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Classic literature in the ESL classroom
Six teachers’ experiences concerning teaching classics

Klassisk litteratur i engelska som andraspråk
Sex lärares erfarenheter av att undervisa klassisk litteratur

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate how some teachers use classic literature in the ESL classroom. It is a qualitative study based on interviews with six teachers, all of them at upper secondary school.

The classic literature of the English-speaking world has done much in shaping Western society as we know it, and thus it is important for the students of English as a second language to have at least some knowledge of the literature of the past. The syllabuses for English B and C also require it.

My findings were that the teachers interviewed all saw classic texts as very important but challenging. Therefore, the texts introduced must suit the needs and interests of the students. There is also a language barrier to consider. However, classic texts can also be introduced through the use of films.

Key words: English as a foreign language, classic literature, teacher views and attitudes, teacher experience
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Introduction

The fact that the classic literature of the English speaking world is of great importance is something no one should be able to contradict. It has shaped Western society to a great extent and continues to affect literature and readers to this day. However, there seems to be a set of preconceived idea about this kind of literature and the ways of teaching it. It is a subject with its own kind of traditional teaching methods, which often resemble turn-of-the-century methods (Collie & Slater, 1992, p. 7).

The reasons for this kind of thinking are not that hard to explain. There is already a language barrier when it comes to reading literature in the L2, and that barrier becomes greater when the language might be dated and old-fashioned. And what could today’s students get from reading Shakespeare, Austen, Twain, Brontë, Salingor or Orwell? Some of these were authors who lived and wrote during a time when racism was legislated and the word "career" for women meant "finding a husband with as good an income as possible". Times have changed in ways most of these authors could not imagine, what could they teach us?

This is the general attitude I have found among students during my VFTperiod. But is this all there is to it? Is it possible to teach the classics in an engaging way that relates to the students’ lives and experiences?

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this degree project is to investigate the attitudes and experiences of some teachers of English in the south of Sweden with regard to using classic literature. It is a qualitative study comprised of interviews with six teachers. They are all upper secondary English teachers, working at three different schools. Two of them are at public schools (one which focuses on theory-centered programs, the other also including vocational programs), and one at an independent school.

My research questions are as follows:

- What are the attitudes of some teachers to classic English literature?
- How do some teachers describe their experience of teaching classic literature?
Background

I personally have always been fascinated by the classics and ever since I started my teacher training I had ideas about using various classic novels and poems in my classroom. This would of course thrill the students, getting to read about Cathy and Heathcliff’s impossible love, the adventures of Huckleberry Finn and the ever-present surveillance of Big Brother. But how would I make my students feel the same excitement I did about these books?

During my VFT period (which was conducted at years 7-9 at a school in the south of Sweden), I came into contact with a lot of students who read in their spare time. None of them read anything which could be called a “classic”, but there was a clear interest in reading among the students. There was, however, one condition: the books had to be interesting to the students. They had to be of some importance or meaning to the students themselves, otherwise they were not worthwhile reading. As an example I may mention the fact that I saw copies of Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight-novels everywhere at the school, and I often heard students discuss the vampire trend which is currently huge in pop culture. I found it interesting and had a few conversations with the students concerning the books, asking them if they had read any other famous vampire novels, such as Dracula by Bram Stoker, or seen any of the many famous movies there are on the theme. They smiled and replied:”No.” They were of course familiar with the blood-sucking count from Transylvania, but they simply did not seem interested in finding out more. When I asked them why, they generally thought that the Twilight-series and books like it were ‘enough’. It may be of interest to mention that the length of the books did not seem to be of any importance - i.e. the students were not intimidated by a brick of a book 600 pages long, if they found it worth their while and effort (see, for example the Harry Potter-series by J.K. Rowling, where the longest book contains more than seven hundred pages).

Initially I wanted to interview the teachers and send out questionnaires among students at my partner school in order to find out as much as I could within the time frame about their respective attitudes to studying the classics (Dörnyei, 2007). I unfortunately had to change my plans when I discovered that studying this type of literature was more or less unheard of in secondary school. It was widely regarded as something which has to wait until upper secondary school due to the proficiency level of the secondary school students being too low.
This is certainly understandable, and so I changed my focus to three large upper secondary schools in the area of Malmo and Lund. I also wanted to examine the possible differences in teaching English literature between various types of schools, and therefore I chose:

1. One independent school (a school which is not run by the state) in central Lund. The school is relatively new and small, and has a very good reputation for the study results among its students, which represent a mix of social backgrounds. Once the school was thought of as an elitist schools, a place for none but the brightest and most driven students, but this has rather changed according to a teacher I interviewed there (P).

2. One public school in central Malmo which deals solely with theoretical programs. The school is large, quite old and has a good reputation for its study results. The students are mainly Swedish and come from a rather good economical background.

3. One public school in Lund which has both theoretical and vocational programs such as motor engineering and construction. The school is large, quite well-known and respected and has existed for well over a hundred years. It has become known among students in the area as a school where many of the students are artistic since it has a well-known arts program. The students come from all kinds of social and economic backgrounds.

**Connecting the classics to the syllabus**

What do the syllabuses for English have to say when it comes to reading classic literature? Here are a few quotes from the syllabus for English in compulsory school, as stated by the Swedish National Agency for Education.

> The school in its teaching of English should aim to ensure that pupils
> 
> - develop their ability to reflect over ways of living and cultures in English-speaking countries and make comparisons with their own experiences,. (Skolverket, 2000)

This may not immediately make one think of the study of classic literature, but it can be included within the definition. As stated by Collie and Slater (1987, p. 4): [studying classic literature] “offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds...”
can be depicted.” That is, classics mirror the society in which they were written, just like contemporary literature, and that society forms the base for the one we have today. Therefore, studying these works gives the students an opportunity to understand the cultures of English-speaking countries from a historical perspective. The same argument can be used for the following demand:

**Goals that pupils should have attained by the end of the ninth year in school**

Pupils should

- have a knowledge of everyday life, society and cultural traditions in some countries where English occupies a central position, as well as be able to make comparisons with their own cultural experiences (Skolverket, 2000)

But, of course, there is nothing here that says that we need to study the classics to meet the demands of the course plan. There is not even anything here that says teachers should use fictional texts at all. But it turns up later on, and now classic literature specifically (or any kind of literature which is a bit older) seems to be slightly targeted. Below are a few quotes from the syllabus for English in the upper secondary school.

**Goals for pupils to strive for in English B**

The pupils should

- have a basic orientation to English literature from different periods
- be able to read, summarise and comment on the contents of longer literary texts

**Goals for pupils to strive for in English C**

The pupils should

- be able to read literature from different periods and different genres, as well as be able in their reading to reflect on textual contents and form from different perspectives (Skolverket, 2000)

Again, the syllabus does not specifically ask for the study of classic literature, but it does fit in well with the bullet points. Yet the syllabus is rather open to interpretation, for example “a few different time periods” could mean reading a book from for example the 60’s that is not a classic, just older than most books the students come into contact with every day.
What is a Classic?

The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again ... This is the artist's way of scribbling 'Kilroy was here' on the wall of the final and irrevocable oblivion through which he must someday pass.
- William Faulkner

classic
• Adjective: judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality.
• Noun: a work of art of established value
- The Oxford English Dictionary
(http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/classic?view=uk)

In order for us to talk about what a classic is, we should first address the term “the Western canon”. The word “canon” itself can mean different things, but refers in this case to “a body of literature and art which proponents claim is definitive of Western civilization” (http://www.knowledgerush.com/kr/encyclopedia/Canon/).

The Western canon is, more or less, a list of books which have had a great role to play in the shaping of Western society as we know it. It is a project which has been going on for quite some time and is one of constant academic debate. The canon usually contains works of fiction such as drama, poetry and novels etc. from various Western cultures, yet it has recently also included some titles from non-Western cultures. There are also many works of non-fiction included, such as works of philosophy, religion, science, history etc. There is no definitive canon. It is a fluid and struggled-over subject, and it has both supporters and adversaries.

What makes a work worthy of being part of the canon? Harold Bloom, an authority on the subject, says

… what makes the author and the work canonical(?) The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange. (Bloom, 1994, p. 3)

Bloom goes on to explain why we should read the canon. We should read it to “encounter authentic aesthetic power and the authority of … ‘aesthetic dignity’”. (Bloom, 1994, p. 35)
Now that we have a broad definition of why and what the Western canon is, how do we describe its content? More exactly, what is classic literature? Some criteria a classic should meet are the following:

- It usually expresses high artistic quality and value, dealing with the great themes of life. “High artistic value” refers to good language use, both in phrasing and in the choice of words.
- It stands the test of time, yet works as a representative of the time period in which it was written.
- It is a work that has a universal appeal. It touches us to our very core beings and deal with themes that are understood by people from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, experiences etc.
- A classic makes connections, meaning that when studied, allusions to other authors and works of literature appear (http://classiclit.about.com/od/forbeginners/a/aa_whatisclass.htm).

Neither does a classic have to be a traditional, written text, but could also be of another format (for example, movies). Here is a slightly broader definition of the word “classic”, derived from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic:

Books, films and music particularly may become a classic... A classic is often something old that is still popular. Some obvious examples are “Tom Sawyer” by Mark Twain, “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes” with Marilyn Monroe, “Heartbreak Hotel” by Elvis Presley. The list is long and wide-ranging.

A well-known phenomenon within culture and literature is the cult classic: a work which has gained a following of very devoted fans throughout the years it has existed (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult_classic). A cult classic, however, has traditionally had problems reaching fame outside the fanbase, except for in a few cases where the work has gained mainstream fame and attention, for example the Star Trek-series. In Translation and the Classic: Identity as Change in the History of Culture, Lawrence Venuti includes pop culture phenomena such as this in his definition of “classic”:
Any text can come to be designated as a classic according to an interpretation of varying complexity performed by a cultural constituency in some historical period, as have Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and John Le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*—not to mention *Superman* comic books… (Lianeri & Zajko, 2008)

Extending the term “literature” to include texts which are not written in traditional books is a rather new notion, sometimes called multiliteracy. Superman comic books are classic examples of its’ genre, but the characters and the story of the hero is so well-known in our society that he might as well take his place among other famous fictional characters of history. Classic literature blends very well into pop culture (in movies, books, re-imaginings etc.), and the results of my study show examples of this further on.

