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## DANGER OF TEACHING LITERATURE SANS HISTORICAL-BIOGRAPHICAL INPUTS

**Dr. M. RAJENDRA PANDIAN**

Associate Professor of English

The American College, Madurai-625002

Email: [rajenn66@gmail.com](mailto:rajenn66@gmail.com)



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### Abstract

The article highlights the menace of ignoring or slighting the importance of historical-biographical details while teaching English literature, particularly to non-native students at college level. We need to take caution as there is a growing tendency in favor of extreme formalism that seeks to relegate history and biography to less prominent roles. Some or many of the teachers of English language and literature at Indian colleges often tend to think that anything other than the formal elements in a work of art is mere impediment in interpreting and appreciating the work and hence to be excluded. At this juncture, we need to remind ourselves that a better understanding of a given topic in English literature is possible with the inclusion of historical-biographical inputs. Their value and importance cannot be underestimated even if they are sometimes very minor, merely anecdotal, or even if they sound like downright gossip. They throw light on the personalities relating to a literary piece and add up to one's knowledge of the background which in turn helps them appreciate the piece of literature better.

Keywords: literature, historical, biographical, appreciation

### Introduction

Until a decade ago if a professor teaching English language and literature in an Indian class room asked the class what the significance of the year 1066 was, almost half of the class could shoot back it was the year of the Norman Conquest. The teacher would also recall, for the benefit of the students, the name of William the Conqueror and the introduction of feudalism in England. At least some of the students were fast in weaving mental pictures of the feudal hierarchy with the King at the helm of affairs—with clergies, nobles, commons and vassals in successively subservient positions. They could also recollect spontaneously the church-state conflict as represented by the king on the one side and the clergy on the other; culmination of the conflict in the time of Henry-II, murder of Thomas

Becket, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*—at least the *Prologue* wherein we find the pilgrims on a trip to the shrine of St. Thomas. As a corollary effect, they could even think of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and also the Civil War between King Charles-I and the Parliamentarians and the rest.

### Historical-Biographical Inputs

The very mentioning of feudalism had pictures of the French Revolution flashing in the minds of students. Thoughts relating to the causes that induced the revolution, its course and consequences possibly rushed to their minds and a few of them articulated such associations in the class and made the atmosphere lively. Even while thinking about the event for a minute or two, one was and is made to think of great personalities like Pitt, the politician and Wordsworth, the poet. One can swiftly

remember how the prime minister was against the bloody event and ordered the closure of coffee houses in London in order to preclude people from discussing a bloody event which was avowedly anti-monarchical. And the poet who was sympathetic toward the revolution got disillusioned when it culminated in the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte. An alert mind which is both synthetic and analytical would compare instantaneously how the regicide involving Charles-I was similar to and different from that of Louis XVI, at once.

The recollection of revolutionary ideas encapsulated in words such as Liberty, Equality and Fraternity opened the windows to the American War of Independence and the Evolution of the Constitution, with the 'inalienable rights' of the people enshrined in it. The varying visions that were pivotal to nation building came not only from federalists and anti-federalists but the makers of the American civilization on the whole that included not only the founding fathers of the nation and signatories of the constitution but also the eminent literary figures such as Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Hemingway, down to Steinbeck and Updike.

There was a time in which literature was taught with its historical background as against the formalist belief in approaching / teaching literature in isolation. The squabbling between teachers of language and those of literature regarding the usefulness (or even the supremacy) of their forte is ridiculous. Whereas the idea that literature can be taught as isolated from its historical background is dangerous as it is bound to promote only partial understanding of the work. However, the fact remains that English literature is being taught in Indian class rooms, at least in certain quarters, without sufficient information on the socio-political and intellectual background of the work and the relevant biographical details of the author. When New Criticism, Practical Criticism, Formalist Criticism and Deconstruction exist as some of the most popular modes in approaching literature, it is not justifiable to stretch the formalist conviction too far and wilfully overlook the relevant and rare historical-biographical details pertaining to a work/

author in question. By ignoring history consciously, consistently, and systematically, a teacher of English literature can do a lot of injustice to younger generations who would otherwise benefit out of genuine historical sense and orientation.

The imperative of not teaching lessons in isolation applies not only to literature but also to history as it cannot be taught bereft of biographical elements. Biographical details can be anecdotal, trivial or even they can sound like downright gossip. How they sound is immaterial as long as they are collected from relatively authentic sources and found with a potential to throw light on the persons and works being discussed. It may not help students very much if a teacher who has to teach Chaucer's *General Prologue* tries to do it by straight reading from the text. Whereas s/he may do better by telling the historical background of medieval England, importance of Latin and French, supremacy and dubiousness of the church and also the evolving critique of the clergy. It may interest our students to know about what is important and what is generally unknown. I have noticed excitement on the faces of my students when I tell them about how Chaucer was not only a liberal humanist but also a "fiery and quick tempered man" who had to fight two court cases against him. One was a rape case and the other was an assault case. He was acquitted in the former as he was found innocent but convicted in the latter as he was pronounced guilty and "fined for beating a Franciscan friar in a London street" (Marsh 170).

