DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 037 444 TE 001 719

AUTHOR Coen, Frank
TITLE First Impressions.
INSTITUTION New England Association of Teachers of English, Burlington, Vt.
PUB DATE Feb 69
NOTE 5p.
JOURNAL CIT Leaflet; v68 n1 p43-7 Feb 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35
DESCRIPTORS Bias, Characterization (Literature), Comparative Analysis, *English Instruction, *Literary Analysis, *Literary Perspective, Nineteenth Century Literature, Novels, Observation, Personal Values, Short Stories, *Thematic Approach, Twentieth Century Literature
IDENTIFIERS Of This Time, Of That Place, *Pride and Prejudice

ABSTRACT

The unreliability of first impressions and subjective judgments is the subject of both Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" and Lionel Trilling's "Of This Time, Of That Place"; consequently, the works are worthwhile parallel studies for high school students. Austen, by means of irony and subtle characterization, dramatizes the need for constant re-examination of values and for courage to admit errors in judgment. Trilling's short story, which centers around a college English instructor and two of his students, makes us aware of the instructor's unconscious prejudices and thus leads us to question the possibility of achieving objectivity. Since Trilling's subleties of plot and language are quite complex, and elusive, "Pride and Prejudice" should probably be taught first. (MF)

The Leaflet; Vol. 68, No. 1, February, 1969

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

by FRANK COEN

Stoughton High School
Stoughton, Massachusetts

In the final analysis, any great work of art must be judged on its own merit; nevertheless, it is interesting and often profitable to study one literary work in relation to others. After a reading of Steinbeck's "Flight," for example, it makes sense to examine other short stories dealing with the theme of initiation, such as Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner" or Faulkner's "The Bear."

Such a teaching technique is of course not new, but I would like to suggest a coupling that is perhaps both worthwhile and novel. I am referring to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Lionel Trilling's short story "Of This Time, Of That Place." Both deal with first impressions and with the unreliability of subjective judgment, and from a literary and thematic point of view have much to offer the high school student.

In this paper it will not be necessary to dwell on the style or theme of Jane Austen's novel. *Pride and Prejudice* is, as everyone knows, a beautifully written novel of classical precision. By means of irony, subtle characterization, and self-revealing dialogue, Miss Austen has dramatized for us the need for constant re-examination of values in a world where change is really the only constant.

In her world only the mature characters flourish, for only the mature are aware of the need for growth and for the courage to admit errors in judgment. The unaware, like Reverend William Collins and Mrs. Bennet, serve mainly as comic foils to the complex Elizabeth and Darcy, characters who continue to grow as they continue to reassess themselves and their relationships with themselves and with others.

In Trilling's rather long short story, the drawing room becomes the classroom, but the theme remains the same. The central symbol is the camera, for the story begins and ends with an episode involving picture taking. What Trilling seems to be saying is that the mind is not a camera, for what it records is not objective reality but subjective judgment. And just as Elizabeth was wrong about Darcy and Wickham, so perhaps are we wrong about Tertan and Blackburn, and maybe even about Dr. Joseph Howe himself.

What is especially rich about this short story is the almost perfect blending of meaning and structure, for all the complexities of the human mind are mirrored in the artistic ambiguities of theme and symbol. To comprehend what Trilling is saying, the reader must bring to the story all his best intelligence, concentration, and open-mindedness, the same qualities necessary for a valid interpretation of life itself.

What happens in the story is simple enough on the surface, but what the story suggests, and continues to suggest at almost every re-reading, links it with the best poetic stories of our time. Summarizing briefly, the story concerns Dr. Joseph Howe, instructor of English at Dwight College, and his relationship with two of his students, Theodore Blackburn, a gregarious con man, and Ferdinand R. Tertan, a strange, undisciplined loner. By the end of the story, Dr. Howe has been promoted to professor, Blackburn has a job and a diploma, and Tertan has been packed off to a psychiatrist.

On one level, it is a fascinating story of academic life dealing with all the problems of a conscientious, intelligent, and compassionate teacher. Identifying with Howe, the reader is disturbed by Blackburn's

brazenness and insensitivity to the arts; on the other hand, he is drawn to the grotesque, poetic Tertan. Like Dr. Howe, the reader concludes that life is unfair, that only th unprincipled succeed, and that even in the academic community there is no place for true genius.

While this reading has some validity, it doesn't take into account the point of view from which the story is written. Once we keep in mind that we are viewing all this through the eyes of Howe, and not through any camera lens, we must take into account his personal feelings and especially his frame of reference. Consequently, when we come to the story again, we must examine very carefully both the character of Dr. Howe and the events as they filter back through his consciousness to us. Given his kind of background, does he, and finally do we, view Blackburn and Tertan with any kind of objectivity?