The problem with the canon is that it more or less demands the works included to be of a certain age. Some might claim that this is necessary when it comes to whether or not a work can be called a classic (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic), but for this degree project I will use the term in the sense of a work which is so well-known it has rather become part of the common consciousness. This means that I, when talking about classic literature, also include more modern works like *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, *1984* by George Orwell, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and other, more recent works.

**Method**

I interviewed a total of six English teachers at the upper secondary level in three large schools in the Malmö/Lund area. Originally the idea was to also interview teachers of English at the secondary level, but the immediate results of my research there showed that most secondary level ESL teachers feel that classic literature is too advanced for the students and so they let the subject wait until upper secondary school.

The interviews were made in order to find out what the teachers’ experiences and attitudes are concerning the subject of teaching classic literature. What have they witnessed in student attitudes towards the subject? How do they make it interesting and engaging? What would
they teach and what would they reject? How have they taught the literature and what do they themselves think of doing it?

The reason for choosing the interview as a method was that I wanted to do qualitative research, meaning that I was more interested in emotions, attitudes, feelings and ideas (Hatch, 2002) rather than percentages and statistics, which are the results one usually gets from quantitative research. This is a subject which lends itself very well to observation as well, but due to the lack of time and the shortness of the degree project, this was, unfortunately, not possible.

The questions in the interview guide were formulated with the research questions as basis. The questions were all open-ended in order to get as “free” answers as possible, and to open up for follow-up questions and letting the informant lead the way (Hatch, 2002, p. 95). The interviews were held in a formal way in rooms chosen by the teachers themselves in order for them to feel secure and in control. I wanted the teachers to feel relaxed and free to express anything they would like to. The answers I received to my guide questions usually lead to several follow-up questions from me, and this was intentional since the interviews were only semi-structured: that is, the interview guide only served as a guide, a skeleton structure to fill out with additional follow-up questions which were impossible to predict.

**Selection**

The reason for choosing these particular teachers was that they were all well-experienced teachers of English who had worked for a considerable amount of time and thus have to have touched upon the subject of classics at some point. I also wanted to see whether or not these experiences varied depending on what kind of students they taught. This made me go to three large schools in the Malmo/Lund area: one public school focused on theoretic teaching aimed at further studies, one independent school and one other public school focusing on vocational subjects.

**Data collection strategy**

In order to obtain the perspectives and experiences of the different teachers chosen, I conducted six interviews all in all. Most of the teachers were interviewed separately with the
exception of P and M who were interviewed together in order to save time both for them and me. I am aware of the idea that this might be contra productive because of interrupted talk (Dörnyei, 2007), but the interview went smoothly.

The questions asked were open-ended since I wanted answers that were as “free” as possible. The questions of the interview guide can be divided into two typologies (Hatch, 2002, p. 152ff): teacher attitudes and teacher experiences. They are not clearly separated in the interview guide, and sometimes the questions mix the two typologies (such as in question 4, which works as a bridge between the two typologies: “Have you/would you read an entire classic novel with your class? Why/why not?”). One could still argue that the interview questions begin asking about the teachers’ attitudes and then move on to experiences. At first they are asked how long they have been teaching and what kind of students they have (if the students are motivated, have good language skills and so on), and how they interpret and incorporate the demands of the syllabus regarding older literature into their teaching. Then come questions regarding the classic works they have used and how they used them, thus the interview goes from attitudes toward experiences.

**Procedure**

Prior to interviewing the chosen candidates, I sent them an e-mail or I made a phone call, where I informed them of the topic of the interview. I did not give them any of the questions which I would use. The reason was that I did not want them to prepare any idealized answers. I planned questions and comments that would hopefully function as follow-up questions so that I could keep the conversation going and encourage the teachers to elaborate on their experiences and their trains of thoughts.

The first three interviewees (J, S and K) I contacted by going to the school and seeking them out. I had already checked with the receptionist and knew that neither of them had any classes that day, but that they all would be at the school anyway, doing paper work. I also went to the independent school in Lund and asked for the other two interviewees (P and M), but they were not there at the time and so our meeting was set up via e-mail. This also happened with the sixth candidate. The interviews were held at the respective schools and recorded on a digital dictaphone. Since I was unfamiliar with the surroundings I trusted the teachers to choose a suitable room for the interview to take place in. Most of the time it worked fine, but there was a bit of background noise during the interviews held in the teachers’ lounge.
However, I did not feel that this disrupted the interview and the candidates did not seem to care about it either.

P and M were interviewed at the same time, and during my interview with S, J was also in the room (but not being interviewed). I was aware of the risks of doing this since one candidate might affect the answers of the other, but I experienced no such thing. Even though they were in the same room, they all answered the questions put to them individually without interrupting and commenting too much. In other words, there was no talk of how “we” teach classic literature; everything was from the point of view of the person being asked at the moment.

The first three interviews were all on the same day (April 15th 2010), at a public school in Malmo which focuses on theory-centered programs.

The fourth and fifth interviews were also on the same day (April 26th, 2010) at the independent school in Lund which also focuses on theory-centered programs.

The sixth and final interview was on the 21st of May at a public school in Lund where they teach vocational programmes such as the construction programme, the electricity programme and the vehicle programme, but also theoretical ones.

Previous Research

I consider this degree project worthwhile partly because the subject of teaching classic literature in ESL is not as common as one might think. There is a lot of previous research done concerning the reading habits and attitudes of young adults, and also of how to use literature and classics in the classroom (for instance, Att läsa skönlitteratur med tonåringar by Gunilla Molloy, 2003). However, this usually refers to the L1, in this case Swedish studies. The use of classics in English as a foreign language does not seem to be as investigated. In this degree project, I refer to a few specialized works concerning reading literature (of any kind) in the L2. These include:
*Literature in the Language Classroom – a resource book of ideas and activities* by Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater, a hands-on practical guide on how to integrate literature with language teaching.

*Teaching Literature*, by Michael N. Long and Ronald Carter, a guide on various ways of teaching literature to learners of different levels and how to relate it to their experiences.

*Teaching Literature in a Second Language* by Brian Parkinson and Helen R Thomas, a work on the language of literature and the language used in the classroom to discuss and work with the literature.

There are also a few sources of information on the literature list (see appendix) that are from the Internet.

I have also gained a lot from reading previous degree projects closely related to my own subject, for example the wonderfully titled “*Oh no not that boring old dead English guy with all his stupid boring plays...*” – *Teaching approaches to Shakespeare in upper secondary schools* (2009) by Gregory McGee and Tina Nilsson.

As for how literature, classic or otherwise, is taught in second languages, both Collie & Slater, and Parkinson & Thomas agree that teachers tend to take a rather traditional approach to the subject, turning it into a somewhat archaic lecture on the background of the text, its author and some basic facts concerning the text, more often than not a summary of its plot. This approach is called “rote learning” (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000, p. 27). The teacher might also read aloud from an extract of a novel, which brings to mind the teaching methods of archetypically Latin lessons in the early 20th century (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000, p. 27). Reading aloud rarely happens in Swedish schools these days, but if it happens it is (in my experience) almost always within the foreign languages, including English.

Something which usually goes together with reading aloud is translation of the text, either by the teacher or the students, sentence by sentence. This is not necessarily good or bad, but translation is generally not considered part of learning a language. It is more like an “add-on-skill” (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000, p. 28) which learners may develop later on after becoming more proficient in the goal language. Furthermore, when we read texts in foreign languages we do not translate them as we go on, but understand them directly.
Collie & Slater mention the difficulties of understanding the “intricacy and linguistic subtlety of the language” (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 7) as a reason for these traditional methods: the reading becomes such a massive linguistic process that the teacher feels obligated to lead the learners step-by-step all the way. They instead propose a more student-centered kind of teaching where the students get to interact and work with the texts themselves, for example in creative writing, role playing, making predictions etc (Collie & Slater, 1987, p 16 ff). This draws the learner into the text more efficiently and lets them make it something of their own. Parkinson & Thomas agree and have borrowed the five stages of working with a text in the second language classroom as proposed by Isenberg (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 109 ff):

1. Transformation (letting the students read an extract and formulate their own questions and thoughts about it at home).
2. Reduction (the students summaries the text in chunks, for example in relationships between characters, events, plot etc. to make the text more manageable).
3 & 4. Categorization and storage (the students categorize various themes and ideas in the book for analysis and discussion, for example Marlowe’s view of the indigenous people in *Heart of Darkness*).
5. Retrieval (the students are able to “go back” in their minds to the texts in subsequent discussions and for essay writing and exams).

The results of the study

For this part of my degree project, I have divided the results of my research into three main categories: background, purpose, and approach. The research questions ask for teachers’ past experiences concerning the teaching of classic literature (background), and their methods of making the classics relevant for the students (purpose and approach).

Background

Descriptions of students and local plans
All the teachers interviewed taught the three English courses at upper secondary school, and all of them had had some experience teaching classic literature, some more than others. They were all familiar with the syllabus for course B and the way it mentions texts from different time periods, and so the teaching of classics was in almost every case confined to course B. Sometimes classic literature would also appear in course C. Course B is described as follows by the Swedish National Board of Education:

> English B builds on English A (...) The course has a more analytical focus. The perspective is further broadened to cover the use of language in varying and complicated situations. Familiarity with English-speaking cultures is developed. (Skolverket, 2009)

When asked how the teachers would describe their students, the answers were mixed. The majority described their students as motivated and willing to study English, and that the students realized the value of learning it. Some claimed to have the entire spectrum of students from extremely motivated and driven to more lazy and immature students. N (who works at the public school with the vocational programmes) had the theory that this mixture had to do with the different programmes the school taught, and that when the students of various programmes were put together in the classroom, it created unevenness. At the independent school, one teacher claimed that the “quality” of the students had gone down these past few years: that the students they had dealt with earlier had been on a much higher level than the ones they presently had. When asked whether the schools had any standard classic works mentioned in the local course plans, they all replied no. The teachers themselves chose the works individually, the only author they all agreed upon as important and one that the students “needed” to know about was Shakespeare, who came up a lot during the interviews.

