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Bulletin 17 - The Study of Literature in the Upper Grades



Isabel McKinney
Eastern Illinois University

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THE NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN

JANUARY 1, 1907

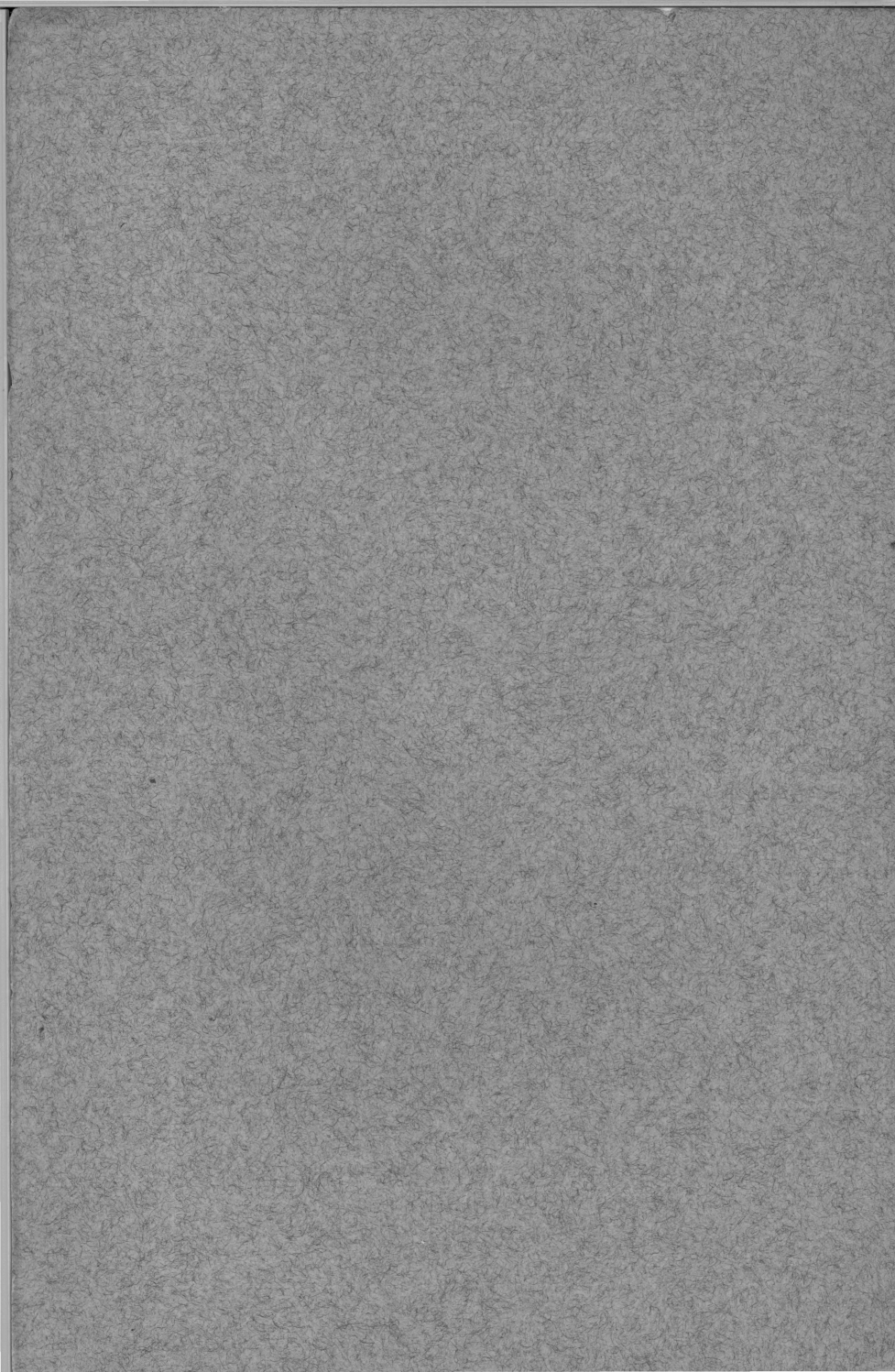


*THE STUDY OF LITERATURE IN THE UPPER
GRADES*

BY

ISABEL MCKINNEY, A. M.
CRITIC TEACHER IN ENGLISH AND HISTORY





NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN

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The Study of Literature in the Upper Grades

BY ISABEL MCKINNEY, A. M.

