examination designed to test a student's ability to read a poem intelligently and talk about it with understanding must be carefully presented to evoke these responses. What has been done in the ten years of the Advanced Placement Program, first in the selection of poems appropriate for discussion by the students, and second in the method of presentation?

To start with the selection of a poem. As I begin to talk more directly about the national examinations, I should perhaps make a prefatory remark or two. The admission I am about to make may seem damaging, but I think I can explain and justify it. Despite the care the College Board takes to appoint to

its committees competent examiners who will be responsible for the selection of a poem and its presentation so that the students can respond to it, you can make a better examination for your students in your own school. But I think you will see that I am not castigating the committee of examiners, of which I was for a few years a member. They do an incredibly good job, but they are faced with a great unknown quantity, students from all over the country and abroad whom they have not themselves taug... They cannot be sure that students will understand terminology which many of us think we hold in common, because even with the best teaching and even with all the work twentieth-century critics have done toward finding common objective criteria for analysis, terms in literary criticism have never been standardized. I remember a heated committee discussion of about three years ago. We had just decided to give the students only general directions that year, asking them to analyze the poem from several aspects including attitude. When we hit upon the term attitude, we all agreed that it was important to the poem and should be included. And we all agreed that we knew what we were talking about. But the minute we began to consider what each of the six-man committee of English teachers meant by the term, we discovered that we did not agree at all. When you are teaching a class and when you know the students to be tested, you can hope that those who have been awake will know what you mean by the terms you use.

To come more directly to the matter of the selection of a poem, and to bear out further my remarks that you can make a better test than a committee for a national examination can. I remind you that I am not talking about poetry you select for regular classroom analysis; here you may deliberately vary your choice from the simple to the very complex. I am talking about the poem you select as a test of understanding poetry. The National committee is at great pains to choose generally poems rich in imagery, with some complexity of texture, strong structure, and clear tone. But it also looks for a poem that is not likely to have been studied at length in class. One reason is obvious, that the committee does not want to give unfair advantage to a student already familiar with the poem. Another reason of an almost diametrically opposite nature, is even more important. A student who has studied the poem may be led to give a canned response and may therefore miss entirely the questions the examiners want him to consider.

In talking about those questions, I come to a point which I hope will be of some practical value to you in the classroom. It has made me revise considerably methods I had used for years in testing. As I look back over the poetry examinations, I see essentially only two ways of presenting a poem for analysis. And the College Board has used both. Everything else is a compromise between the two. In both you give the student the poem to read. In the first method, you then say in effect, "Here is a poem; take it apart, put it together again, and show us that you understand it." Perhaps you would rather have that in examinationeze. Here are the total directions for the poem on the first national administration of the Advanced Placement Examinations, in 1956:

> Discuss in detail the poem below, showing how structure, verse, language, imagery, and sound contribute to its whole meaning. Your feeling about the poem is important only as the outcome of careful reading.

The advantages of this method of testing are that you are giving the student an opportunity to discover the poem for himself and that you give freedom and scope to the well-prepared student. The disadvantages perhaps outweigh these advantages. Some students, faced immediately with the whole task, don't know

where to begin. And it they get off to a false start, they are likely to be hopelessly lost. Furthermore, most students think they must say something profound about every element mentioned. I suffered miserably at a conference immediately following that examination when I was asked to defend the question and John Ciardi, before a large audience, vehemently declared that he couldn't for the life of him say anything sensible about sound devices as a contribution to the total meaning of that poem.

The committee attempted a modification of that method in the next year with the Auden sonnet I have previously mentioned. Here are the somewhat more explicit directions for that poem:

> The following poem, by an American poet, is about a Chinese soldier who was killed in 1938 in the war between China and Japan.
>
> Read the poem slowly, reflect upon it, and consider (a) its total effect, emotional and intellectual, and (b) the various means by which the effect is attained. Some of the means often considered are: diction, figures of speech, sentence structure, metrics, organization, point of view of the poetic speaker.
>
> Write an organized explanation of your findings, stressing those which seem to you to be most important. Spend ample time in reading the poem and planning your answer. A lengthy essay is not expected.