**Relating the classics to the syllabus**

When asked how the teachers related classic literature to the syllabus, there was a general idea that it was something which should be dealt with later on, maybe in the second or third year of upper secondary school. There was the opinion that the students would become frightened or stressed if given such texts too early. N spoke about how the teacher must be able to adjust the teaching to the needs and wants of the students, and still make it work along with the statements of the course plans, and therefore the issue of relating could take different forms.
In the syllabus for English B, it is stated that the students should be able to read and understand texts from various time periods, and I wanted to know how the teachers interpreted that, and how they practiced it in their teaching. The teachers all had access to some classic literature from the school: “I use the material in the course book” (K). The course book is of course the most prominent piece of material used in the ESL classroom, and therefore almost every book of the kind includes some form of classic texts, be it extracts from novels or classic poems. The idea seems to be to give the students bite-sized pieces of classic literature, making it easier to use and study. J also had experience of using the text book. In his case the book contained a short chapter from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. He, however, said that he had not had very good experiences using that text since most of his students did not understand it due to language difficulties.

J and S both said that they worked primarily with what they had in their office, and this ranged from extracts to film versions of a couple of classic novels. Films, the teacher all agreed, are wonderful tools for making the classics come alive, and they work for everyone regardless of the level of proficiency since one’s understanding of the work does not solely depend on how well one understands the language used. Furthermore, there are so many great film versions to choose from: BBC’s productions are of course well-known, but occasionally there come high-budget Hollywood versions which also have the advantage of being more familiar to the students.

Another teacher (M) worked more with extracts than anything else. She herself was “not that interested in the classics”, but she thought that the students needed to know about them. That common knowledge was a good enough reason for teaching the topic of classic literature and a good enough way of connecting it to the course plan.

M said that she had had the experience of having more than one student read the same book at the same time (here she mentioned *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald) and that it had worked out alright, but only one of the teachers had read an entire classic novel with the whole of the class (N). There were a few reasons why most of the teachers would not do that though, most common of which were the lack of time and the fact that the students would find an entire book too much for them to handle. Working with extracts made it easier for the
teachers to vary the study of literature, and the chance of finding something for everyone to
enjoy increased.

**Purpose**

**Making the classics relevant**

One experience which seemed to be shared by many of the teachers interviewed was that the
students might have difficulties relating classic literature to their own lives and experiences.
M expressed her thoughts on how the students thought the books were “old-fashioned”, that
they used dated language, and she also talked about how the students would complain about
the lack of action.

> Nothing happens even though there might be a lot of things happening: glances across
> the room and a lot of symbolism, the colour of dresses, you know, white dress for
> purity, and the red for, you know, older mothers, which I think they don’t really get
> until we start to talk about it (M).

All these are things that the students do not grasp since they are more used to what M called
“bang crash action”.

J mentioned Shakespeare, which he teaches during the B course. He talked about how he tries
to relate Shakespeare’s themes and characters to the present time, to show the students the
timelessness of the author and his plays. He did not talk much to his students about
Shakespeare as a person and a product of a certain time, but as the creator of “the universal
man” (J), someone who captured in words what it means to be human, regardless of what time
or society one lives in. Here, movies had a valuable role to play. J, and the five other teachers
interviewed, had used movies to show examples of how the classic themes resurface in
modern productions. One fantastic example, which J had used, is Baz Luhrman’s *Romeo +
Juliet*, a movie version which takes place in present-time Los Angeles (Verona Beach), and
replaces the two fighting families with criminal gangs of Mexicans versus Italians. Watching
the play from this angle made it more accessible for the students, and J had found that it
worked very well even among students who normally did not care for Shakespeare. He had
also tried other movie versions with varying results, but that movie seems to be the one that
stands out and works the best. It is worth mentioning that that particular movie does not
change the script of the original play: the actors speak the same lines Shakespeare wrote. This means that even though the language was the same, the change of scenery and social setting made the play more easily accessible.

S also talked about the ever-lasting themes of the classics with his students, but he also wanted them to think about the themes reflectively, about how the story of the work might have unfolded had it taken place today: “What would it have been like if Romeo and Juliet were here, today, in Malmo?” (S). This way the students not only talked about the themes of the classics but made them their own, as it were, and remodeled them slightly to make them fit into their own image of society and mankind. The difference between J’s and S’s methods is that J did not work with the language, or try to make it understandable to the students on an experiential level, whereas S did. He let his students play with Shakespeare’s language, modernize it as it were.

M and P were very used to working with film versions of Shakespeare plays as well. When I asked them about it, they explained that they did it because “it really brings it home to you, what he was writing about” (P). They both work with the more well-known movie versions, the ones students tend to know about (like Hamlet, Romeo + Juliet etc). This meant that they focused primarily on the tragedies and the more dramatic works of the poet. P said that he had never really worked with any of the comedies. He did not clearly explain why, but it seemed that it had something to do with the fact that the comedies were not as well-known among the students. J had worked a couple of times with a film version of a Shakespeare comedy (Much Ado about Nothing) and it had been well received by his students. He said that he did it to show the more light-hearted side of Shakespeare, a side that maybe not everyone knows about. J felt that it was beneficial for the students to see that Shakespeare’s plays were not only about death and tragedy, but could also be funny.

**Approach**

**Introducing the classics**

When introducing the theme of a classic author, S talked about the author as a person: the story of his life, the time he lived in and so on, so that the students would become interested in
the subject that way. He usually succeeded very well with this method, but if all else failed he would tell the students that “this is in the syllabus, we need to do this” (S).

Another teacher (K) usually introduced the topic in a mixed way: historically and linguistically. She would talk about the rules of society in which Shakespeare lived, and the politics of writing for patrons. Then she would explain what a sonnet is and read it out loud for students. The reason for this, she said, was “to show that you can read it normally, without fooling around, and read it like any other text”. She also explains the structure of a sonnet’s rhymes, and lets the students read the poems for themselves, marking words they don’t understand and reading to each other.

J had a more work-centred approach to introducing the classics. He felt that “there is a limit to” the historical context of the authors, their times and societies etc. Instead he focused more on the works themselves and their themes and plots. He felt that most teachers dwelled too much on the historical facts and figures of the authors and their works, rather than getting down to the works themselves right away.

N can also be said to have a sort of work-centred way of introducing an author. She would begin with giving the students a quote, a good one which made the students think and discuss, and then she would introduce the author and his/her works. She talked about the importance of relating it all to the students’ world, to their own way of thinking, and that this means that the teacher must find different approaches for each group. She had also tried showing the students a few clips from a biographical film about a classic author in order to awaken interest among the students, with great success.

**Various teaching methods**

There turned out to be a wide range of teaching approaches, even when the teachers interviewed were at the same school. Some teachers chose to stick with the traditional methods, others created their own and used outside sources:

We made a comparison with a play which was in town a few years ago called *Mohamlet* which took place in a restaurant kitchen, but other than that everything was the same (as in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*). They got to write down the central theme of the play as they saw it; everything was permitted in terms of interpretation. (S)
In my current B-class I introduced the theme of Romantic poetry, and we went and saw this film at the theatre, about the life of John Keats (“Bright Star”). A very beautiful film… appreciated by many. (N)

S and N were both very student-centred in their ways of teaching, and had both used role-play to an extent with their students. S let them recreate the scenes from *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* in a modern day Malmo, writing their own scripts and so on. He found this method to be extremely good, because it got everyone involved and interested, including the students who would not care too much for studying Shakespeare’s plays in the first place. This way the students not only talked about the themes of the classics but made them their own, as it were, and remodeled them slightly to make them fit into their own image of society and mankind. N had similar experiences with her groups in English C who dramatized various important scenes from a novel the class had read together. She also spoke of how the students themselves had held seminar series were they communicated their interpretations and ideas of the book and its themes to the rest of the class.

J’s methods were more purely text-oriented. He did not consider role-play a good method for his students, the reason being that it would be too difficult and take too much time. Instead, he relied on the texts he had at his disposal. For example, the students would first see the monologue scene from an old film version of *Hamlet* starring Laurence Olivier, then watch the same scene from another version starring Kenneth Branagh, and compare the productions, the way the monologue was presented via actor, music and surroundings. They later did the same thing with the “grave digger scene”. There was also a lot of reading out loud in J’s classes: one student would read one line and another one would translate until the piece was done. When I posed the question of whether he could imagine having the students do some sort of creative work, like role-play, he said that he could very well do that, that there are many Shakespeare scenes which lend themselves quite well to that. The problem with this, according to J, was the level of proficiency in the students: they simply did not understand the texts when it came to classic literature, at least not in the form of Shakespeare or Jane Austen (which the boys of the classes usually commented with a resounding “moooooeeeee…”).

A great commonality among the difficulties experienced by the teachers was the teaching of the language. They all felt that that was an obstacle which had to be overcome, and it was usually a difficult one. Everyone agreed that they had, at some point, had students who were proficient and “strong”, and to them the language came rather easily. J claimed that the
students even had difficulties understanding translations of classics in Swedish. N was the only teacher who did not “give” the difficult words and phrases to the students, but made them find them themselves using their computers. According to her, this was a much more efficient way of learning new and old-fashioned words rather than her handing out a list of words for them to study.

K had a student-centred approach. She would read/watch something with her students, and then put together questions for discussion, which the students would then work with in smaller groups. Some questions were related to quotes, some were open ended discussion questions. Afterwards she would go through the questions with the class and have each group answer each one, so that their answers built on the ones of the previous group. This way the students would get a fuller grasp of the subject at hand, and a better understanding of the language since they, in effect, worked together as a whole group, but in smaller pieces. K herself would also comment on this or that if she felt that there was something the students had overlooked.

Most of the teachers had very fixed ideas of how one should teach and treat the topic of studying the literature. They all talked about how one had to adjust the teaching to the level of the students, but only one teacher actually mentioned how to do that. Some students felt it was better to write analyses of poems and reviews; others were more comfortable role-playing and acting the work out creatively. Group discussions were a common thing with N: the students would sit in groups of maybe five people and discuss the current work using a couple of analysis questions posed by the teacher and then the whole class as a group would answer the questions together, just like in the case with K. N would also sometimes use more traditional, teacher-centred methods: the words “series of lectures” were mentioned, because that was what some students felt most comfortable with.

