

# An Introduction to Western Literature —from the Classical Period to the Renaissance

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## I. Motivation

Nowadays, in many Taiwanese schools, there are diverse classes, such as science-gifted, social science-gifted, art-gifted, language-gifted, or athletic classes. To develop students' unique talents, the schools offer a variety of courses related to the special fields, which we rarely have access to. These courses either expand students' perspectives or deepen students' thoughts; some of them even teach students skills in certain subjects. From those various courses, we teachers may derive some useful resources for our featured courses, which we will aim to design in the near future. Thus, I would like to share my own experience in the language-gifted class with teachers and provide some suggestions for designing an issue-related featured course based on my years of teaching this different course, though I have not turned it into a featured one yet.

## II. Introduction

“An Introduction to Western Literature” is a must-elect course in the Language-gifted class in National Hualien Girls' Senior High School. I've been teaching this course for years. In the first year, I was too ambitious to be practical, making a long list of Western literary works, which later I found was a mission impossible. After revision and revision again, I narrowed the range—from the Classical Period to the Renaissance. Although it may be thought still too much for senior high school students, compared with the course of “An Introduction to Chinese Literature,” (another must-elect course taught by the Chinese teacher) it is acceptable. The truth is that I am not sure what senior high school students should learn about Western Literature. In my college life, professors taught us English majors Western literary works and introduced the background knowledge of culture and history. The richness of literary works added spice to my college life and stirred my interest in literature, which inspired me to generate more profound viewpoints, and many of them played a part in my later life. Therefore, as a literature lover, I would like to share my passion with students and hopefully they are exposed to this field and benefit from those literary works.

The course starts with classical literature, including Hellenism (Greek culture) and Hebraism (Hebrew culture). We study Greek mythology, epics, Greek tragedies and the Bible. Then we go on to the Middle Ages; the genres we study include epics,

chivalric romance, and tales. In the Renaissance, we study allegory, poetry, sonnets and drama (See the details of the list in Appendix 1). In the beginning, I like to distribute the jobs to individual students. The jobs are the oral reports on the literary works, which the students are responsible for during the classes. What I am responsible for is the introduction to the background knowledge on history, culture, and literature. Also, after students' reports, I offer comments for further discussion and reflection.

### III. Teaching Objectives

According to *Literature*—one of the *Resource Books for Teachers* by Alan Duff and Alan Maley, the idea of using literary works as teaching resources has gained more acceptance and there are plenty of benefits, from the aspects of language, culture, or involving students personally. But the main concern is to employ literary texts as a teaching resource to teach language. It is the text itself that matters. Therefore, the teacher does not need to provide literary commentary or historical explanation. However, this course is intended for an introduction to Western literature. Students may not necessarily read genuine texts as we expect for the linguistic factor. In the aspects of culture and students' personal growth, the exposure to Western literature must be beneficial to students to some degrees. Thus, I anticipate the following teaching objectives:

- A. To develop students' abilities to appreciate literary works.
- B. To develop students' abilities to think critically.
- C. To expose students to multiple cultures and enable them to show respect and tolerance.

### IV. Teaching Strategy

As is mentioned above, the process of the class consists of my lecture and students' reports. Thus there is no special teaching strategy here because the whole course aims at introducing the literary works in the classical period and the Renaissance, exposing students to Western literary genres, appreciating the great works and further enabling students to be respectful and tolerant of multiple cultures. Concerning developing students' abilities to think critically, QAR strategy is a good choice, which can be integrated into students' reports. In students' oral reports, they not only tell the storyline, but also raise issues for discussion, in which QAR strategy is applied, and, finally, offer their reflections. After their oral reports, they need to hand in their written forms of assignment (see the worksheet in Appendix 2).

If students are not familiar with this Question-Answer Relationship strategy, the

teacher should demonstrate the sample to make sure they are aware of the different types of questions and they are able to raise the questions “in my head,” which I intend to make them ask. Since students in the language-gifted class have taken extra reading courses, they have got used to many similar reading strategies. Thus, I do not need to spend much time on QAR. Instead, I spare a little bit time showing them the explication of QAR (Appendix 3). Based on their later reports and the issues for discussion they put forward, they really get the gist.

