

**Teaching the Conflicts in Literature by Acknowledging Our Own  
Conflicts**

Ellen Spolsky, Bar-Ilan University  
ellen.spolsky@gmail.com

Two of the approaches mentioned in the new literature curriculum seem, prima facie, to be contradictory. In the first, reader response criticism, the teacher is asked to encourage the students' personal responses to the texts. Many teachers, of course, have always been happy to encourage any oral expression in English. Let's mark out this approach as one end of a spectrum. The teacher is careful not to denigrate any reply, assuming that everyone is entitled to a self-generated interpretation. Making clear that virtually any opinion will be entertained allows students to develop their spoken language skills without fear of giving the "wrong" answer.

The new guidelines suggest as a second approach, cultural historical literary study, which seems to stand at the opposite end of the spectrum. Attention to the cultural contexts of literary texts is meant to "expand the horizons" of the students beyond their own responses and to broaden their understanding of cultural and historical periods and places other than their own. This approach emphasizes the distance between readers and texts, promising that literary texts can, when understood within their original contexts, give us experiences otherwise unavailable, taking us away from our familiar lives. Achieving this goal requires studying some historical information precisely because it is foreign to the students. We're quite far, here, from personal interpretation – from a focus on how reading the text feels to the reader. The implications for classroom activity are that not "everything goes." And there's homework: students may be asked to read other texts from the same place and time, or do some research into the contexts of the texts they're reading. In this approach there will be right and wrong answers.

The approach I want to suggest – the approach I take as a teacher at Bar-Ilan in our *Teaching the Conflicts Program* – is a third approach. It incorporates

parts of both, but is different from either. In order to set out this third but not middle approach, I have to make clear that “teaching the conflicts” requires a different view of what literature is and what it does – a view that undermines the assumptions of both the methods of teaching described above.

Literature, as I understand it, isn't only what I personally make of it. Although of course everyone has a personal reaction to a text, if it's worth the bother, what I gain from my reading won't fit in easily with what I already know. A valuable text will demand I make room for it in my world. Nor would I agree that a text “reflects” the cultural contexts of its origins. Just as it is not a mirror of my own concerns, it isn't and never was a mirror of its author's life and times. Literature is not inert, it is not silent – it has a voice and speaks up. A story elbows its way in – takes the floor, has something to say. Its narrative can never be only a history, a record of events, real or fictional. It is the nature of narrative to display conflicts and possibilities, and to have opinions about them. Our valued texts jump into cultural conflicts; step up to discuss, to negotiate, to clarify. In fact, they don't always clarify, but they certainly get into the argument.

“Demanding,” “Elbowing in,” “taking the floor,” “jumping in” – you can see that I'm talking about conflict. A reflective mirror is not the right metaphor for the boisterous activity, for the belligerence or aggression of some of our best narrative texts. I understand literature as something that acts in the world; it has work to do in areas of conflict, and that's why I'm so happy to have it returning to the curriculum. It has a lot of work to do in Israel, and that's because we are an active people, and we and our students have to deal with aggression and belligerence all our lives. We'll get back to this, but first I want to situate and defend my claim that literature acts in the world.

Let's begin with an anthropological situation of great interest: story telling is a human universal, like eating and mating. I don't distinguish here between fiction and history, songs, novels, plays, poetry, or films. Any form that tells or even implies a narrative fits into the category of story-telling. Why is there is no culture that doesn't tell stories? Story telling, it is argued, helps people organize the chaotic world around them. It structures the swirling present by ordering,

hierarchicalizing, and assigning value. We need to understand what our choices are, and to be able to predict the outcomes of different actions. We need to know why we should prefer one outcome over the other, before we can choose. All people and most animals need to be able to see or imagine alternatives in order to make choices that are best for themselves, whether the choice is what to eat, or whom to marry. Narratives display or imply choices, agency, and active decision making. They put us through the paces, giving us practice in making decisions. So forget mirrors, and reflections; literature acts so that we can act. Great literature also makes clear that these choices are never easy. On this view, then, of literature as active in our lives, let's take another look at James Joyce's "Eveline." From the standard view of "culture and context" that the new program asks us to consider, I suppose we'd all agree that Joyce judged Eveline's last minute decision not to go with Frank as mistaken. Certainly that's the way it's normally taught in Israeli classrooms. She misses her chance to get out of her stifling life. The text itself supports this reading: her life is "dusty" like the cretonne curtains, and perhaps fading, like her promise to her dying mother. Her father is stingy and inconsiderate if not actually violent, while everything about Frank, including his name, seems promising.

This interpretation comes from the way we answer the standard contextual question: how did Joyce intend us to understand Eveline's refusal to board the ship with Frank? Besides the hints in the story itself, we may infer Joyce's criticism of Eveline's choice from his having left Ireland to live in Paris, convinced that he couldn't live and write honestly in small-minded bourgeois Dublin. This expansion from text to biography seems to close the case: he must have felt that Eveline's refusal was a foolish, even a tragic mistake.

Now let's ask a second contextual question, but the context is now ours. Who put Joyce's *Eveline* in the English curriculum, when, and for what reason? My informal snooping revealed that the familiar reading list was decided in the early 70s, and this story was chosen in sympathy with the inferences attributed to Joyce. It was assumed that adolescents would sympathize with a young woman feeling oppressed by being tied to her home and its onerous responsibilities, and

thus would think it a tragedy that she didn't run off with Frank, despite her father's prohibition. My source, Pnina Rosenblit, an experienced English teacher, and herself a member of the curriculum committee when the decision was made, cannot confirm that this idea was conscious, but she didn't object to it either. Indeed, the value of independence from the bourgeois constraints of an older generation is so central a theme of Israeli Zionist identity that it goes without saying.