**Evaluation**

The most common form of evaluation was asking the students directly what they had thought of the project of studying classic literature. Written evaluations were more uncommon, and some teachers did not even mention evaluation at all, but saw the subject as part of the overall course and not some separate matter which needed its own evaluation.
Discussion

Language and relevance

According to Long & Carter (1991), the use of literature in the ESL classroom has been challenged more and more over the years. The idea nowadays is that teachers should focus more on the practical needs of the students than anything else. The learners should be able to speak and understand the language, and this is more important than reading and writing correctly. From what I have gathered, they seem to have a point. The teachers I talked to felt that classic literature did not give much when it came to language use since the language of the works is often dated, too difficult and poses too great a challenge to the students. In other words, the teachers did not teach classic literature because they felt that it would enrich the students linguistically. They teach it more for the reason of common knowledge, and because they believe that the students need to know some literature history. It is indeed true that a certain level of proficiency is required when reading the classics, but in my experience I have found that there is no reason that it cannot be combined with language teaching.

Furthermore, according to Long & Carter’s experience, the use of classic literature in the modern ESL classroom is something thought of as being taught for traditional purposes, that it is a remnant of the earlier ways of teaching foreign languages. Of course, the whole reason we learn a language is to be able to use it in practical situations, but in my results I found that no one taught classic literature due to any sort of tradition. True, there was the commonality of everyone using Shakespeare at some point, but the reason for this should be obvious to most. “You’ve got to do Shakespeare at some point … and that they learn about him is important, I believe” (N). “It’s the classical and the timeless (themes) in a way. It survived into our times and carried a message with it which was so important that if we forget that, we are not human anymore” (J).

Teachers have to have balance when teaching classic literature. The students must be able to understand the texts given to them, and this may sometimes restrict a teacher in their choice of texts. However, the access to the literature at an experiential level is more important to reading than a perfect understanding of the language. That is, the students must be able to identify with the thoughts, ideas and experiences dealt with in the texts they read in order to make them their own and understand them (Long & Carter, 1991). These two criteria
(language learning and relating the texts to the real world) were mixed well by all the teachers I interviewed, and most of them had a student-centred approach to it. That is, they did not simply make the students read on their own and then leave them to figure the text out for themselves. They engaged the students in using the texts actively: discussing them, playing with them, watching them in action etc. Thus, the structure and vocabulary of the language was taught at the same time as using it in various practical situations.

Only two of the teachers interviewed (N and M) had had the experience of reading an entire novel with their classes. The others all worked solely with extracts, shorter texts or novels read individually. At first I thought it was a pity that the students would not get an entire work but mere chopped-up bits and pieces of various ones. After having talked to the teachers I changed my mind since their way of working with extracts allowed the students to receive a wider range of texts to work with. This enhanced the possibility of every student in the class finding something that suited them, both when it came to language level and personal experiences. It made it possible for the teacher to show various kinds of language use from various time periods, as is stated in the syllabus for English B.

On the subject of language difficulties, Collie & Slater (1987, p. 7) say:

> Often the sheer difficulties of detailed comprehension posed by the intricacy or linguistic subtlety of the language turn the teaching of literature into a massive process of explanation by the teacher or even or even translation, with the greater proportion of available classroom tome devoted to a step by step exegetical exercise led by the teacher.

Some of the teachers expressed a similar experience to the one described here, and to them there seemed to be no way around it. They had to teach this way, because otherwise the students would not understand things properly. However, when compiling the results I found that there are other ways of dealing with language difficulties. N spoke about how her students get to use their own computers (leased to them by the school) during class to try and find out what a certain word or phrase means. This way the students would learn the language more effectively, according to her, since they had found the words out and learned them on their own. This is also a good exercise if one is aiming to proceed to higher levels of education since no one will hand out word lists at the university.
On reading aloud

Long & Carter (1991) are aware that reading aloud is common in second language classrooms in many cultures around the world. It is a tradition, as it were, and this might be one of the strongest and most commonly used reasons for this given by teachers: poetry and storytelling are traditionally oral cultures and have been so for a long time, and drama is meant to be acted out rather than read quietly.

Reading aloud was common among the teachers I interviewed, and none of them seemed to question it as a method of showing the text to the students. Their most common reason for doing this was that the language would be more easily accessed by the students and that they might get a new idea of the texts. In essence: listening to someone reading a work aloud is easier than reading the text. This is something I have myself experienced during my VFT: the language becomes daunting and almost frightening to the students because of its unfamiliarity. K talked about how she would read the sonnets aloud in order to show the students how it “should be done”.

Long & Carter are not against the practice of reading aloud, but they address a few possible problems with it. Reading aloud is an art form, and few teachers are trained in doing it “properly”, that is with effective pauses and manages in tempo and pitch. If the teacher means to read aloud in order to make the text come alive, doing so in a monotone voice is bound to fail. N had found a way around this: she used recordings of famous actors reading poems, like Jeremy Irons’s reading of Wordsworth’s “The Daffodils”. She also said that “poetry should be read aloud”. She did not mention anything about whether she herself read aloud, but she would let the students do so in smaller groups. The reason for this being that reading aloud can be an uncomfortable thing for many, especially when it comes to something like poetry which can be very emotional and/or complicated.

Different teaching models

Long & Carter (1991, p. 8f) describe three models of teaching literature:

The cultural model: a teacher-centred method used when studying literature, the idea being “to flee the text” as a work and focus on it as a product about which the students gather information.
The language model: a language-based approach which concerns itself with how language is used. It is usually more learner-centred and activity-based. The most important is reading between the lines and interpreting the relation between language and literary meanings.

The personal growth model: a student-centred approach where relating the themes and topics of texts to the students’ own personal experiences is paramount, this in order to motivate them. It is a mainly analytic approach and does not work well along with the product-centred teaching of the cultural model.

Perhaps the one coming closest to the cultural model was J. His classes were usually very teacher-centred with him lecturing and explaining the themes and topics of the works he had chosen, and then not working much more with the material than giving open-ended questions in class. There was no mention of any sort of creative work where the students got to make the texts their own, and it did not seem as if he himself had thought about it. However, he did say that it was quite possible he might use this kind of method in the future.

The language model and the personal growth model often overlap and mix, and this also happened in the literature classes of the teachers interviewed. The cultural model, however, also had a role to play. P mentioned how he usually introduced the theme of Shakespeare by lecturing to his students about the poet’s time and society, the politics and hierarchy of his time. “The way I introduce it all is based on history and then I talk about poetry and what kind of verse Shakespeare used” (P). This was also the case with K, who would explain the structure of the sonnet and then read one aloud to the students in order to show them how it works, as it were. M also focused a lot on the language rather than delving deeply into Shakespeare’s works. Her teaching was overall rather quick-paced since she feared that the students would lose interest, and this concerned both the teaching of the historical context, the language and the works:

I don’t go into details very much with his works, I use to stick to one theme or topic […] And you have to be careful what and how much you choose to show students these days because they will go ‘aaaarrgh, boring’ and they won’t understand, they’re not as susceptible (M).

Overall, I got the sensation that both P and M did not have very high thoughts of their students’ proficiency in English. They spoke about how the students had been more susceptible to studying the language at a relatively high level for upper secondary school, but
that this was no longer the case. “We were accused of being an elitist school, but we have more of a cross section now, a broader section of ability” (P). When it came to working with the texts the methods were recognizable ones: smaller group discussions and written analytical tasks, and M mentioned how she used something similar to a blog with her classes whenever there was a book to read. She would summarise the most recent and important events of the pages the students had for homework because she found that not many students actually read the books.

This suggests that more challenging teaching methods were not fit for the students. I was therefore surprised when I came to the public school with the vocational programmes where N taught. I found that the students there had more experience from more active methods than the students of a theory-centred independent school did, such as creative tasks. The students at the public school had a more independent way of learning, and the description I got of them from N showed them as more resourceful. From what she told me, it seemed her students enjoy the classics more and use them creatively. They also had classes where the teacher would lecture and explain contexts around the texts, but from what N told me there seemed to be more of a mix between teacher-centred and learner-centred teaching than I had found at the independent school.

**Conclusion**

The research questions in this degree project are:

- What are the attitudes of some teachers to classic English literature?
- How do some teachers describe their experience of teaching classic literature?

As for the first question, my findings show a mix in attitudes. All of the teachers saw the importance of teaching and using classic literature at some point no matter their own views on the subject, and they were all aware that it is required by the syllabus for English B. They all agreed, however, that it is not an easy thing to teach since it demands a certain level of language proficiency and maturity of the students. The general idea was that it is a difficult subject to teach, but usually very rewarding and appreciated by most of the students.
The teaching of classic literature was something thought of as important by all the teachers interviewed for this degree project, no matter their personal opinions of the subject. There was a general idea that the students needed to know certain things, and the number one priority for the English teachers was Shakespeare: his works, but also his time. He was the only one they all had in common and all brought up during the interviews, and it is not that difficult to understand why. The students were given the opportunity to read other authors and works, but then they would do so on their own and the choice of books would be theirs, if somewhat supervised by the teacher.

The methods used were a mix of a few different ones. There is no question that the traditional form of language teaching, with teacher-centred classes containing lectures and the teacher reading aloud, was very often used. This was considered beneficial for the students; it would simply make the subject easier. There is nothing truly “wrong” about this method, but in my opinion it needs to be combined with other, more learner-centred approaches. I got to hear about a few very good examples of this: otherwise uninterested students happily role-playing using their own scripts, the writing of imitative poems/alternate endings/new chapters etc, analysis questions, group discussions etc. The teachers also never relied solely on the written texts but managed very well to adapt their teaching to the students’ experiences through the use of films which showed various ways of interpreting the works. A few common examples were Baz Luhrman’s *Romeo + Juliet* and Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet*, but in one case also a biographical film about an author (*Bright Star*, a film about the life of John Keats).