## V. Syllabus

There are two class periods a week. The days of the exams are deducted. Basically, I like to introduce the background knowledge and have students make oral reports. Then we discuss questions raised either from the reporters or from the teacher.

1. Introduction & Job Allocation
2. The Origin of the Western Literature+6 reports
3. Hellenism+2 reports
4. Epic+ Watching the Film
5. Watching the Film+ Discussion
6. Greek tragedy+3 reports
7. Greek tragedy+3 reports
8. The Bible+4 reports
9. Latin Literature+2 reports
10. Middle Ages+3 reports
11. Middle Ages+6 reports
12. The Renaissance+3 reports
13. The Renaissance+4 reports
14. Sonnet
15. Sonnet+4 reports
16. Watching the Film
17. Recording
18. Recording+ Feedback

This class has twenty students; thus I assign each student two oral reports based on what literary works I would like to introduce, which is also flexible. Each year I assign different classes a slightly different selection of works of literature according to the number of the class. This time in total the students have three oral reports, two of which are delivered in Chinese and the last one is given in English, which will be formal and at the same time be recorded in the last class periods. The former reports provide students with opportunities to practice their abilities of oral presentation and

meanwhile the other students appreciate the stories. The latter report, which they choose from the former reports, enhances their abilities of oral presentation in English. Since by this time all the students are acquainted with the stories and discussed issues, they can focus on the English presentation.

## VI. Teaching Procedure

On the teacher's part, seeing that the content involves a large range of Western literature, the teacher must prepare sufficient materials on the background knowledge. Fortunately, thanks to my passion for literature, I've referred to many relevant books and kept available, useful materials. Meanwhile, I've often consulted some of my colleges, history teachers, about the related history. The course covers European history and can not be explained clearly without plenty of reference books and other professional help.

As the syllabus indicates, I would like to start with the origins of Western literature, then go on with the rise of Hellenism, Greek mythology, the great Greek epics, the Greek tragedy, and introduce the rise of Hebraism and the Bible. Next, we are exposed to Roman history and study Latin literature. After that, we go to the Middle Ages and are indulged in the air of Middle Ages literature. Then, Dante, a transitional figure, reveals to us the glorious Renaissance ahead. After Dante, we would enjoy the masterpieces in the Renaissance. We stop at Shakespeare's sonnets, but in the next semester of this course we will explore Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Therefore, basically, this semester of the course on Western Literature introduces the general background from the classical period to the Renaissance while in the next semester the course will lead students to explore just one masterpiece, which in my opinion is an appropriate arrangement.

My teaching procedure is as follows:

**First**, I like to provide the historic background and features of the culture and literature in this period.

**Second**, students make oral reports and discuss the questions.

**Third**, I make comments on their reports and throw out other questions for thought.

**Fourth**, I deliver complements and ask for their reflections.

The first film, *Troy*, is to allow students to have a deeper sense about the epic *The Iliad*. The second, film, *Elizabeth*, lets students to have a better understanding of the Britain historic development in the Renaissance.

## VII. Reflections

In the first class period, I had students state orally what they had known about Western literature and what they had expected of this course and then I slightly

adjusted my teaching content for the course. No doubt I could not meet everyone's demand, but I could make a little adjustment because I hoped the course would be associated with students' personal experiences, which would trigger a lot more of their interest. The course was inclusive of supplying background knowledge, and introducing literary works. I found, however, what lit the course was students' QAR time. During QAR time, what issues students raised for discussion or their answers were mostly related to their own life experiences or reflect their views on life, which made the literary works linked to themselves, instead of being isolated, ancient stories.

I have listed several questions as examples.