When Oliver Cromwell is known as a Republican who fought against the King, one needs to know how he, very much like his predecessor King Charles I, squabbled with the parliament as well. It may be of interest and use to students to relate how King Charles-I as well as the Republican Cromwell thought alike and acted alike in sealing the parliament building as their respective quarrels with the respective parliaments reached crescendo. But the difference between the two was that Charles-I simply closed down the parliament building, sealed it and left whereas Cromwell went a step ahead by affixing a board on the façade of the parliament building of the Rumps, reading, "This House to let—unfurnished" (Thorn 344). This will make students understand what kind of dictator the Republican

Cromwell was. Do our students know the phrase “cruel necessity” and the person who said it? We do them a service by helping them know this was used by Cromwell in his argument to justify the execution of Charles-I, their king. In this context, a reference to Milton can be made so that students will get to know about his role as a deputy (Latin Secretary) to the Lord Protector and also how his admiration for Cromwell, the Republican, reflected in his portrayal of Satan as a leader with republican qualities as opposed to the monarchical and arbitrary God—in *Paradise Lost*-Books I & II.

Besides, the teacher can tell students how Milton married three times unsuccessfully which allegedly made him a misogynist bent on presenting the character of Eve in *Paradise Lost*-Book IX as the originator of human fall. While highlighting Eliot’s Catholic and conservative moorings it may not be an offense to make a passing reference to the alleged liaison between Vivienne Eliot and Bertrand Russell which was probably one of the reasons for, or, contributing factors to the poet’s depression. Commenting on their marriage, Eliot says, “To her, the marriage brought no happiness....To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came the “The Waste Land” (qtd. in Menand). Students who are exposed to *The Waste Land* might get an idea about the extent to which the individual might have been affected by such things and how it should have shaped his thoughts and feelings apart from the generally known socio-political background of the work.

It may help our learners to be aware that Louis Althusser was a patient of Lacan who only felt helpless when the renowned proponent of Structural Marxism got depressed with his wife and eventually murdered her (Habib 589). Although an avowed Marxist and a teacher who was very friendly with students, Theodor Adorno felt constrained to call the police to remove the crowd of student-protestors who had occupied the campus of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany in 1968. But, those leftist students did not take it lightly and hence they gheraoed Adorno and wrote: “If Adorno is left in peace, capitalism will never cease.” Some female students even bared their

breasts before him and acted out some sort of erotic performance as a mark of protest (Critchley 247).

While telling the class about Plato’s ideal world and Aristotle’s difficulty in grasping that, we can also mention their different backgrounds. Plato’s father was a philosopher himself and no wonder Plato grew up as an idealist. But, Aristotle’s father was a physician ( to King Amyntas of Macedonia) who explained to his son about human body and the way it functioned, and such training helped the young Aristotle grow into someone like an empiricist who could not simply endorse his master’s idealism (Durant 63). One probable reason for Aristotle’s overall disagreement with Plato could be the disenchantment he developed with his teacher and his teaching as he studied under Plato not for three years or five but twenty. Perhaps the same background issue put Philip Sidney and Stephen Gosson on the opposite sides too. The former was an Elizabethan courtier and aristocrat and by defending poetry Sidney sought to defend his own aristocratic, pleasure-seeking court life whereas Gosson who was a Puritan priest was trying to justify his own austerity by attacking poetry on various grounds. (Habib 261)

It will interest our learners to know how Shakespeare was a pro-establishment writer, who wrote about thirty seven plays including *The Life and Death of King John*, without making even an oblique reference to the signing of *Magna Carta* which had been a land-mark event in the history of human rights. This “notable omission” was caused by the fact that “the courtier in Shakespeare was compelled to leave out Magna Carta as too politically sensitive, something that might be construed as criticizing the institution of monarchy or tacitly supporting the internal rebellion against the crown” (Lock). This political sagacity combined with a strong survival instinct on the part of thinkers could be seen in many including Dickens, the nineteenth century novelist, and Heidegger, the twentieth century theorist.

Dickens took special penchant for exposing the squalor and inequality in the English society of his time. He was so hurt to see the practice of slavery in America and by the time he was concluding his trip

and returning to England he famously wrote, "This is not the Republic I came to see" (qtd. in Slater 175). But, the same Dickens did not respond in favor of abolition when American Civil War, fought to end slavery, was at its peak. Commenting that "secession might not be a rebellion at all" (qtd. in Waller 541), Dickens played it safe by not displeasing Queen Victoria whose approach to the American event was one of caution and diplomatic equivocation.

While Hitler was engaged in systematic extermination of the Jews in Germany, Heidegger promptly took a membership from Hitler's Nazi Party. Although one can argue that it was his individual right, what is shocking is how he denied Husserl "library privileges". The shock increases when one learns that Husserl had been Heidegger's mentor after all, and recommended his name for the post of professor at the University of Freiburg. But, nothing helped Husserl as he was a retired professor, and that too of Jewish origin (Critchley 223).

### Conclusion

Indeed it enhances the understanding of students as well as teachers when they take into account the historical-biographical details relating to the particular topics. Those anecdotal details help one achieve greater clarity about personalities, events and ultimately the works that they seek to explore. However, one may not favor prescribing Trevelyan's *English Social History* anymore to realize such objective as the book perhaps is not exceptionally related to what the students of English Literature in Indian class rooms study these days. Likewise, one cannot not endorse either, the act of writing in any doctoral thesis the biographical details of a given author for pages together. That can be strictly avoided.

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