In conclusion, the teaching of classic literature in the ESL classroom demands a flexible teacher who is willing to try different things and to adjust the choice of texts and methods after the needs and wants of the students. The language and the knowledge derived from studying the subject are the goals, but the best way to get there is to listen to the students and relate the texts to them and their personal experiences. Variation and the possibility of trying out different things in the subject of classic literature is more important than reading through one entire work simply for the sake of it, and because of this the teachers interviewed relied on extracts and isolated scenes from various film versions of. There is nothing that says reading an entire work is impossible, but it demands a lot from both the teacher and the students and can easily become too heavy a task.
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Interview guide

1. For how long have you been a teacher?
2. How would you describe your students (language proficiency, motivation etc)?
3. What classic works have you taught during your time as a teacher?
4. How do you interpret the demands of the syllabus regarding reading older texts?
5. How do you yourself feel about classic literature?
6. Have you/would you read an entire classic novel with your class? Why/why not?
7. How have you worked with the literature pre-, mid- and post-reading?
8. Have you found any specific methods better than others?
9. Would you use film versions of classic works or do you prefer written text?
Appendix 2

Interview with J

E: For how long have you been a teacher?

J: I began in 1978… 32 years then.

E: 32 years.

J: Yeah, all in all. First at secondary school, then adult education and now upper secondary.

E: Okay. And you teach all three courses right now?

J: Yes.

E: (after having briefly discussed Shakespeare) Have you worked a lot with Shakespeare yourself?

J: Well of course, but we don’t read an entire work in English, it’s too hard you see.

E: So what do you read?

J: We’ve worked with extracts from Hamlet, the monologue, so the students get to try it out. I take that monologue and then I show them two movies: one with sir Lawrence Olivier and then the one with Kenneth Branagh, and that way they hear the monologue twice with some alterations. I don’t spend more time on it than that because it’s simply too hard, the language. It demands a lot, even I feel that Hamlet is difficult.

E: Yeah, it’s a long one.

J: Yes, and sir Kenneth’s version is the play in its entirety, but the students who manage it are so few that it’s almost useless.

E: You mean they don’t understand the movie?

J: Well yeah, if they get subtitles.

E: Well, Hamlet is kind of heavy. What if you’d use something easier?
J: Yeah, I’ve got a movie version of *Much ado about nothing* which is really good, and they usually like that. So there they get to see that Shakespeare could be light-hearted as well.

E: How do you make this all relevant for the students then? I’m thinking of this modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the one with DiCaprio that takes place in Los Angeles.

J: Yeah, I’ve used it a couple of times.

E: That’s a good way of anchoring it with the students, or…?

J: Well yeah, but Shakespeare is timeless. The passing of time doesn’t matter to him, he always works. Some talk more about the time and the society in which he lived, what kind of person he was, but the plays tend to be forgotten. A lot about his time, Elizabethan England and all that, but there’s a limit to that I think.

E: Have you worked with the sonnets as well? They’re slightly shorter.

J: Yeah, I usually show them ”Shall I compare thee”, because most people know about that one. It’s mostly that they get to try it out, that they see that it is possible to read this ancient English and understand it. There’s nothing more I can do, I don’t have the time.

E: In the English B course plan it says that the students have to read texts from different time periods, that they have certain knowledge of literature. How do you interpret this? How do you use this?

J: I use it mostly in the way that I show them a few different texts from various time periods. So there’s no thorough studying, I don’t have the time for that. They get to read some texts, right, and then we watch a movie and we talk about Shakespeare and Robinson Crusoe, the Age of Reason in the 1700’s and all that, and when they see that one the usually think it’s easier to deal with.

E: Anything from the 19th century?

J: Well, we’ve got some anthologies where there is some to choose from. Then there are a couple of students who try reading. I had one who read *Oliver Twist*, all of it, and she made it, but she said it was tough.

E: Yeah, Dickens is rather heavy.

J: Yeah, and she did it, and I was impressed. But those students are rare, it doesn’t work…
E: So you wouldn’t read a novel with everyone in the class?

J: No, I don’t think so.

E: Well, Dickens might be a challenge, but what about more modern works?

J: Yes, that might have worked better.

E: Do you have any experience teaching more modern classics?

J: Steinbeck works, of course.

E: *Of Mice and Men*?

J: Yeah, that’s right. They read books themselves and I let them choose whichever they’d like, and that one’s rather popular. It’s short but good and full of action. *The Pearl* too, and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway is an easy one. Just because it’s a short book doesn’t mean it’s a bad one.

E: Does the local school plan mention classics in any way? Any standard works?

J: Yes there are. Everyone does Shakespeare, more or less.

E: So he’s mentioned in the local plan?

J: Nah, I don’t really know, but everyone does it and we use him as a starting point. Going back to Chaucer, that’s pointless. So we begin with him and then we touch on a few different time periods. With the Romantics we maybe do a poem by Shelley or Byron, but nothing more. I’ve done a few Edgar Allan Poe short stories as well, *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*… and that worked all right.

E: Any other big ones, Austen for example?

J: Austen, naturally. She was incredibly popular maybe ten years ago. Everyone read her books and there were a lot of movie versions made, right. But there’s always a certain group that sticks there and that’s girls.

E: Yeah, and she may not be the easiest one to read, but there are a lot of movie versions of her works. Have you used them?
J: Well, they’re all there aren’t they… I had a chapter from *Pride and Prejudice* in the course book which we all read together as we do. And half the class went “moooooeh, boring”… They thought it was too hard, the language was too strange to them.

E: Okay.

J: And then there were a few good ones who got it, naturally.

E: How would you describe the students here? Study motivated…?

J: We used to have more homogenous groups here, and then we could do more… Nowadays we have to mix and adjust, not everyone has the… neither the interest nor the ability. Maybe we shouldn’t make everyone go to upper secondary school. Those who aren’t interested maybe shouldn’t be here, that’s what I think. It’s just a waste of time.

(…)

E: How do you introduce a text or a film to them?

J: At first… I do pretty much the same as the Swedish teacher does; he works with Shakespeare some as well. They already know the story of *Hamlet* roughly, so I give them the monologue which I think they should have heard in English at least once. They also get to read it, we have a book with the English text and the Swedish translation next to each other, so they get that part of it too.

E: How do you relate the works to the experiences of the students, to their lives here and now?

J: It’s about the human being, right, a timeless perspective. The universal man, it concerns us all. It’s about how life can be rough, overcoming obstacles and difficulties; life isn’t just a game, hehe…

E: But how do they work with it all afterwards?

J: They get to watch the monologue twice, right. First off with Lawrence Olivier with him sitting on a rock and all, in black and white, very traditional. Then they get to compare that clip to the one with Kenneth Branagh who stands in front of a mirror at Kroneborg with a dagger in his hand, very refined. And so he does the monologue and they usually think that’s better, more modern of course.
E: Mmm.

J: He does it very well, I think… So there’s that, and then I usually take the gravedigger scene too, so they get to see that Shakespeare had a sense of humor too. Everyone always thinks it’s in the monologue that he holds the skull, but that’s in the gravedigger scene, and it has a sort of burlesque sense of humor to it.

E: Then what, after they’ve seen it, then what happens?

J: Well, then they have it there, in the archive so to say…

E: So they don’t work actively with it themselves?

J: Sometimes one of them get to read a few lines in English, then another translates and then we go through it like that, line by line.

E: Okay.

J: Parallel reading.

E: What do you think would have come out of it if they’d for example role-played a bit?

J: Yeah, I bet they’d think that would be fun, it’s not a bad idea. There are other scenes than Hamlet’s monologue, there’s the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*… Yeah, I could see myself doing that, then they would do it in English as well.

E: Yeah, it would sort of force them to learn the language.

J: Yes, ’cause you know, they don’t understand the Swedish translations either.

E: Mmm. So, when you mention Shakespeare and other classics, what kind of reaction do you usually get?

J: A mix. Some say “oh, exciting”. They know what it is and that it’s still such a big deal in theatres around the world, so there obviously has to be something special about it all, and that gets them curious. Others are not so enthusiastic about it, they just think it’s difficult and hard. But overall, the positive ones are the ones making the most noise, dominating the class.

E: What if you’d used a slightly "lighter”, less important author, like Austen or Dickens?
J: Pretty much the same, I think. The boys tend to go “aaah, girly stuff” and all, and it takes time to get into it. Crossing that threshold takes a couple of pages, and sometimes the threshold is simply too much for them. Too difficult.

E: What if you’d used a movie version? Would that have gone home with the boys too?

J: Yeah, for a while at least. Yes, I even think it might be easier for them if they get it served to them that easily.

E: Do you think of a movie and a book as equally useful?

J: Yes, and there are even films that are better than the books, such as Lord of the Rings, a lot of people thought the movies were better. A lot of them think the books are terribly difficult, they’re slow and there are so many descriptions. I personally liked the books better, the movies leave out a lot. Then again, it’s better than having seen the movies than not having read anything at all, the movies are better than nothing.

E: Do you think classic literature is important to use in English class?

J: Well, of course. Because they are classics, it’s the classic and the timeless, in a way. It stood out in a way that made it survive into our days, so it apparently has some sort of timeless message and it’s important enough that, if we forget it, we’re no longer human.

E: Beautifully put.

J: Yeah, that’s how it is. Being human is troublesome, it’s never been easy. There are always difficult questions to take a stand in, concerning all kinds of matters. Questions we will never answer anyway, unfortunately.

E: Have you ever felt like the classics did not work at all, that the class as a whole did not get it?

J: Yeah… That’s why I work with these movie clips and scenes, it’s easier than doing the whole drama. But once we went to the theatre and saw Hamlet on stage.

E: Ah, how did that go?

J: They really appreciated it, it worked a lot better. They’re not used to the theatre, they never go there otherwise. And that year there was an American theatre group in town, and they did Hamlet, and it worked really well. Much better than simply reading the text too.
E: Well yeah, plays are meant to be seen at a stage. But what about a novel then, what would be the best way to work with that?

J: In this anthology I have there’s a short extract from *David Copperfield*, which I sometimes give to the strongest students, right.

E: Mmm.

J: And that’s not too difficult, that book. Sometimes I’ve used the old, black and white movie version of *Great Expectations*.