1. Hera motivates Semele to reveal Zeus' real identity. Do you think that is proper or improper? Why?
2. Why does Semele fall in love with Zeus? Just because of beauty? If you were Semele, would you do the same thing?
3. If you were Icarus and you knew the miserable result, would you fly high again or take your father's advice?
4. Icarus makes efforts to pursue his ideal but sacrifices his own life. How would we seek for our goal without losing something valuable?
5. According to the Book of Revelations of the Bible, humanity will go to the path of destruction in the end. If you had one day left, how would you spend this day?
6. The love story of Cupid and Psyche is beautiful. They fall in love at first sight. Do you believe in this kind of love or love due to a long time of interaction?
7. Zeus betrays his wife Hera again and again. If you were Hera, would you tolerate your husband's behavior?
8. In *Oedipus the King*, man can know the fate from the oracle. If you had a chance to know your fate, would you desire to know it? Why or why not?
9. In the *Aeneid*, Dido and Aeneas love each other but Aeneas left Dido because of his heavy duty—rebuild his nation. If you were Aeneas, would you leave Dido on account of a great goal?
10. In *the Canterbury Tales*, Mrs. Bath marries five times. Do you think she is seeking her true love or just indulging herself in her lust?

And these questions always aroused their peer classmates' concern and attention, and caused heated discussion among the whole class. When it was my turn to make comments, I shared my own opinion or experience with them. This interaction was the most enjoyable time in the course!

## VIII. Suggestions

The above was my experience of teaching an introduction to Western literature

in

the Language-gifted Class. If all the conditions permit and I am able to teach such a selective course in the common class (not in the special class), I would like to narrow the range with the similar teaching strategy and procedure; QAR is especially indispensable, since it leads students to think deeper and to reflect more profoundly, not to mention bringing a lot of joy to the class. If time permits, allow students to design a little play and show the results. That will add more fun to the course! One day I will put this plan into practice, and hopefully involve more students in exploring the delight of the Western literary world.



荷馬史詩的文學價值：

- c. The Greek tragedy and the three great \*tragedians & the Greek comedians  
希臘露天大劇場→戲劇詩人的考場

The origin of the Greek tragedy:

The evolution of the Greek tragedy:

The theme:

The characteristics:

The theatre:

The origin of the Greek comedy:

埃斯克勒斯(Aeschylus, 525 B.C.-456 B.C.)：「古希臘悲劇之父」

作品：【被縛的普羅米修斯】 (*Prometheus Bound*) 【阿加門農】 (*Agamemnon*)

索福克利斯(Sophocles, 495 B.C.-406 B.C.)：

作品：【伊底帕斯王】 (*Oedipus the King*) 【安迪哥妮】 (*Antigone*)

尤里匹底斯(Euripides, 480 B.C.-407 B.C.)：

代表作品：【美狄亞】 (*Medea*)

- d. 亞里斯多德的【詩學】 (Aristotle, 384 B.C.-322 B.C. *Poetics*)：三一律

- e. 聖經：西元前 2 世紀編成→ 摩西的五經→ 舊約聖經 (the Old Testament-- the Hebrew Bible)

基督教：舊約全書+新約全書→聖經 (西元五世紀)  
(羅馬統治時期)

- f. 拉丁文學：

Historical background & cultural features:

律克里修 (94-55 B.C.) 詩作【萬物原論】 (*On the Nature of Things*)

西賽羅 (106-43 B.C.) 【西比奧之夢】 (“Dream of Scipio”) → 【論共和】 (*On the Republic*) 壓軸的一章

維吉爾 (Virgil, 70-19 B.C.)：羅馬帝國的民族史詩【伊尼伊德】 (*Aeneid*)

奧維德 (Ovid, 43 B.C.- 17 A.D.)：【變形記】 (*Metamorphoses*) 【寄情】

(Amores)

## 2. 中古世紀的文學 (500—1500 A.D.)

- a. 英國語言發展史：The history of the English language  
英語是屬於印歐語族日爾曼語系的語言。  
英語發展三大時期：
  - (1) Old English period, 450-1150
  - (2) Middle English period, 1150-1500
  - (3) Modern English period, 1500--
  
- b. 英雄史詩：西元七、八世紀到十二、三世紀之間  
英國的【貝奧武夫】(*Beowulf*)
  
- c. 騎士文學 (chivalric romance)：十二、三世紀  
The Pearl Poet 【高威爵士與綠騎士】(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*)  
  