Critic Teacher in English and History

It is hardly possible for a child educated according to any modern programme to escape some contact with good literature. Even if he does not study literature as a distinct subject, he finds famous poems and good bits of prose used in his reading class, his grammar, composition, and language work. Yet this array of excellent literary material may be deceptive. The child may analyze the sentences of a poem or read it aloud, write a composition or paraphrase based upon it, or even commit it to memory; he may study the meanings of its words, its metaphors, similes, and allusions, its historical setting, its moral teaching, and the biography of its author, yet never in reality study a single poem as literature.

A discussion of this proposition tends to vagueness through lack of an adequate definition. For the purposes of this paper let the term "literature" be broad enough to

include all selections of poetry and prose likely to be used in the English courses; any "life-experience" told in a more or less artistic way. If literature is something of this nature, then a study of literature should lead first of all to a comprehension of this experience, and an appreciation of its expression in words. It may lead further into varied fields of historical and critical analysis and classification; but for children in the grades, because a rather wide knowledge of particulars must precede any understanding of abstractions, this comprehension and appreciation of each selection is the all-important and sufficient end.

It is obvious that a child studying a poem for any purpose whatever under the guidance of a highly-gifted and sympathetic teacher might arrive at this end. It is equally obvious that a highly-gifted and sensitive child might in every case comprehend and appreciate for himself without any guidance. Here are added to the apparent means personal forces not to be reckoned on by most teachers in dealing with the ordinary child. For these it is requisite to find the most direct means to the best results.

Several methods in common use can hardly be said to meet these requirements. Most frequent, perhaps, are those which make literary material a mere tool for the performance of some task, a task whose end, important in itself, focuses the attention.

To many teachers, for example, the study of a poem means the analysis of its sentences and the parsing of its words. Now the use of a poem for grammatical analysis is the study, not of literature, but of grammar. Literary appreciation may, though it usually does not, attend the process; to taste an orange and to dissect it for the microscope are two very different but not wholly incompatible ways of treating it. Doubtless it is both necessary and desirable that some poetry be appropriated to grammatical uses; but this may well be substantial poetry, logical or discursive, which can bear

rough handling, and at any rate such study should never be labeled "literature." The grammatical analysis of every sentence in Tennyson's "Bugle Song" is hardly a more direct and certain way to the comprehension of that poem than the chemical analysis of Millet's colors is to the understanding of the "Angelus."

To study a poem for the purposes of composition or reading is not generally so far wide of the mark, because the purposes here are partially identical; some insight into the spirit of a poem is essential to its reproduction, whether orally or in writing. But beyond this each subject has concerns of its own entirely distinct from those of literature. Neither are the ends of literature served by taking the poem as a mere text for discussion geographical, biological, historical, or even ethical. In general, the use of a poem invariably with some ulterior motive—grammatical, moral, or otherwise—is obviously not so direct a way to the comprehension of its meaning and the appreciation of its literary form as a study of that poem for its own sake.

On the other hand, this study does not mean a mere reading of the piece of literature either to or by the children. Such reading has its place and a large one, in the school plans, but it is not productive of the same results as thorough study. The advocates of the exclusively-reading method are generally people who know books better than they know children. They seem to believe either in a sort of limited predestination to the delights of literature which makes the services of a teacher useless, or else in a universal predestination which makes those services unnecessary. Neither of these beliefs accords with the facts; most children seem to be capable of some real literary appreciation; but the great majority of them must attain to it, and that not by listening with however great apparent joy to the reading of anything by anyone. There are those also, not advocates but clients of the method, who resort to it from indolence or

bewilderment. In any case the results are similar: considerable pleasure if the material is interesting and the reading well done, some development in taste and in quickness of apprehension, and a superficial and generally evanescent impression of the literature read.

If, then, some genuine study of a piece of literature be undertaken for what there is in it, the teacher at once discovers that, from the very nature of the material, no general rules can much avail. The cardinal principle, indeed, is that of individuality. No two pieces of literature embody precisely the same experience in precisely the same form; therefore no two can be studied in precisely the same way. Probably no two teachers and no two classes are capable of exactly the same comprehension and appreciation of any one poem. Insistence on this individuality, both objective and subjective, seems to leave the whole matter in a fog utterly bewildering to an inexperienced teacher; but it is really a guiding and illuminating conviction.