(…)

J: Dickens is one of the greats, right. But doing it in its entirety, there’s always this time issue…

E: So the language is the greatest obstacle, it seems. Is it the grammar, or the vocabulary…?

J: All of it. There’s also the fact that it’s a bit slow and heavy, one has to really get into it, get past the first fifty pages.

E: You mean there’s a sort of mental barrier? That they don’t get it because they don’t have the energy?

J: Yeah, one could put it like that. They don’t have the energy to take that fight. I once had a girl who was going to read Wuthering Heights, but she gave up. Then there’s of course 20th century literature, like you mentioned *The Great Gatsby*.

E: Yeah, that’s not too hard.

J: Yeah, and Hemingway.

(…)

E: Yes, *A Farewell to Arms* is pretty well-known, but he’s also got some short stories that are pretty easy to read.
J: It’s hard finding a book which everyone in a class will enjoy. In the office we’ve got some books which we read with everyone, but they’re all more modern books, like *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* (by Joyce Carol Oates).

E: How about using simplified, abbreviated versions of the novels?

J: I think that’s wrong. It works at an early stage, but by now they’re expected to be able to handle a certain level.

E: But you just said they can’t handle it.

J: No, but is it really better reading one of those than nothing at all? Dickens, boiled down to that… I don’t know, honestly, it seems kind of pointless to me, better just skip it entirely or watch the movie instead.

(...)

J: You mentioned Orwell before…

E: Yes, *1984*, that’s applicable to our lives right now.

J: There is an extract from that in the anthology which I’ve used a couple of times, and I show them the introduction of the movie. The book is pretty heavy, especially in the ending when he explains how this society works. We’ve never read the entire book, but some have asked to borrow the movie and take it home with them to watch all of it. Then there’s *Animal Farm*, and that’s short and simple, can be read as a fable.

(...)

J: They’ve grown up with TV, some of them don’t even read books.

E: You think they lack the patience?

J: Yes, it seems like that sometimes.

E: But doesn’t it have to do a lot with awakening the interest of the students, to make them feel like ”this is about me, this is something I can use”?

J: Well sure, but not everyone can do that in English.

(...)

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J: Another author which could be counted among the classic ones is Agatha Christie, they usually like her.

E: Yeah, I liked her too when I was that age.

J: Yes, she’s common among them. We’ve got a couple of Ten Little Niggers here. But nowadays it’s called And Then They Were None. I could do that with the class as a group, that’s classic.

E: Of course it is. And crime fiction is big in Sweden as well, we’ve got a lot of that in the Swedish literature.

J: Yeah, and Grisham sometimes works as well, and Stephen King.

(…)

E: Okay, well, I think I’ve got enough for now. Thanks a lot for seeing me.

J: No problem.

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**Interview with S**

E: For how long have you been a teacher?

S: Oh, a great deal of years. My first began in the spring of 1976, but I’ve only been at this school for two years.

E: It says in the B course plan that the students should be able to read texts from different time periods, but you say you don’t use classic literature. How do you interpret the course plan, how do you integrate that demand into your classes?

S: We often read extracts from classics or a part of a classic; we’ve done that several times. But getting an entire class to read the same book, that’s… No.

E: What about poetry?
S: Poetry I use, like Shakespeare. They’re short and easy. I’ve got a class doing him right now and his poems work great for that.

E: What reactions do you usually get from your students when you tell them ”Now we’re going to do Shakespeare”?

S: ”Mooeeeeh”, I guess. But I’ve been here for so long that I’ve learnt how to sell it to them.

E: So how do you?

S: I start by telling them about Shakespeare and ask them to imagine that 18 year old boy who was forced to marry a woman who was eight years older than him, why? Then he got three kids and suddenly left. He just left and no one knew where he was for years. That makes them interested in Shakespeare as a person, and it works fine. If one looks at a work thinking about what it was like to live back then, then I can usually make them read classic works.

E: So you connect it with reality right from the start?

S: Absolutely.

E: But how do we connect it to the world of today? Why should we read *Hamlet* now, I mean?

S: Then we should ask ourselves: ”Why are these plays still being put up all over the world?” Right now this class I mentioned is writing, each to themselves, a short text about what the play is about (Hamlet), what the central theme is. Half of the class will say “vengeance”, and then they got the next task: taking this basic story about revenge and move it to present-day Malmo or somewhere else in modern time. They make it up themselves, write what it would be like, and then they put together a script.

E: Mmm.

S: We also did a comparison with a play which was put up at the theatre a few years ago, *Mohamlet*. It took place in the kitchen of a restaurant, but otherwise it was all the same. They got to write down their interpretations of the play, everything was allowed. But it wouldn’t have worked in the first year, it’s too advanced.

E: So you always put it up until second or third year?

S: Yes, I’d say so.
E: But if we leave Shakespeare… He’s universal, he works with everything, but what about other works, like Jane Austen. What are your experiences concerning that?

S: Well, that doesn’t really work with everyone. Particularly Jane Austen rarely works well with the boys, they don’t tend to choose her when they get to choose a classic book to read.

E: Do you ever show movie versions of the books? That seems to be a way to make it more accessible to everyone.

S: Absolutely.

E: Ever done that?

S: Not Austen, but they’ve seen Hamlet.

E: All of it?

S: Oh yes, the one with Mel Gibson in it. I liked that one.

E: I saw a movie about Frankenstein too in your bookshelf, ever used that?

S: Absolutely, good idea actually. I also did Richard III once, and that worked perfectly well.

E: Ever used the modern version of Romeo and Juliet, the one that takes place in modern day Los Angeles?

S: Yes, many times.

E: How did that work?

S: That went pretty well, actually. It was easier for them to grasp and I thought it was a great idea. There’s another one I’d like to get a hold of, the old Italian one. Sefirelli, the one that’s shot in Verona.

E: That one’s lovely.

S: I love using movies. I go by the new, broader concept of text and that includes movies so…

E: How come?

S: It gives them the literature in an easy, accessible way. It makes it easier for them to grasp it.
E: Have you ever experienced that the students didn’t get what you were showing them or telling them?

S: Yeah, I’ve had things that worked less well. Can’t think of any at the moment… Sometimes you don’t succeed in selling the subject to them, it’s a maturity thing. It’s hard, classic are hard. There’s usually a smaller group that it works with and they get to pick plays and books themselves… But they must’ve all read at least something, they need to know a few things about literature so we do Shakespeare to give them an introduction…

E: Classics are hard, sure. Would you read a simplified or shortened version of a novel or play or what have you?

S: Yes, I could do that. Speaking of which, in one of my classes they’re doing Shakespeare now and they got to read the modern translation of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*.

E: So they’ve modernized the language?

S: I’ve got another book here which they usually like a lot. Every other page is in Swedish and the others in English, so they can read the translation while they read the play in English.

E: And that works, parallel reading?

S: Yeah. Haven’t seen any other plays done this way though.

(...)

E: What about more modern classics, like *The Great Gatsby* is a short, simple book. Could you use that with the entire class?

S: Absolutely, and I have done it in the C course.

E: How did they like it?

S: It went perfectly fine. They thought it was a bit slow, there’s not much happening until the very end with the shooting and all. But they liked it.

E: Any other modern novels?

S: I used *The Catcher in the Rye* a couple of years ago and re-read it myself then. That worked fine, the language isn’t that hard and it’s pretty good. Yeah, I could see myself doing that again.
E: How do you work with the language of the books?

S: Oh, always. But I don’t use classics in order to improve their language skills, but we always comment it if there’s anything particular about it.

E: How do you make the students feel like the works have something to do with them personally, that they can be connected to their lives?

S: It’s all about connecting it to their time, making sure they can relate to what is going on by looking at their own experiences.

(...)

S: We once watched a movie version of *Animal Farm* and they made that just fine. We analyzed it afterwards and they saw clear references to Soviet Russia and the Communists.

(...)

E: Do you notice any difference in the students if they read a poem or a novel?

S: Some are right away openly negative to poetry.

E: How come?

S: It’s mostly the guys, they want to make themselves heard and protest. Then again it’s all about selling it in a way that works, and it usually does in the end. But spontaneously you get ”eeeeeeehhh”. But I’m also very clear with them that ”this is in the course plan, this needs to be done”. And when I choose a poem I pick one that’s well-known and liked, and I want them to discuss what makes it so. You might find something you like, even if it was just one line, then perfect, take that with you and forget the rest, but you still found something that caught you, why?

E: How would you describe your students? Study motivated…?

S: Yes, in general. There’s a great difference between this one and other schools. Here the majority really wants to study.

E: How do your students work with the classics afterwards? Do they get to create something of their own, or role play?
S: Oh yeah, and it usually works well. Like I said, they get to imagine and write about what it would have been like if Hamlet or Romeo and Juliet were here, today.

E: Is it always in writing?

S: Yes, everything is always written down, to make a script.

E: Sounds like a lot of fun. And the like it?

S: Oh yes, and... I had a group which read one of the plays and they thought it was kind of dull, but they liked doing this. They will do it. They feel it has something to do with them, and I give them a lot of knowledge and info, I almost lecture. I talk about Shakespeare’s life and what it was like to be him, to have to marry some girl because you got her pregnant. I also talk about England back in those days, what society looked like and what happened.

(…)

E: So you include the sociological and political aspects too?

S: Oh yes, I bring them up early. You’ve got to like find an issue that interests them so they can think “aha, so that’s what this is about”. They have to think about what life was like then. We’ve read Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal in English, and before that we had talked about the poverty and the horrid state that Ireland was in.

(…)

E: So you combine the English with a lot of history?

S: Yes, you have to, I think.

E: Okay... Well, I think I’m done here. Thank you very much for wanting to participate.

S: No problem.
Interview with K

E: For how long have you been a teacher?

K: I was finished in 1989.

E: Have you been here ever since?

K: No, I’ve been teaching at a couple of other upper secondary schools before.

E: How do you perceive this school compared to others?

K: I like it a lot here, prefer this school.

E: How come?

K: Well, I like the students, they’re very nice students that are good working with. Good staff, nice colleagues, I think it’s a very good school.

E: How would you describe your students in English class? Motivated…?