【亞瑟王與圓桌武士】
  
- d. 喬叟 (Chaucer, 1343-1300)：「英國詩歌之父」，【坎伯利特故事集】(*The Canterbury Tales*)
  
- e. 朗格蘭的(*Piers Plowman*)
  
- g. 但丁 (Dante, 1256-1321)：  
【神曲】(*Divine Comedy*)→地獄：影射現實世界；天堂：象徵理想世界；  
煉獄：從現實通往理想境界的必由之路。

## 3. 文藝復興 (the Renaissance)

- a. 文藝復興的興起：歐洲文藝復興運動起源於義大利，但是把文學推向高峰的，卻是英國的文學家。
  
- b. 義畫壇三傑：
  - (1) 達文西的〈蒙娜莉莎的微笑〉
  - (2) 米開朗基羅的〈大衛〉的雕像
  - (3) 拉斐爾畫的聖母
  
- c. 義文壇三傑：
  - (1) 但丁的【神曲】

(2)抒情詩人佩托拉克 (Petrarch, 1304-1374) 的【歌集】  
→「詩聖」、完善十四行詩的詩歌形式，文藝復興作家的先鋒。

(3) 薄伽丘 (1313-1375)的【十日談】：反應義大利的現實社會，揭開歐洲文藝復興的序幕；近代短篇小說鼻祖

- d. 法國：拉伯雷 (Francois Rabelais, 1493-1553) 的【巨人傳】  
西班牙：塞凡提斯 (Cervantes, 1547-1616) 的【唐吉科德】 (*Don Quixote*)：近代長篇小說鼻祖
- e. 英國的歷史背景&宗教改革：
- f. 文藝復興之釋義&人文主義：
- g. 摩爾 (Thomas More, 1478-1535) 的【烏托邦】 (*Utopia*)
- h. 席德尼(Philip Sidney, 1554-1586)的【詩辯】 (*Defence of Poesy*)
- i. 史賓塞 (Spenser, 1552-1599)：【牧人日曆】 (*The Shepheardes Calender*)、  
【仙后】 (*Faerie Queene*)
- j. 十四行詩(sonnets)的發展：
- k. 馬洛 (Christopher Marlowe, 1564-1593)：【浮士德博士的悲劇】 (*Doctor Faustus*) 【馬爾他島的猶太人】
- l. 莎士比亞 (William Shakespeare, 1564-1616)：四大悲劇→【哈姆雷特】 (*Hamlet*)、【奧賽羅】(*Othello*)、【馬克白】(*Macbeth*)、【李爾王】(*King Lear*)，  
【羅密歐與茱麗葉】 著名喜劇→【威尼斯商人】【仲夏夜之夢】【皆大歡喜】

**Appendix 2**

**Western Literature**

Worksheet for Classical literary works    SCORE—Oral:\_\_\_\_\_ Written:\_\_\_\_\_

Class 209    No. \_\_\_\_\_    Name \_\_\_\_\_

Title	
Questions & Feedback	
Afterthoughts	

### Appendix 3

The QAR strategy divides questions into two broad categories; "In the Book" (text-explicit) questions and "In My Head" (text-implicit) questions.

- "In the Book" questions are generated directly from a reading selection. These explicit questions fall into two subcategories: "Right There"—questions found in one place in a selection and "Think and Search"—questions built around cumulative information found throughout a document.
- "In My Head" questions are created by the reader when confronting a text. These questions are not explicitly found in the reading; rather, these questions arise as the reader engages the selection's content through active thought, comparison, evaluation, etc. These implicit questions fall into two subcategories: "Author and You"—questions that the text provokes in the reader and "On My Own"—questions arising from the reader's prior knowledge and experiences.

<b>In the Book</b>	<b>In My Head</b>
<b>Right There</b> The answer is easily found in the text. The exact words for the questions and answers are located in the same sentence.	<b>Author and You</b> The answer is not in the text. The reader combines previous knowledge with text information to create a response.
<b>Think and Search</b> The answer is in the text, but requires gathering information from different places in the selection.	<b>On My Own</b> The answer is not in the text. The reader uses previous experience to respond.

<http://www.readingeducator.com/strategies/qar.htm>