Here's a third frame – suggested to me by another experienced teacher, Joyce Fisch, who taught the story years ago in a religious school. Her female students were not at all sure that Eveline hadn't done the right thing, and the boys were sure it was the Catholic Church that had forced her to stay. Joyce then had to cope with two new contexts in addition to that of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dublin: the religious students' own understanding of duty, and their ignorance of the teachings of the Catholic Church. As for the second, she saw an opportunity not to be missed to repair a gap in her students' education, and set about correcting some misunderstandings about the Catholic Church, and comparing certain of its views to Judaism. But the sympathy her female students expressed towards Eveline – their refusal to agree that she had made a mistake – was harder to cope with, since it seemed clearly to challenge Joyce's own judgment. For us, however, it opens up the exciting possibility of self-assertion: not Eveline's, but the readers'. What happens if we decide to disagree with what we assume Joyce wanted us to conclude?

Let's expand this hint and let another context into our discussion – our own context, and by "our" I really mean we English teachers in Israel. You don't need to be a young religious high-school girl to have grounds to resist Joyce's carrying his readers off into a sea of dreams. What do *you* make of Eveline's dreams as you read this story?

"She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres where he had a home

waiting for her...People knew that they were courting and, when he sang about the lass that loves a sailor, she always felt pleasantly confused. He used to call her Poppens out of fun....He had tales of distant countries.... He told her the names of the ships he had been on and the names of the different services. He had sailed through the Straits of Magellan and he told her stories of the terrible Patagonians. He had fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres, he said, and had come over to the old country just for a holiday. Of course, her father had found out the affair and had forbidden her to have anything to say to him....

She stood up in a sudden impulse of terror. Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too. But she wanted to live. Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. *He would save her.*" (my italics)

I don't think you have to be an overprotective religious mother to suspect that this view is a bit delusional. But here's the interesting part: Joyce himself suggests it. When she stands on the pier looking at the sea and thinks about Frank:

"All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: **He would drown her.**"

Note the rhetorical parallel. Would he save her or drown her? Joyce has been subtler than I've so far given him credit for. He has suggested two conflicting but equally potent possibilities. But we're not finished evoking contexts. Am I the only one who has had to cope with caring for aging parents – sometimes with sweet memories, but also with difficulties? And further – are any of you immigrants? Has it always been easy? Have you ever felt misunderstood and unappreciated? Do you remember the organ-grinder in Joyce's story?

She remembered the last night of her mother's illness....outside she heard a melancholy air of Italy. The organ-player had been ordered to go away and given sixpence. She remembered her father strutting back into the sick-room saying:

'Damned Italians! coming over here!'

Had Joyce included this detail to remind us that the life of an immigrant without her family, her sailor husband away, might not be so happy? Might he not indeed drown her? Joyce's story prompts us to ask an extremely contemporary question: is marriage an absolute good? Is following a man and what he thinks is good always what a woman needs? I am not claiming that Joyce intended this particular question. He may or may not have. I am claiming, however, that it is entirely possible from the words of the story itself to see the point of view of a woman who would rather do her duty and manage her own life than be drowned by a young man who we may suspect may have come home to bring back a housekeeper. And why should we not entertain both views? Maybe the air in Buenos Aires is not "good" air, but "hot" air!!

What we can see, once we allow our own perspectives to enter as "context" – and why not? – is that Joyce's text itself gives us the threads by which to unravel the first reading of the story. This is why it's great literature: because it shows us, after we discover the conflict within the text, how really hard Eveline's choice was. It's too easy to just condemn her as passing up a good opportunity. To do so makes light of a serious and really unsolvable conflict. Why force a choice of a reading, when the whole point is that there is a conflict in which any choice of action is difficult.

In the classroom this approach can produce some of the advantages of the "reader response" approach. If current contexts count, then the teacher has to stand back and let the students make the first moves – preferably on paper – before hearing either the teacher's or the other students' reactions. Having encouraged "response," the teacher now has to be quiet and work hard. The teacher has to listen carefully, not accepting anything, and not jumping in to

correct, but gauging just why the student had the reaction he or she did, and how that student can be brought to see the other side of the story – to actually feel the conflict in the story. This will involve *both* helping them understand the historical contexts of the text *and* the bearing their own contexts have on its meaning. The teacher’s goal is to legitimize the students’ own concerns, but also bring them to inhabit other positions – to recognize that life puts people in hard places. You want them to feel the conflict, as did Eveline, not just condemn or approve. You might want to ask the students to add a scene: say, one in which Frank talks to his Irish relations about his life in Buenos Aires, explaining to them why he wants to bring Eveline back with him. What would be implied by his not telling them of his intentions toward Eveline? They might be asked to write a soliloquy in which he explains to himself why he hasn’t yet told her he loves her. They might be asked to write the letter Eveline sends her younger brothers 5 years later from Buenos Aires.

Our focus in the Teaching the Conflicts Program is to learn how to negotiate between the contexts of literature and the contexts of our current reading of literature. We believe that literature teaches this crucial “higher order skill:” being able to take two different positions oneself, and being aware that others can reasonably inhabit other positions than your own. I don’t need to tell you how important this is in Israel.

*Ellen Spolsky is Professor of English at Bar-Ilan University and co-director, with Professor Susan Handelman, of the Teaching the Conflicts Program, a special graduate program for High School English teachers.*