It means primarily that all study must be at first hand. The teacher must find out for himself just what the piece of literature says, and how; then he must help the children to do the same. In both of these tasks he may have much valuable assistance nowadays; but no one else's notes, explanations, suggestions, or questions can take the place of his own thought. Until he has mastered the thing he can hardly help others to its mastery. Then, too, he must discover not only the meaning of the poem for him, but its most important characteristics for his class.—where to lay the emphasis in teaching. Certain masterpieces, "The Ancient Mariner" for instance, might be studied, from different points of view, in every year from the fourth or fifth through high school and college. Others, like the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" or "Ivanhoe," are actually taught in any of the upper grades or the first two high school years, the problems attacked growing in difficulty with the maturity of

the class. However puzzling these questions of adjustment may appear, the first requisite to answering them is a thorough knowledge of the subject-matter.

The material for consideration in any piece of literature is of course twofold: content and form. The content, that bit of life-experience, thought or fancy, scene or story, characters, their motives and actions, all this is of first importance. A comprehension of it involves not only understanding, but realization,—understanding intellectually, realization imaginatively. Just where understanding leaves off and realization begins it would be impossible to determine; but the general difference between them is clear enough. Understanding means mastery of the text, the words and the thought behind them; realization means reconstruction of scenes and situations, reanimation of motives, rekindling of emotions. Understanding involves interpretation in terms of the reader's vocabulary and habits of thought; realization involves interpretation in terms of his feelings, images, and experience. The first is necessary to any intelligent reading; the second also is essential to the comprehension of any true literature, not only "The Daffodils" and "Home Thoughts from Abroad," "Hervé Riel" and "The Passing of Arthur," but Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and Lamb's "Dissertation on Roast Pig." The stimulation of this imaginative realization is the special and imperative duty of the teacher of literature.

Of literary form and style, appreciation does not mean a great deal of technical knowledge. Suitable for discussion in the upper grades are such things as the interweaving of plots in "Silas Marner" and the "Merchant of Venice," the telling descriptive words and sense images of "Sir Galahad," the march from one great scene to another of "Ivanhoe," the brisk, friendly manner of "Treasure Island." In poetry the element of sound is to be considered, the rhythms, not

freighted with their ponderous classical titles, long lines and short, the music of vowels and consonants, the adaptation of sound to sense, and the echo of the rhyme.

As to special methods and devices for presenting this material, few suggestions are at all widely applicable. One thing is absolutely essential to good work—a definite assignment. Three or four carefully worded questions or directions for study given out in advance prepare the children for interested and profitable class discussion, and save time. Almost always the class should be directed to read the short poem or chapter through for a general impression or the thread of the story, then to study carefully for the special questions assigned. The kinds of questions are naturally determined by the nature of the material; a light, dainty lyric like Lowell's "Fountain" would be spoiled by an attempt to ponder and discuss it with the seriousness necessary for Emerson's "Rhodora."

If the wording is difficult or the expression highly figurative, the first problem is one of translation. Here again the teacher must use judgment; it is worth while to consider every word in a poem like "Sir Galahad;" but, although much of Shakespeare is unintelligible to twentieth-century children without a glossary, to explain every obscure phrase would be a waste of time; and to elucidate every sentence of "The Talisman" would be folly. With these distinctions in mind the words or sentences likely to cause trouble should be assigned for study. Sometimes the key sentence of a chapter with all that it opens for discussion, will be sufficient for a whole lesson. More often, however, the explanation of words and phrases is a ground-clearing process, insufficient in itself even to the cultivation of full understanding.

For this, questions of circumstance are necessary: who, when, where, what, how—questions sometimes of little value except to send the child to his book again and again. Such, for example, are: "Name the characters in this chapter.

Which have we met before? Name all the places visited by the hero. How many men are left on each side? Account for each one missing. How many chapters here describe the events of a single day? Give Portia's argument in brief."

A step beyond the question of circumstance is the question that appeals to imagination and judgment. One of these may often do duty for five or six questions of fact, because its answer includes the answers of all the others. A few examples are: "Who is the hero of this play? Why? Do you think it was right or wrong for Jim (in "Treasure Island") to leave the stockade? Give reasons. What is Shylock's strongest trait of character as shown in this scene? Picture the scene in the Cass's parlor when Silas Marner appears in the doorway. Tell everything that Eppie did for Silas."

