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ABSTRACT

To understand the dangers of interpreting literary works primarily through the history, social customs, and values of the period portrayed in the work, students should imagine themselves 3 centuries in the future considering a modern work of art. For example, they should try to interpret the movie, "The Graduate," as a reflection of the social and moral values of the 20th century. Through such an activity, they will not only become aware of some of the dangers of the "psuedo-history of ideas," but also will learn what historical information can be of value, and will realize that no historical analysis can substitute for a close reading of the work itself. (LH)

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BENJAMIN IN THE 23RD CENTURY

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In a recent discussion of the *Iliad* one of my students attempted to apply his knowledge of Greek religion in explaining the impact that the defiling of Hector's body would have had on ancient Greek readers. Achilles' deed was wrong, he argued, because the Greeks believed that a person's soul could not pass on to the next world until the body was buried. On the surface this seems to be a perfectly rational argument, and it is only on closer inspection that what should be the obvious truth asserts itself — no such explanation is relevant, and in fact this type of explanation even obscures the main issue. The best way to point this out is to bring the situation up to date — ask the student how he would feel today if his brother were killed and had his body dragged around town as an example to others. This should make it clear that Homer was concerned with universal human emotions and not with a specific point of religious doctrine which he may or may not have believed.

Such revelation does not come easily. I myself had been guilty of explaining Antigone's desire to bury her brother in similar terms until I read H.D.F. Kitto's brilliant essay on *Antigone* in *Form and Meaning in Drama* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1956), which emphasizes Antigone's human motivation and makes the simple and profound statement that never in the play does any character ever refer to the religious doctrine in question. The recent classroom incident again brought up the problem and made me aware once more how fraught with peril the approach to literature through history can be. While I do not totally disregard the use of historical material in literary interpretation, I feel it is necessary to be somewhat skeptical of glib historical generalizations, and as a teacher I should attempt to caution my students about the dangers of this approach.

One way to accomplish this is to create a hypothetical situation — have the class imagine that they have suddenly jumped ahead in

time to the 23rd century and are studying the literature of the 1960's as part of a course in Early American Literature. It is best to take a work with which most of the students are familiar. In this case, I chose the movie *The Graduate*.

What historical knowledge, I asked them, would be helpful to the student who is attempting to understand *The Graduate*? For one thing, there is the problem of youth's alienation from the older generation. Perhaps more significant is the "sexual revolution" which took place in the 1960's. The astute 23rd-century scholar, having read through microfilmed volumes of *Playboy,* would have little doubt about the fact that at this time a new morality, based on a rejection of Victorian and Puritanical codes, was arising. Applying this to *The Graduate* we find that Benjamin's feelings about his parents, never really explained in the movies, become perfectly clear. Also we would understand that the audiences would take delight in Benjamin's affair with Mrs. Robinson instead of condemning him for it. Finally traditional religion (symbolized by the cross) and the middle-class ideal of marriage are mocked.

Such an analysis would certainly carry a lot of weight — especially when the lecturer *proved,* based on documented evidence, that 20th-century man could have felt no other way. We can only hope that some 23rd-century student would see the obvious fallacy.

For our hypothetical professor, in substituting scholarship for close critical reading, has overlooked many facts about the movie itself. For one thing, Benjamin's affair with Mrs. Robinson is not meant to be approved of, as should be obvious from internal evidence, for this is the one act that nearly costs him his chance to marry Elaine. Furthermore, Benjamin explicitly rejects the ideal of sex without love, and for this reason he is clearly dissatisfied with Mrs. Robinson. Neither can we overlook the old double standard — Elaine remains conspicuously chaste. If anything about sex is affirmed in the movie, it is the old Puritanical sexual ethic. Benjamin sins and must expiate his sin before winning the virtuous heroine.

We are not attempting here to present a detailed analysis of *The Graduate;* the purpose of this discussion is to show that the use of historical evidence is as likely to distort the true meaning as to explain it.

The alienation theme also deserves our attention. Is Benjamin's reaction against his parents purely a phenomenon of the 1960's? Perhaps it would be more truthful to see Benjamin as a descendent

of other alienated youth — Prince Hal, Tom Jones, or Huck Finn, for example. Of course we are told by authorities like G. B. Harrison that the Elizabethan audience favored the values of Henry IV and approved of Hal's rejection of Falstaff and his acceptance of what we would call "establishment" values, but lovers of Falstaff have never been convinced.

If we cannot learn about the drama from studying the times, it would seem to follow that we cannot learn about the times from the drama. Taking the same example we used before — can we deduce from Elaine's chastity that pre-marital sex was universally frowned upon in the 1960's? An even more forceful example could be made from another movie of the same year. Many members of the audiences who applauded *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* would probably refuse to let their own offspring marry a member of a different race.

Through these examples one should be able to convince students of the skepticism that is needed when approaching the glib generalizations to which they have become accustomed. From this one can move to areas where historical information is truly helpful. It is useful to find some connection between the triumph of youth over age in the movie and the fact that the majority of cinema viewers were under 30. It is useful to know that part of the fascination with adultery in the movie was caused by the fact that such a subject could not have been portrayed in a film ten years before. It is also useful to know that the theme of the generation gap was prevalent in the writing of the time. This may seem to be a contradiction to what was said above — but I am here asserting simply that the subject was talked about more than it had been in the past—not that the problem itself was any more acute. It is necessary to distinguish between literary history and pseudo-history of ideas.

Students, of course, are under tremendous pressure, and learning pat generalizations often seems to be a short-cut to literary understanding (a practice which is unfortunately encouraged quite often by our examination procedures). Perhaps this supposed "time travel," allowing students to see how others would fallaciously see them, can help create an awareness of the fact that there is no substitute for closely reading the works themselves. Only then will they truly understand why we bother to read the great works at all.