

Cultural interaction in the classroom in the 21st Century

Ayesha Heble describes the reactions of her Omani students to Browning's *My Last Duchess*.

I had read Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* to my class at the end of a lesson on poetic genres in general, with this as an example of the dramatic monologue. I had mentioned ballads as part of the narrative tradition, and we were now comparing it with the genre of dramatic poetry. Browning's poem was the example I had chosen.

I tried to read it at my dramatic best. I started off in a fairly normal conversational tone, but as the poem proceeded my voice rose, both in volume and pitch, as I tried to convey the tone of moral indignation felt by the Duke as he recalled his late wife's indiscriminating pleasure in equating his gifts with those of any stranger,

*as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift.*

There was a hushed silence when I got to the end, and I asked the class what they thought had happened in the poem. Who was speaking in the poem?—yes, the Duke; what was he talking about?—yes, a painting of his wife; what had happened to his wife?—and then one of the girls, just came out with it—'He killed her, didn't he?' I was amazed that they had got it in just that first reading. I asked her to point out where she had learned this piece of information, and she was able to identify it exactly:

*I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.*

I read the lines again and a chill descended on the class—yes, he *had* killed her! We all gave a little collective shiver.

But why had he done that? 'Because she smiled at everyone', 'Because she did not give him importance', 'Because she did not respect him', 'Because he was jealous', 'Because he thought she was his property'—the answers came thick and fast—these young women had completely entered into the spirit of the poem and could hardly contain themselves. It was time for the end of the lesson so I asked them to study it more carefully for homework, and promised that we would continue our discussion the next time.

Radhiya's position was that the Duke was quite justified in having had his wife killed—after all she was his wife and it was quite clear that she had been cheating on him. Hadn't he mentioned Fra Pandolf's name twice—she quoted the line numbers—this was obviously a hint that his wife had been having an affair with the artist who had painted her portrait. And smiling at everyone indiscriminately! Obviously she didn't respect her husband. No, the Duke was a good, decent man who had loved his wife, and in fact wanted to shield her from blame—that was why he didn't say anything too directly to the listener. He had warned her many times, but when she didn't mend her ways, he had shown mercy

on her by having her killed, and keeping her pure in his heart forever.

I was at a total loss at what to do with this. I realized of course, that this was a serious misinterpretation of the poem, and certainly of Browning's intention in the poem, but one that was based perhaps on a completely different world-view of the position of women from the western one. More specifically, it was perhaps based on an Arabic understanding of the relationship between men and women, and what was permissible and what was not. However, I did not want to discourage personal interpretations of the poem or to impose my own world-view on my students. How was one to draw the distinction between an appreciation of a poem as a work of art, and a subjective response to its content?

I had said that she was free to express her own opinion as long as she could support it from the text, and here she was, giving me line numbers and quotations from the poem

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to prove her point. Of course the Duchess had been a flighty sort of person and the poor, betrayed Duke had done the only thing he could possibly do in the situation—have her killed! How could I tell her that she had got it all wrong?

Eventually, I let the problem solve itself, as it were, by encouraging the students to discuss their various interpretations among themselves, acting only as a moderator, or occasionally providing editorial assistance as required. What I tried to stress was that there were no 'right' answers, and eventually it was a question of interpretation, which could differ widely from one person to the next. Questions of class, gender and culture came into the discussion, even if they might not have been expressed in exactly those terms. I think by the end of it all, my students had explored their ideas about literature and also about many things which went far beyond the world of the poem.

I found all the young women and the one young man, equally keen to do a detailed analysis of the poem. We went through it line by line, but with me trying to elicit the meaning from them rather than giving it to them. When we came to the lines about the Duchess I asked them what they thought of her character, and Tahra, one of the quieter girls in the class, said very emphatically, 'I think she is innocent'.

There, the gauntlet had been thrown, and Radhiya of course jumped to pick it up. 'But she does not respect her husband. How can she be innocent?' Others joined in;



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Asmaa pointed out that as a member of the aristocracy the Duchess would be expected to be gracious to her servants and admirers and this did not necessarily indicate wantonness—though of course she did not use those exact words. We talked about the character of the Duke—his love of art and artefacts, and wondered whether he saw his wife as just another beautiful work of art that he possessed. Had he ever tried to indicate his displeasure to his wife? After all

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he himself acknowledged that to do that would be to 'stoop'; and he chose 'never to stoop'. Someone else mentioned the extent of his power—all he had to do was give commands, and it would be done.

We identified the person the Duke was addressing and what business he had come about. So, the Duke was planning to remarry! *Aaha!* He insisted that he was only interested in the Count's 'fair daughter', but he had obviously asked for a fairly generous dowry as well. I explained that the 'dowry' he was interested in was not money that the man is expected to give to the woman he wants to marry, as in Arab society, but the other way around—money that his prospective bride's father would be expected to pay to him.

And so the discussion went on for the whole of the lesson. I pointed out that there were no answers to some of

the questions. Had the Duchess in fact been unfaithful? The poet obviously didn't seem to think so, but perhaps he was wrong. Had the Duke's jealousy been justified? Was he justified in *having her killed*? In fact, we would never know. Even I, as the teacher, did not have the right answers. But somewhere in that discussion there was an appreciation of the depth of the poem in allowing such levels of meaning. Somewhere, they explored their ideas about men and women and right and wrong. That things could mean different things in different cultures.

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I learned a lot from the experience as well. I think, mainly, I was able to apply what I have learned as a communicative language teacher to my teaching of literature. As a communicative language teacher one of the principles that I have consciously tried to follow is, 'set it up and step out of it!' In other words, one sets up a task for the students to do, provides them with the tools for achieving it, and then lets them get on with using those tools, with the minimum of intervention by the teacher. The teacher serves mainly as a moderator or facilitator. This had proved a wonderful way of getting language learners to use the language they were learning, but I had never tried it in a more content-based subject like literature.

The wonderful thing is that it worked!

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