

**ENGLISH LITERATURE
TEACHING IN
SCHOOLS: TWO LECTURES
WITH EXAMPLES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649306183

English Literature Teaching in Schools: Two Lectures with Examples by H. Courthope Bowen

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

H. COURTHOPE BOWEN

**ENGLISH LITERATURE
TEACHING IN
SCHOOLS: TWO LECTURES
WITH EXAMPLES**

LB
1575
.B79

ENGLISH LITERATURE TEACHING
IN SCHOOLS

ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
IN MIDDLE-CLASS SCHOOLS¹

IF we were to inquire, in any hundred English schools taken at random, whether *Literature* formed a part of the regular school course, I think we should get positive, very positive, answers in the affirmative from at least ninety-nine. And yet I am prepared to maintain that at least ninety-eight of the ninety-nine answers would be wrong. There are hardly any schools in England, in which *Literature, used as literature,* forms any part of the regular education. Works in many languages, by many famous writers—in Latin, in Greek, in French, in German, and frequently in English—are indeed employed in almost every school above the rank of an infant school. But employed how? As lay-figures for lessons in vocabulary, in construction, in philology, in antiquarianism, and all the rest of old Dryasdust's pet subjects; but as lessons in thought and imagination, in the art of expression, in the beauty and power of speech, never, or very nearly never. I am very far from wishing to be thought to deny that

¹ A Paper read before the College of Preceptors on March 16th 1881, and since revised.

2 THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

the lessons usually given on Latin and Greek authors and the rest, are of use. I would even allow that they are of great use. But what I assert is, that they are not lessons on *Literature*.

What then, I shall be asked, *are* lessons on Literature? and what good do you think them likely to do? To answer these questions, with a special view to the use of English Literature in non-classical schools, is the object of my present attempt.

By the study of Literature, as *literature*, I mean the study of a poem or prose-work for the sake of its substance, its form and its style; for the sake of the thought and imagination and feeling it contains, and the methods used to express these; for the sake of its lofty, large or acute perception of things; its power of exposition; the beauty, force, and meaning of its metaphors, its similes, and its epithets; the strength and music of its language. All of which things have nothing to do with grammar, and but very little to do with philology or antiquarianism.¹ In fact, my aim is to lead my pupils to appreciate thought as thought, a work of art as a work of art; and thereby not only to

¹ As an illustration of an utterly wrong use of antiquarianism, I would refer my readers to, amongst other books, the Clarendon Press edition of *As You Like It*. At the beginning of the second act occur the lines—

“Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.”

Instead of a short statement that this was an old fancy, with perhaps a couple of fairly familiar quotations referring to it, we have a long note—about a page and a half of very small print—relating the origin and history of the fable, with learned quotations from obscure authors whom few people have ever heard of.

As an instance of intrusive grammar, I might mention that, in the

enlarge, enrich, and refine their minds and hearts, but also to bring them to a knowledge and ability of expressing themselves, when they have something to say, both correctly and well. The study of grammar and philology and antiquarianism will help them but little to accomplish this object. If they are to become good writers or good speakers, they must study the works or speech of those who have written or spoken well. If authorities are needed in support of this view I appeal to Pliny and Cicero, Cardinal Wolsey, Roger Ascham, Milton, Montaigne, Locke, Rousseau, and many another.

In dealing with a foreign language, it is of course necessary that our pupils should attain a fair knowledge of its vocabulary and construction before anything like a genuine appreciation of its literature can in any sense be possible for them; and all attempts at producing this appreciation have therefore to be postponed to a rather late period of their school life. But I think the period need not by any means be made so late as it generally is. And to omit it altogether is, I consider, a still more serious fault. We ourselves know, by our own experience, that it is not at all necessary for us to be deeply versed in all the *irregularities* of French or German, before we can enjoy our Molière and Hugo, or our Schiller and Goethe;

notes to so simple a poem as *The Burial of Sir John Moore*, one editor commences with—"Not, an adverb qualifying 'a,' usually called the indefinite article, but really an adjective, a contracted form of the numeral adjective *one*." While another, in explaining the meaning of *fallow* to little boys, gives its Anglo-Saxon derivation. In the last case, I am afraid I must admit that I was the culprit myself—but that was ten years ago, and I was a little crazy on the subject of philology. I have grown wiser since then.