Questions of literary form will occur less frequently. This is partly because in many of the selections taught the form is of little consequence; but some of the less admirable verses are good to illustrate the beat of the rhythm, for example. Whenever any matter of form is discussed it should be kept in the concrete, referring to the selection in hand, with as much illustration and as little theory as possible. Very little comparison should be attempted; but after several novels for example, have been studied, some differences or similarities may well be noticed. With children it is perhaps wise to assume the reality of characters and events: to ask not "Where does the author make use of the element of chance?" but "In what ways does some fortunate chance save Jim's life from Israel's hands?" But possibly the danger of spoiling the story with technical questions has been overestimated. After all, to these older children, when they have been stimulated to imagine vividly until every scene and character is real, a glimpse of the artistic side should bring only keener pleasure.

After the study of a rather long selection, general questions are profitable, gathering up facts and impressions.

Written summaries of acts or chapters are useful in discovering essential elements of plot; and character sketches, more or less detailed, should be frequently attempted. Material to help in this kind of work may be kept in note-books as the study progresses: lists and descriptions of characters, suggestive titles for parts or chapters, most important events, and favorite passages for memorizing.

The wording of a question to draw out the "theme" or "moral" is a matter for careful thought, and the handling of the class discussions following such a question is an even more delicate affair. It is a pity for the teacher to make only moral what the writer has made spiritual. A skilful teacher on excellent terms with her class can ask, "What kind of people ought to read this poem?" and make personal applications of an allegory, with entire success. But in general the moral had better be left wrapt in the poem or story—it is often bare enough there. "Do you think the Ancient Mariner was punished too severely?" will probably produce a much more vital and unembarrassed discussion than "What is the lesson taught us by this poem?" When a moral is aimed at one's head, it is human nature to dodge.

In the classroom the ideal is perfect freedom with constant progress. The teacher will not propound the carefully assigned questions like so many separate problems in arithmetic. The literature still is master; the questions are not ends in themselves, but helps to comprehension. There should be a certain fluidity about the discussion, yet held within bounds, so that it shall not run away to nothing like water spilled upon the ground. Besides questions and answers, and informal expression of ideas, longer topical recitations are often desirable; some of the directions already suggested will produce these. Most important of all, perhaps, is the constant picturing of scenes down to minute details, for the purpose of testing and developing the child's visual-

izing power. Oral description and analysis of character, and summaries of events, should often precede written work of the same kind.

All this will have its influence on the language work and reading. Indeed, when once the teacher has distinguished their separate purposes, he may well use either for the help of the others. The biographies of the more familiar authors, which are well enough for the children to know, but for which there is no time in the literature class, may be turned over to the composition class. In the reading class conversational parts from a story may be acted. Sometimes dramatization may be attempted, as a play from "Quentin Durward," or scenes from "The Great Stone Face" or the "Arabian Nights." In many other ways the composition, reading, and literature may be related; but each subject should have its due proportion and allotted period of time.

What is the just proportion of time for this careful study of literature depends, of course, on its value as compared with other subjects; and a treatment of this belongs to the philosophy of education. That it has some specific value should be evident. The beauty of a line of poetry, for example, is worth learning to hear; and Americans are not likely to overdo the matter of ear-training. Appreciation of strong plot-structure, true characterization and telling description, may influence to some extent the pupils' judgment of some trashy novel, or reveal the tawdriness of Diamond Dick. Training in the ability to read closely, to get the meaning from a page or line, familiarity with varied forms of expression and figures of speech, all are widely and immediately useful.

Moreover, the vivid realization of another's thought, the power of putting one's self in another's place, of seeing with another's eyes, is worth cultivating or acquiring. A live and healthy imagination is not only an aesthetic but a moral asset. If the characters in "Snowbound" are so much alive that the children know which sister they like better, and the

color of the uncle's hair; if they can see the landscape of the autumnal Hudson valley as the ever-hungry Ichabod beheld it; if they can think Lowell's thoughts when they find the first dandelion, they have gained much more than immediate pleasure.

One thing is certain, however: not all the minute study possible in the grades can make a child free of the world of books. It can give him only a few standards, a few tools, and a little training in their use. Much reading, or even the sight of books—a shelf-full of stories by Stevenson, the complete works of Holmes, a beautiful edition of Irving—will help to put the schoolroom work in its proper place. By every means in his power the teacher should make the child feel that these particular poems and stories of his textbook are not mere educational documents prepared for his edification, but pages from a great library, where wise and grown-up men delight to linger, and where he may choose to his own taste whenever he can reach the shelves. So perhaps he may be tempted to grow strong, and may find some use and meaning in his study of literature.

