http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes_main.html

Take the Plunge

An Innovator from Back in the Day Shares a Tale of Teaching Classic Lit through Pop Songs and Ballads.

By Michael Meyer
Chicago, Illinois
September 9, 2008

When I first discovered the *Lit Tunes* website, I was excited and pleased to learn that a young scholar, Chris Goering, was attempting to make connections to popular culture and to tap into the minds of today's students. It was not a concept unfamiliar to me since I tried it myself in the early 1970s, some thirty years before Chris's website and certainly before the age of computers and the internet.

In Search of a Fresh Approach

My high school students were not what Chris labels twitch speed kids since texting and cell phones were non-existent. Yet I found it was difficult if not impossible to interest them in *Beowulf* and medieval texts like *The Canterbury Tales*. For most of my students, Shakespeare was almost unintelligible, and Milton, Shelley, Keats, and Byron were obscure and boring. I was frustrated as a first year high school teacher, and I sought new and different ways to approach literature that I thought offered important messages, even though hundred of years had passed from the time it was written to the time my students were reading it.

When I returned from a fall teachers' conference, I decided to abandon my chronological approach and teach thematically, choosing issues that impacted my students in the here and now. I selected broad thematic emphases and asked my students to find current songs that seemed to speak to these issues. Then I found similar poetry, drama, and fiction that also addressed these life issues.

Relevance Inspires Enthusiasm.

Though it is a long time ago, I can still remember that some of the topics included war, loneliness, sexuality, love — broad topics, to be sure, but guaranteed to be relevant to 70s kids who found English literature to be a trial of major proportions.

Since there was no way to download photos or images in that day and age, I brought in lots of magazines and told the students their assignment was to create a picture roll that would be fed through a machine, projecting the images onto a screen. I divided the class into groups of two and told them to try to illustrate a song by clipping out ads and illustrations from catalogs and print media. Then they had to find a parallel poem or text from their book and explain how the songwriter and the literary genius were dealing with the same topics.

I was surprised at the enthusiasm which rocked the classroom. I told the students they could use rolls of shelf lining paper and Elmer's glue to affix the illustrations. Some students needed two rolls of paper to complete their project. They were hooked.

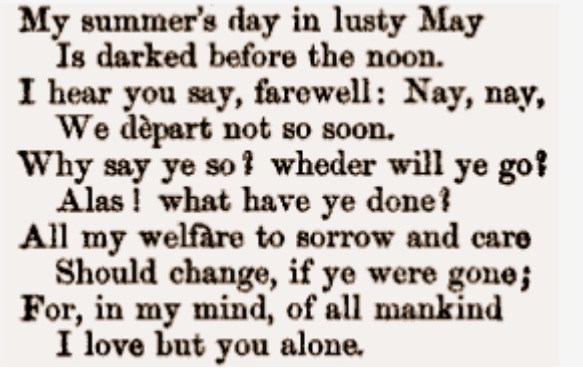
Class time was devoted to creating the displays and helping students select an appropriate parallel text that they could present to the class. The old material now seemed fresh and new rather than tired and worn out. After a presentation had been given and a parallel text presented, the students welcomed my discussion of literary definitions like the sonnet form and the conventions of epic poetry. I had discovered a way to make literature relevant, and I knew that what I found would make my lesson plans so much easier.

When James Taylor Mirrors Sir Patrick, Success Is in the Air.

Several years after that first experiment, I tried another, perhaps just as unorthodox. Teaching the Scottish ballads from medieval times, including Sir Patrick Spens, Lord Randal, and Edward, Edward, I began to see how the ballads were related to the themes of contemporary country music — an observation that holds true today.

Many of the characteristics of the ballad were reiterated in the present-day lyrics of Dan Fogelberg, James Taylor, Olivia Newton John, and John Mellencamp. Moreover the techniques of the ballad were repeated as well. There was unrequited love, incremental repetition, identical repetition-refrain, a rhyme scheme that repeats, death and violence, superstition and supernatural events. Many of the songs contained up to eight of the fourteen characteristics I had identified as qualities that make a ballad a unique art form.