4 THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

and why any one should suppose this to be so in the case of Latin and Greek, I am quite at a loss to understand. A good sound knowledge of the *regularities* of a language seems to me a quite sufficient introduction to its literature; while the *irregularities* may very safely be left to be dealt with as they occur.

In Middle-Class Schools our pupils generally leave us at the age of fourteen or fifteen, only a very few staying on till they are sixteen years of age; in these schools, therefore, it is vain to hope to do much with the literatures of foreign languages. But this does not compel us to give up the study of Literature altogether. We have still our own native English to fall back upon; and its literature will, I think, be found quite sufficient for our purpose. Here we have no difficulties to encounter in the regular constructions, for our pupils are well acquainted with these already; and the difficulty of vocabulary is only a very small matter, and may be reduced to next to nothing, if we are careful in our choice of subjects. We can therefore commence the study of English Literature at a comparatively early period; and I have found great advantage in so doing.

But perhaps I shall make my views clearer on this subject, if I take a short and simple poem, and treat it in the way I propose. I must ask you to bear in mind, that I am not to be supposed to be addressing myself to grave and learned ladies and gentlemen, but to little children of ten or eleven years of age, whose homes are not for the most part filled with an atmosphere of culture and learning; and whose home literature in all probability mainly consists of nothing better than

the daily newspaper. Moreover, as my time is short, I am choosing the very simplest of simple poems, and must ask you to imagine for yourselves how much more fruitful and interesting the same method would become, if applied to literature of richer and nobler character, with pupils a year or so older.

The poem I choose is *The Pilgrim Fathers*, by Mrs. Hemans :—

The breaking waves dash'd high
On a stern and rock-bound coast ;
And the woods, against a stormy sky,
Their giant branches toss'd.

And the heavy night hung dark
The hills and waters o'er,
When a band of exiles moor'd their bark
On the wild New England shore.

Not as the conqueror comes,
They, true-hearted, came ;—
Not with the roll of the stirring drums,
And the trumpet that sings of fame ;—

Not as the flying come,
In silence and in fear ;—
They shook the depths of the desert's gloom
With their hymns of lofty cheer.

Amidst the storm they sang,
Till the stars heard, and the sea ;
And the sounding aisles of the dim woods rang
To the anthem of the free.

The ocean-eagle soar'd
From his nest by the white waves' foam,
And the rocking pines of the forest roar'd :—
Such was their welcome home.

6 THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

There were men with hoary hair
Amidst that pilgrim band ;
Why had they come to wither there,
Away from their childhood's land ?

There was woman's fearless eye,
Lit by her deep love's truth ;
There was manhood's brow aersnely high,
And the fiery heart of youth.

What sought they thus afar ?
Bright jewels from the mine ?
The wealth of seas ? the spoils of war ?
No—'twas a faith's pure shrine.

Yes, call that holy ground,
Which first their brave feet trod !
They have left unstained what there they found—
Freedom to worship God !

I read through the poem very slowly and as impressively as I can, striving to catch the attention and interest of my hearers, and to bring out the meaning of the words, and the feeling and intention of the author to the very fullest. Having finished the poem, I begin to ask questions as to its subject :— What is it all about ? Why does the author relate it ? What effect is it meant to produce upon us ? Some few boys, at least, in the class, will have heard of the "Mayflower" and her crew. We turn to our history—probably Green's—and refresh our memories, and learn what caused the flight of the "Pilgrim Fathers," and what they did when they arrived in the New World, and what became of them. Then, returning to our poem, we see that we are meant to be impressed with the wildness of the place the "pilgrims" had chosen for their home ; with the fact that the motive which had