K: Well, we only have theory-centred programmes here, but that doesn’t mean everyone is motivated to study. I’ve got two classes in English B and one in English C this year, and one of them is extremely study-motivated and proficient. When they started they were past the A-course and had begun entering the B-course, most of them would be able to take the C-course this year. The other class is an ordinary class, some good, most of them normally talented, normal kids. They like English, they think it’s fun and the work well. They don’t always study, but I still think they’re good, but they’re not naturally at the same level as the other class. The C-group has a couple of very good ones, and a few who skip classes and are kind of lazy, not wanting to do more than necessary.

E: So generally you’d say that they’re somewhat motivated?

K: Mmm.

E: So if you had given them a classic work, for example a novel, how would they react?

K: Well, they choose that kind of books themselves, on their own initiative.

E: If you would read a chapter out of, let’s say, Pride and Prejudice together as a class, what would they think of that?
K: I have, and they thought it was fun. And then we analyze the language and differences and so on.

E: And that worked out fine?

K: Yes.

E: Interesting, I have had the impression that the classics are too difficult.

K: In the course book I use there are chapters from Dickens, Austen, a few different classics and it has never been a problem. A lot of the students, particularly the girls, love Jane Austen, and right now I’ve got a guy who read *Frankenstein*, and liking it a lot it seems. I think it is individually based, it depends on what kind of students you have in the class. If they want to learn and delve deeper into the language, they understand that they have to read other types of texts than the usual, spoken language-based text.

E: What about if you’d used Shakespeare?

K: Yeah, we do Shakespeare during the B-course.

E: Yeah, it says there that they have to be able to read texts from different time periods. How do you interpret this, how do you use this?

K: Partly through literature, I use the material from the course book. I also bring in texts, extracts, and let them try out different things. Then we do the Shakespeare-course as well where we read extracts, we go through the language, we watch movies and sometimes we use the play and the students act it out.

E: Ah, so they get to use it creatively as well?

K: Oh yes.

E: Do you yourself like classic literature?

K: Absolutely.

E: Why?

K: I think it’s an interesting document about the time that was, it’s often a testimony from the time it was written, especially through the language. You learn a lot about how people lived
then, how they thought, what the limitations and expectations were, and how society worked, how one described one’s surroundings. That, to me, is interesting.

E: Do you feel that it is relevant to the teaching of English as a second language?

K: I think we should show students that which they don’t already know. They should be able to discover new things and see them as meaningful and they should feel that they have use for it when they’ve grown up. They should know that it is there and that they’ve had an introduction to it.

E: So how would you introduce a sonnet by Shakespeare, say? Would you talk about him as a person, the society he lived in?

K: Yes, we’ve done that. We’ve talked about him and his time, the importance of his sonnets and the whole system of patrons who ordered them. I usually read them out loud to the students, and then they get to read it themselves. I read aloud first to show them that it can be read normally, that there is no reason to fool around but that it can be read like any other text. Then they take a look at it, read it and mark if there’s something they don’t understand. We go through the rhyme scheme of the sonnets, then they read them to each other, someone might get to read out loud to everyone, so we work pretty in-depth with them.

E: Okay. What about novels? Would you read an entire novel with your class?

K: I don’t read entire novels with them that often. I prefer that they pick the novel they want to read individually. I give them a few classic examples and they have to get their choices approved. I usually bring a little basket of books to class and give short presentations of each book, then they choose one. Sometimes they get to choose something I don’t have, but they still have to check that it’s okay with me.

E: Could you imagine showing them a movie version of a classic work?

K: Of course.

E: Have you?

K: Oh yes. I love Othello, and when we do Shakespeare I usually tell them that I’ll choose a movie. Everyone already knows the story in Romeo and Juliet, and they’ve seen that movie, but they don’t know Othello and it’s such a cool, powerful story. I’ve got one with Lawrence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh in a great Othello-version, and the students usually like it a
lot. When I introduce Shakespeare I tend to use the *Romeo and Juliet*-version with DiCaprio, the introduction with the news speaker. Then we compare it to the older Firelli version, that classic, very beautiful movie. We talk about different scenes, why the director decided to do this etc..

E: What about more modern stuff, like *1984* or something like that?

K: I could see myself using them, but I haven’t.

E: How would that have been then? Would you watch a movie again or stick with the book?

K: Most often you don’t have to watch an entire movie; you can pick a scene and focus on that. Some movies you don’t need to watch the entirety of, but may want to use to show a certain theme, and then a few scenes are usually enough. Other movies one chooses because it may be better to “read” the movie and analyze it like a book. I never show movies simply for the fun of it, I want to use it.

E: How do you usually work with it then? Written tests, discussion groups, seminars…?

K: I usually put together a few discussion questions and you can get movie quotes off the Internet. Some questions are quote-based, others are questions of analysis. They sit in group of maybe four and talk it over, and when they’re done we put it together. I take one question at the time and let the groups answer it one at a time, so the next group builds on what the previous one said. I also make comments if there’s something they’ve missed.

E: So it’s a discussion forum then?

K: Yeah, you could call it that, but one where I’ve chosen the questions.

E: How do you feel about creative tasks like role-playing?

K: Yeah, sometimes when we’ve done Shakespeare they’ve dramatized and it can turn out great. Not everyone likes it, but there’s always someone who loves it.

E: Have you ever experienced that you’ve used a piece of work and that it didn’t work, that the students didn’t get it?

K: Sometimes our opinions differ, like with Othello. They thought it was a bad movie because of something or other, and sometimes during the discussions it turns out that they’ve missed a couple of things and that when they find out more about them they find them more interesting.
after all. One has to remember too that some students are kind of immature while others are very mature, and that is of course rather demanding. At the same time they have to learn, that’s why they’re here. It doesn’t always have to be fun and games, it’s supposed to be educational and that’s where the teacher comes in. That is our role: being educational and make something boring at least interesting.

E: All right, I think I’m pretty much done here. Thank you very much for your time.

K: Thank you.

Interview with P and M

E: I play it rather fast and loose with the term ”classic literature”. When I use it I mean any kind of literature or author that has sort of become part of the common consciousness, that is, authors and works that one is expected to know of, so it could be anything from Shakespeare to Shelley, to Salinger and modern classics. Okay, for how long have you taught English?

P: In my case, more than thirty years. Not all at upper secondary, I came here to teach adults, so I’ve been an upper secondary teacher for ten years. Back in England I taught geography.

M: I have been teaching for twenty years, both English and Italian, and I think I’ve been teaching here for about six years.

E: What do you think of classic literature yourself? Are you interested in it or you could just as well go without it?

P: I wasn’t all that interested when I was a student myself, I didn’t read it until I went to university and got in touch with the…. Ehm… there’s a word for it, to gather it all… But, when I teach it it is not for pleasure, but because the students are supposed to know certain things about literature.

E: Yes, it’s in the course plan, isn’t it? Particularly in English b it says that students should be able to read and understand texts from different time periods.

P: Yes. The thing is, you said on the phone you wanted to know how we teach it. And I find that we were a lot more ambitious before, we had very advanced students who almost had an
elitist course, really, and they read at a level which I doubt would have been common at other schools.

E: Yeah, that’s the general idea I had of this place after having heard of it from others.

M: I must admit I’m not that interested in the classics myself, but I think that the students need to know about them, they should have that knowledge as well. I think we could kind of sort out what knowledge it is we give to them, so I work a lot with extracts.

E: So, do you connect it to reality, like talk about who this author was, what he or she did?

M: Yeah. For instance, right now my class is reading the great Gatsby which they described as slow, but still interesting, and most of them enjoyed it. I think students usually tend to talk about classics as older and old-fashioned. That’s usually the kind of reaction I get from them when it’s anything that’s more than ten years old (laughs).

E: Do you try to make the classics relevant, like showing how they reappear in popular culture?

P: Yeah, and what you’re going at there is very true with Shakespeare. No matter which play we use we can connect it to modern society, and a good way of studying Shakespeare is of course through film. So we show a… whatever it is, I’ve done Romeo and Juliet for instance. One year we took Hamlet… And the films really bring it home to you, what he was writing about.

E: Yes, and there are a lot of wonderful movies on his plays, of course. Would you watch the entire film then?

P: Oh yes.

M: Mmm.

P: But after having studied extracts, we always begin with extracts of some scene. But before we do any of that I talk about Shakespeare’s time, the cultural history of England in the fifteenth century.

E: Do you talk about Shakespeare the person, his life and what he did?

P: Not so much, no. I put him in the context of the power struggles which were going on during Tudor times, and how playwrights were kept in order to win the favours of patrons and
the royals, but also where the common person came in, since so many could not read and the theatre was the pleasure of choice for the common people back then, and how Shakespeare had to please the royals but also think of his target audience which stretched from the royals to the common man.

M: I don’t go into details very much with his works, I use to stick to one theme or topic. I’ve shown them *Romeo and Juliet*, both the modern version with DiCaprio and the Italian film from the fifties, I think. I compare to them how these themes are shown. And you have to be careful what and how much you choose to show the students these days, because they will go “aaaarg, boring”, and they won’t understand, they’re not as susceptible.

E: Why do you think this is?

P: Just the general trend, and that there are more students to choose from, and the students get to be more mixed except for at some communal schools that have specialist programmes. We’ve got more school places than we have students. There are fewer sixteen-year-olds now than there was ten years ago.

E: That complicates matters, I’m sure.

M: Yeah, hahaha.

P: Our school was accused of being an elitist school, but we have more of a cross section now, a broader section of ability.

E: What are the students’ reactions then if you say “all right kids, now we’re going to do Shakespeare”. What do they say?

M: It’s a mixture, really, because some have already done it…

P: I can’t say I’ve ever encountered any preconceived ideas.

E: No?

P: The way I introduce it all is based on history and then I talk about poetry, and what type of verse Shakespeare used.

E: “What is a sonnet” and so on…?

P: Yeah, we do the sonnets before we start on the plays.
E: Yeah? Any specific sonnet or you just take whichever? Got any standards?

P: There’s “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” of course, since most of them have already heard at least part of that.

E: What about the language then?

P: It’s challenging, and you need to translate old words for them, perhaps rewrite it in a more modern language.