My students were surprised and pleased to find that techniques hundreds of years old were still being practiced — and not in Scotland, but in America by modern-day performers. Their tastes varied, of course. Some were attracted to The Beatles, some to Johnny Cash, some to fringe artists I had never heard of. But attracted they were, and they enthusiastically went to work, identifying how present day singers had modified and adapted ideas that seemed very outdated and


My summer's day in lusty May
Is darked before the noon.
I hear you say, farewell: Nay, nay,
We dèpart not so soon.
Why say ye so? wheder will ye go?
Alas! what have ye done?
All my welfare to sorrow and care
Should change, if ye were gone;
For, in my mind, of all mankind
I love but you alone.

uninteresting, corny and repetitious, when previously presented as poems from a long past era. Now they became a format — an approach that current artists used to engage their audience, to tell a story, and to relate a narrative.

Suddenly, my class enrollment rocketed. Students were eager to try out their skills, to show the unique connections they could make. Papers became longer and less tedious to read. Class became interactive instead of teacher centered.

Break the Mold and Innovate.

Today the Internet makes ideas and innovations easy to find. They are literally at our fingertips. But clearly most teachers are afraid to break out of the mold, to teach in a way that is decidedly different from the way they have been taught.

Later in my career, I had the opportunity to hire some of the students I had impacted; they became my colleagues and peers. But I found that their college experiences had made them forget the excitement of learning. Many had returned to lectures and to multiple choice test questions that revealed little about what their students had assimilated and digested from their reading. And it was clear that most of their students did not understand the connections and relationships of the readings of yesteryear to the problems of today.

As a PhD and a college professor since 1986, I find that administrators on a tertiary level are also leery of relating the classic texts of the past to what is going on in today's world. My department chair would rather I lecture about the qualities of the jeremiad, or help students dissect the convoluted prose of early American writers, than for me to tap the connections to current events that seem so evident and so relevant to today's readers.

Beyond the Rote
Soars the Psyche.

Yet, I continue to stress developing synapses as I teach college students who are elementary and secondary education majors. I want them to train their minds to react to what they read by saying, to say: "Wait a minute. I heard that elsewhere. I remember where it was! It was in this film, this song, this newspaper editorial, this TV show."

There is no doubt that the concerns of past great writers are clearly being repeated. After all, great literature is about humanity, and when we read it, we do so to experience how others have lived, what they have valued, and what mistakes they have made. If, like my department chair, we make the mistake of devaluing the here and now, we will find that we have created readers who have only rote knowledge. They will be able to regurgitate the lecture material and produce the right answers, but sadly the material will not have not sunk deep into their psyches, will not have penetrated their souls.

As I turn 65 and approach retirement, I fervently pray that those education majors will take the plunge and try the risky, often difficult path of innovation. *Lit Tunes* is a start, but we must constantly be ready to espouse the new and reach the next generation with the pearls of wisdom and insights into the human condition that great authors still

have to offer. If our current education majors do not embrace the great works of yesterday, then clearly the classics are in danger of being forgotten at worst, or dismissed as dated and irrelevant.

E D I T O R ' S N O T E :

After growing up in Rock Island, Illinois, Michael J.Meyer attended Concordia University in River Forest, Illinois, and went on to receive an MA and PhD from Loyola University Chicago. He has taught on the elementary, secondary and college level and presently teaches as an adjunct professor of English at DePaul University of Chicago. His Children's Literature course is a popular part of the curriculum and provides a place to encourage his students to reach out with innovative techniques and approaches to reading. A widely published Steinbeck scholar, Dr. Meyer is presently working on two volumes of Steinbeck criticism and is the co-editor of Greenwood's A John Steinbeck Encyclopaedia (2006).

His e-mail is mjonmeyer@gmail.com — and he welcomes questions from budding teachers and student teachers.