

Time May Not Be On Our Side

When I was a student in the first half of the two-semester survey of American literature, I recall slogging through the Puritan writers early in the semester, wondering exactly why I became an English major. Then, we progressed to more moderate slogging through a group of writers who seemed to have nothing in common other than the fact that they happened to be born at roughly the same time. Only after two-thirds of a semester did we arrive at the writers we were really interested in: the Romantics. Thus, it should come as no surprise that, when I first taught that first half of the year-long survey of American literature, my students began by slogging through the Puritans, though I'm sure I made them slog less than I was made to do.

During that semester, though, I thought of a different way of teaching a survey course. Near the end of the semester, we were discussing Emerson's essay "Nature," and I was struck by a connection between his view of language in relation to nature and that of Jonathan Edwards. I do not remember the connection being made when I was a student, and I had not yet run across it in the critical literature. In fact, I hadn't planned on talking about it in class that day, but I just stumbled across it. It led us to talk about the development of language from Edwards to Emerson and on to current theories of semiotics.

It was this discussion that led me to reconsider the notion of the survey course. Now, rather than teaching the course chronologically, I have restructured the class based on the major themes of American literature during this period. My course now centers on three main questions: 1) What is the role of religion in American literature and culture? 2) What is the relationship between the individual and the wider culture? 3) What is the view of nature? The class ends with one to two weeks of literature from the end of the chronological era to see how America has progressed from its beginning dreams.

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I'll get to the benefits of such an approach in a few moments, but, first, I have to admit that there are a few drawbacks to this plan. One is that, rather than pigeon-holing authors based solely on when they were born, forcing them to fit the description of the major literary movement of the time, whether they do or not, I now force them to fit a thematic approach that they also may not fit. Thus, I struggle where to place a writer as important as Edgar Allan Poe (I put him in the individualism section, as he created the detective story, and we discuss America's attempt to break away from England, in literary terms, in this section).

Additionally, some writers get less coverage than they would if I devoted an entire day to them. I include Emily Dickinson with Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet in the religion section, but we only get to read seven or so poems by her. Since we discuss her on a day with two other poets, we are unable to go in as much depth with her as I would like. However, this problem is inherent in the survey format. There is simply no way to cover two to three hundred years of literature in fifteen weeks, though most of us still attempt to do so in one way or another.

There are also some professors who are not fond of my thematic approach because they believe that I am taking the writers out of their historical context, which they see as the most important aspect of teaching literature. While I disagree with their focus on history, I understand their concern; in fact, at least one student commented that she was confused as to who was writing when. Thus, I have attempted in my second time of teaching thematically to make it clear when a particular writer is working and who his or her contemporaries are. I also teach works chronologically within the thematic approach because I do still want to show the development of ideas in American literature.

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I'm willing to deal with these drawbacks, as I believe the benefits are worth it. First, the students make connections between writers more than they did when I taught the class chronologically. I purposefully design the class to highlight those connections so that students can make the connections themselves. Thus, Edwards and Emerson's essays on language and nature are now covered on the same day, making it easier for students to see how similar they are instead of their having to remember Edwards' essay from two months ago. Recently, we covered Edwards, Jefferson, Paine, and Emerson's writings about religion in one week. By the end of that week, students were showing how Emerson's work comes from both branches of thinking, pointing out how sometimes Emerson sounds like Edwards, while other times he sounds like Paine, two writers who are on opposite end of the spectrum of American religion. In the past, I had to point out passages in Emerson, then ask if students remembered a writer who had similar ideas. If it was a particularly sharp class, one or two might make the connection after I pointed it out. Now, students bring it to my attention.

Next, the students get to see the conflicts that still affect our culture today and where those conflicts originate. Certainly, when it comes to religious conflict, their seeing Edwards, Paine, and Jefferson's writings side-by-side shows the debate between a government heavily influenced by religion and the *laissez-faire* approach put forward by Jefferson. When we read the works that argue for individualism, such as *Walden*, students can see the negative results of that individualism in a culture where people do not know their neighbors or they have more friends on Facebook than they do in the class they're taking, but they can also see the call for community in James Fenimore Cooper's writings.

Last, my class has a focus now that it seemed to lack in the past. When I taught this course chronologically, it seemed to merely meander through time, jumping from one writer to

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another with no *raison d'être* other than the historical push. Now, though, students know when they walk into class in the middle of the semester, we're going to be talking about individualism. Thus, when they are reading their assignment, they know that is the theme that led me to assign that particular writing at that particular time. And, not to be overlooked, they also know what the focus of the exams will be. While we would like to think that students are above such base concerns, we all know better because we were students once.

While I am certainly not arguing that all courses should be taught thematically rather than chronologically, survey classes benefit largely from this approach. It has refreshed my outlook on American literature, and it will assist students in their understanding of this period, and that's a theme we would all like to see covered more often.

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