The School Calendar

Spring Term

Eleven Weeks

1907

April 2, Tuesday

*Class work assigned at 9
A. M.*

June 14, Friday

Spring Term ends

Summer Term

Six Weeks

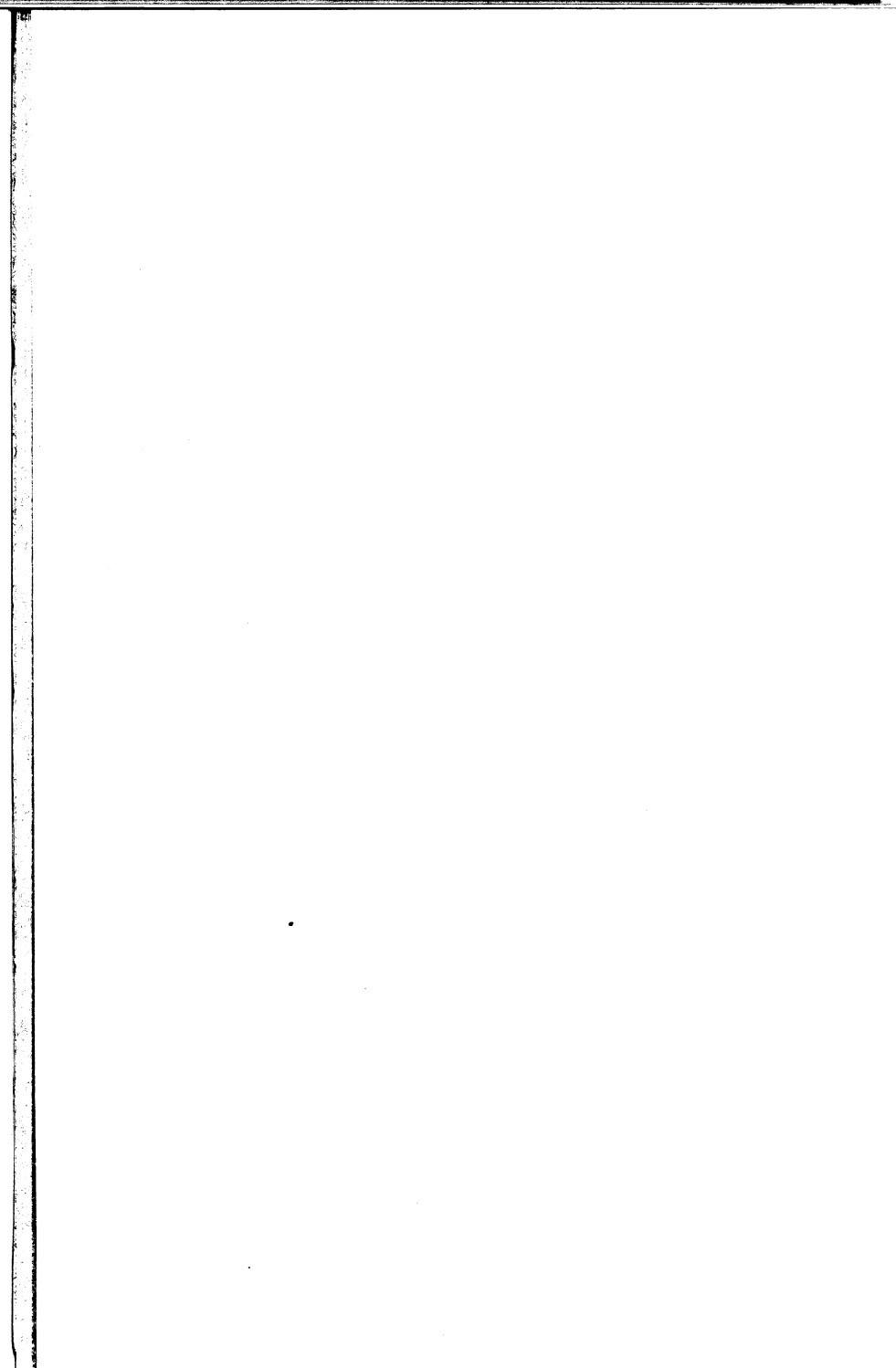
1907

June 17, Monday

*Classification. Class work
assigned at 2 P. M.*

July 26, Friday

Summer Term ends



Illinois State Reformatory

Print.