Take Blackburn, for example. Just after a curious yet strangely fascinating conversation with Tertan, Howe comes face to face with "Theodore Blackburn, vice-president of the Student Council." Poor Blackburn commits all the sins: he utters some platitudes about wanting to be "a well-rounded man," he mispronounces Wordsworth's name, and after asking permission to sit in on Dr. Howe's first semester course "just for background," he never shows up again. Enough to make any pedant shudder.

What happens in the second semester is even worse. The central incident involves a confrontation with Dr. Howe over Blackburn's failing mark in an exam on the Romantic poets:

> Howe picked up the blue-book. There was always the possibility of injustice. The teacher may be bored by the mass of papers and not wholly attentive. A phrase, even the student's handwriting, may irritate him unreasonably. "Well," said Howe, "let's go through it."
>
> He opened the first page. "Now here: you write, 'In *The Ancient Mariner,* Coleridge lives in and transports us to a honey-sweet world where all is rich and strange, a world of charm to which we can escape from the humdrum existence of our daily lives, the world of romance. Here, in this warm and honey-sweet land of charming dreams we can relax and enjoy ourselves.' "
>
> Howe lowered the paper and waited with a neutral look for Blackburn to speak. Blackburn returned the look boldly,

did not speak, sat stolid and lofty. At last Howe said, speaking gently, "Did you mean that, or were you just at a loss for something to say?"

This is a remarkable little scene, and we may find ourselves nodding smugly and perhaps unpleasantly with Dr. Howe. On closer examination, however, the reader may have some second thoughts. After all, what is so terribly wrong with Blackburn's answer? Of course he's not talking about *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* but he wouldn't be the first business major, or even the first English major, to confuse one poem of Coleridge with another, for surely he is thinking about *Kubla Khan.* The little drama reaches a climax when Blackburn refers to Prometheus as "Prothemeus," a trivial error that seems to give Howe, pedant that he is, some sort of perverse pleasure.

From the beginning Howe is turned off by Blackburn and turned on by Tertan. When Blackburn politely takes Howe's arm to usher him into the classroom, Dr. Howe "felt a surge of temper rise in him and almost violently disengaged his arm and walked to the desk. . . ."; yet somewhat earlier "he (Howe) touched Tertan's elbow, led him up to the desk and stood so as to shield their conversation from the class." The language here is important, for the choice of words manages to suggest the secret feelings of Dr. Howe. He "touched" Tertan's elbow, and the word "shield" suggests his role as protector; on the other hand, Blackburn moved "adroitly" behind him and "grasped" him by the arm "to urge" him over the threshold.

Throughout the story Trilling makes use of a subtle kind of language to underscore the subconscious prejudices of Dr. Howe. Blackburn has a "roast-beef" look, his smile almost always suggests defiance, and his look is often "bold." Tertan, on the other hand, has an ascetic look, the allusive language links him with the world of poetry, and Dr. Howe is pleased by the "timbre of his curious sentences." When Tertan flatters Howe by comparing him with Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, the professor looks at him with "good-natured irony," but when Blackburn tries flattery, he is rebuked with sarcasm that is singularly bad-natured.

Since the subtleties of plot and language in this story are quite complex, it would be advisable to teach *Pride and Prejudice* first. Certainly by the end of the first few chapters, the students should have become aware of the ironies and ambiguities that give the novel its central meaning. It will not be necessary to lead the students by their noses, either,

for once they have caught the irony of the first sentence ("It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."), they will be on the watch for the ambiguous dialogues that dot the novel, confuse the speakers, and delight the reader. And by the end of the novel, they will have discovered for themselves the inadequacies of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Rev. Collins, and the moral superiority of Elizabeth and Darcy.

Thus when they come to Trilling's story, they will, hopefully, look long and carefully at language, character, and symbol. Not all of the students will enjoy this kind of examination, and of course some of the allusions (Tertullian, Dwight College, "He clasped the crags," "the thrice-woven circle of the boy's loneliness . . .") might be a little too elusive for the high school student. For the most part, however, the richness of language and symbol transforms this short story into a poem of beauty and substance.

Like life, it must be approached with reasonableness, intelligence, and honesty. It deals with the insignificance of time and place and with the truth of inner reality, as well as with the difficulty of attaining that kind of truth. In the late 1960's, this story, along with Jane Austen's, might serve to shed a little light on the darkness of pride and prejudice that seems to have shrouded the minds of too many Americans.