One reader of the examinations commented on the results. "I found a misuse of critical language, forced and silly applications of critical concepts, generalizations so broad as to cover any poem, relapses into emotional reactions, value judgments, and irrelevant biographical information on the author."

The next year the committee abandoned that approach in favor of structured questions on the poem. And that was the method of organization for seven years. Structuring means an orderly series of questions which call for brief responses. The problem is to decide what order to put the questions in. One may give succeeding instructions which call for picking out the images, perhaps with comment, comment on rhyme and other sound devices, words which help to establish tone, etc. Or one may move through the poem from beginning to end, asking questions of language, questions which involve a comparison of images or ideas from one line to another. Generally, structured questions are designed to lead from the simpler to the more complex and difficult problems. The kind of poem frequently influences the method of structure.

Structured questions have some very weighty advantages. If a student is perceptive, but has not been properly taught, he may be led to appropriate responses. If a student is a little slow to get the poem, or if he gets off to a false start, he may recover. But there are serious disadvantages. The student may make what look like appropriate noises to individual responses, and the reader looking only at the separate parts may credit the student with a fair response and move casually on to the next paper. If the reader stopped to put all the part responses together, he might come to the conclusion that the student had no understanding of the poem whatsoever. Readers commented after the examination two years ago: "In setting up criteria based on the structured questions we have given so many points for the ability to recognize the more obvious elements, that we may not have separated clearly the really incompetent from the borderline competent. [The really able student performs well no matter

how you present the material to him.] Have we not gone too far in structuring the exam? The student who has had a respectable course in analysis does not get the advantage of showing what he has learned."

The examination this past year presented a half-way, but happy compromise between the two extremes. The instructions for Edwin Muir's The Return, upon which I commented earlier, are as follows:

> The following poem refers to these circumstances:
>
> Ulysses has been gone so long from Ithaca that many presume him dead. Penelope, his wife, is being wooed by persistent suitors who carouse in Ulysses' house. She has promised to choose one of them after she has finished the garment she is weaving. Every night she undoes the work she has completed during the day.
>
> Write a carefully planned essay intended to help another reader to understand the poem. In your essay you should consider the organization of the elements of the poem.
>
> (a) What is the major contrast between Stanza 1 and Stanza 2?
> (b) What particular uses of language express this contrast?
> (c) What is the poet's attitude toward the situation he describes, how is it expressed?

Notice that the word attitude has once more crept into the examination, but this time so qualified as to make the intent of the examiners clear.

Whatever method you choose for examining your own students, and I suggest that the method might well vary depending upon the amenability of the poem to one method or another, we can all agree that our aim in testing poetry is an intelligent reading and understanding of poetry, including a knowledge of all devices the poet may use, but without reading in more than the poem contains. And I think also we want a reading of the poem without so dissecting it that there is no sense of wholeness left and no life left. I still remember with pleasure the poem of Roy Campbell On Some South African Novelists, satirizing both novelists who are lifeless and their critics who murder to dissect:

> You praise the firm restraint with which they write
> I'm with you there of course;
> They use the snaffle and the curb all right,
> But where's the bloody horse?

I am painfully aware of the way teachers in their desire for precision and subtlety can use the snaffle and the curb all right but completely lose the bloody horse. Several years ago, when I was much more knowledgeable and much surer of myself than I am right now, I climbed down from my pedestal in triumph one morning after completing an especially brilliant analysis of a poem, only to be confronted by one aggressive-looking young fellow who glowered at me and asked: "But, sir, don't you like poetry? Miss Fiditch, my high-school teacher used to cry when she read poetry." I drew myself together and sneered at him that we had more important things to do with poetry than emotionalize over it. But when afterwards in the quiet of my study I thought it over, I began to wonder who was right. What I am getting at is that even in the clinical austerity of the examination room, students should not have to forget that poetry is delight. Appreciation is not gush, but it is not a cold, mathematical naming of parts either.