E: Do you translate the entire text for them or just the difficult words?

P: No, just the words. And sometimes there is a use of dialects so then we have to deal with that.

M: I’ve usually found them quite positive. They really do try to understand it, even though it doesn’t always come as a sonnet. I don’t spend more than a couple of lessons on it (the language), I don’t spend more than that because I think they’ll lose interest.

E: So the students are kind of positive at least?

M: Yeah, I think so.

E: Would you say that the students here are motivated, that they want to study, maybe go to university later on?

P: Not very often.

E: No?

M: We’ve seen quite a lot who don’t want to go on to higher education immediately; they want to take a couple of years off and travel, do different things.

E: All right. Well, we talked about Romeo and Juliet, what about the comedies then?

P: No, never done that to be honest.

M: No, but the idea is fascinating. Quite often you stick to the most common ones, the ones that they know of.

P: The ones that are accessible.
M: Yeah.

E: *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet…*

M: Yeah, yeah, the ones that you can maybe find films about. We’re limited as well with budget also so obviously you can’t do everything; you need to sort of get the good things.

P: Mmm, same with Dickens, and Shelley you mentioned earlier.

E: Mmm, and Dickens are really thick books too.

P: Yeah, exactly.

E: So there’s a time factor there.

P: Yeah, and Jane Austen as well. Down to extracts.

E: Yeah, I’d like to bring up Jane Austen as well, because everyone knows about Shakespeare and can mention something he has written, but Jane Austen is usually thought of as, um, how do I say it, more girly, that all the girls read Jane Austen. So if you introduce her to students, what kind of reactions do you get then?

P: Actually you’re right there, the girls do tend to appreciate it more than the boys.

M: Mmm. I think that’s because of all the descriptions, although… I think a few boys have actually read her works for me, but they’re a minority. And they sometimes compare her books to Edith Wharton, but I remember the boys not liking that book… I think what the students don’t really like about the classics is that there’s no action, I think they want something to happen, and they say “this book is boring because nothing happens” when in fact quite a lot happens that is not the “bang crash” type of happening, but more kind of glances across the room and a lot of symbolism, the colour of dresses, you know, white dress for purity, and the red for, you know, older mothers, which I think they don’t really get until we start to talk about it.

E: But one genre where there is a lot of action is the horror genre, for example *Frankenstein* or the old vampire novels, and the vampire genre is huge today..

M: Yeah.

E: Have you ever tried a *Frankenstein* movie or anything like that?
M: I haven’t because I’m not too keen on that, hahaha.

E: No?

M: No, but one time of year I let students choose a book, as you do, and last year I had lots of reviews on the “Twilight”-series, and I haven’t actually thought about it but you could em, connect it to the old classics. Quite interesting.

E: Carmilla, Dracula…

M: Yeah, quite interesting. I’m not so sure about the boys, you know we talked about Jane Austen being a type of girl literature, I’m not sure how much the boys would like the “Twilight” series, I’m not sure how… I think some of them wouldn’t admit to it, hehehe.

E: That is unfortunate.

P: We do Shakespeare for a couple of weeks and then… It’s hard to get more time periods than that. We do a couple of novels in the third year…. Umm, what have we done, they get introduced to a couple of extracts from Jane Austen, they know what she’s about with all the feminist sort of thinking and they can relate to that, the trapped society of the time… Umm… So then in the final year I tend to move towards the twentieth century… My favorite book, which I’ve made everyone read the last years at least is The God of Small Things because it has so… Partly because it’s from a different part of the English speaking world, and partly because it has so many depths, so many levels to it.

E: All right.

P: Umm, so many different strokes and… it is a challenging book to read, and I have to re-read it every time it’s coming up with a new class because the story’s not told in a chronological order and I forget details, and an 18 year old coming new to it, they find it very confusing at times.

E: Yeah, that sounds complicated, how do they handle that book?

P: At the end, they all like it, I’ve heard good things from all the classes, but it’s tough. There we do much more in-depth analysis of characterization and the different relationships, the background and the past…
E: Yeah? How do you work with the material afterwards, after you’ve read a novel or some poems?

P: What I do that year, that is, while they’re reading it give them fairly open-ended questions which draws attention to the main event of the particular chapter or series of chapters. And then they do more analysis of the whole book at the end.

E: So there are a lot of written tasks?

P: There are a lot of written tasks, yeah. The stuff along the way is really for discussion in class or in small groups.

M: Mmm.

E: Okay.

P: And then they get quite a long menu of questions they can choose from.

M: I think nowadays you almost have to use like a blog, that we summarize what each chapter is about because I’ve found in recent years that not everyone actually reads the book.

E: Aha…

M: And so I started doing that.

E: To control it?

M: In a way, yes. And it also helps them because if you don’t do it like that you never get in pieces of work, you have to make sure that everyone has some information so you can check the end result, and also have discussion questions after the summarized chapters, and it could be that they sit in groups of four, so they can also cheat and only read the chapter that e said we were going to read and not read the other ones. But they have to relate their chapter to the group members and discuss open questions.

E: Have you checked it later on in discussion?

M: We do this later on in class and then I go around and listen to them and sort of ask them questions, I can stop and listen to the group discussing.

E: All right. Have you ever done any form of dramatizations? Do students get to act it out?
M: Unfortunately no because I haven’t got the time for that because that takes a lot of time, especially rehearsing, it takes a lot of time.

P: Yeah.

M: The only thing I’ve done again is that they’ve been allowed to add their own chapter. Like in the first year they did Big Mouth and Ugly Girl (by Joyce Carol Oates) and there they could either write an introductory chapter or a final chapter, so that’s the only kind of freer exercise I’ve given them, but this time limit, unfortunately…

P: And another thing we could do is, of course, act out a press conference, interview characters that have been involved in some incident and bring that up to a press conference of some sort. Or have reportage of some character.

E: Yeah. Well, the language of the older classic is of course a bit tricky, but in “The graet Gatsby”, it’s a novel which is a bit more contemporary, how did that go?

M: I don’t think we really had any problems…

E: No?

M: The last year was the first time I’d used it. I think it was because we went through the chapters together in small classes. No, I never kind of noticed any negative…

E: Do you have any standard works on this school, like “we have to do this and this and this some time”?

P: No.

M: We got the books and we do it because we think it works. I used The handmaid’s tale (by Margaret Atwood) which I don’t like but I think it’s an excellent book. We have very interesting discussions about it and the students usually get very interested in it.

E: But that’s a rather thick book, isn’t it.

M: Yes, but I think that most students read it, it’s quite easy to read, it’s not difficult. And there’s also that we tell the students that “we have to do these things because it’s in the syllabus, it doesn’t mean you have to like everything” and just because you don’t like it doesn’t mean you can’t do it, I think you can do it better if you don’t like it.
P: It might make you more critical.

M: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

E: *The Handmaid’s Tale*, would you count that into classic literature? It has been called one of the first sci-fi novels.

M: I think in a way it is because. . . The reason why we do it is because, she’s also Canadian isn’t she? So they get another… look… rather than only American and English.

E: On that note, would you ever do a poem written in dialect? Like Robert Burns wrote in Scottish…

M: That’s right. Mmm…. Yeah, I think I’d do it more just to get an example of, I don’t think we would spend a lot of time on it. But I would maybe just introduce it as an example of Scottish poetry. The important thing is that you have to understand it yourself, and if you don’t understand it yourself you can’t use it, hahaha.

P: That word just came to me now – the canon.

E and M: Aaah, yes…

P: We don’t use that book anymore, there was a course book that we started out with a couple of years ago, and it had little biographies of different authors belonging to the canon…

M: See the conflict might be that it’s slightly different for teenagers now…

E: The problem with the canon as well is that it’s not something carved into stone.

P: Yeah, and modern authors win a lot of prizes and so they automatically become classics, that’s the time right now, and if it’s in England or America, that often sets the tone for literature studies in others parts of the world.

E: Would you maybe use an abridged version of a book?

P: If we had someone at that level, yes. The thing is, we do runt the Cambridge exam here. A few years ago there was no literature option in the exam, now there is. And we don’t include it because of the time, it’s just distracting. The students should focus on the language instead of reading another book.
E: So when you use novels of any kind you see it more as a cultural experience than as one of language?

P: No no, I’m not saying that. But that’s the purpose of the Cambridge exam.

E: All right.

P: And the questions you get in a language exam… it’s too strict, really, to review or pick up a main theme, you’re only required to write 250 words or something like that, when we, at least in the third year, want to focus more on analytical studies. I don’t need to be bothered by that, we’ll do our novel anyway, but now we need to focus on the exam. In the autumn term I focus mainly on the exam and then in November I introduce one of the novels. The exam is then in March or June.

E: All right. Well, I’ve kept you here for longer than I was supposed to actually, but thank you very much.

Interview with N

E: For how long have you been a teacher?

N: Oh, what could it be… 16 years.

E: Okay. Have you taught English the whole time?

N: Yes, English and Swedish.

E: How would you describe the students in general? Are they motivated, do they like studying?

N: Well, we have a mix. We have students who are very good and we have those that are less motivated. It depends a bit on the subjects and programmes. We’ve got all sorts, we’ve got… natural science, arts, construction, so the students are different too.

E: Mmm. Which programmes do you teach then?
N: Right now I’ve got… I’ve got all of them. It’s usually a mix since I teach English C which is an individual choice, which means that I get a mix of students from various programmes.

E: How do you yourself feel about classic literature?

N: Yeah, well… I read all kinds of books, I like a mix. Right now I only have the time to read what the students are reading. We also use some of the old classics, and we have a lot of students here who ask for classic literature, who want that kind of knowledge.

E: Okay. The course plan for English B says that the students should be able to read texts from different time periods, know a bit of history and so on. How do you use this when you teach?

N: Mmm, most often in various ways. Sometimes I’ve held series of lectures with a written test at the end, and sometimes they focus more on one particular author, or they get extracts from several authors.

E: Mmm.

N: Then I try to show them how… literature comes back. To show that there are connections between what was written then and what is written now.

E: That literature resurfaces.

N: Mmm. But to answer your question, it kind of depends on the students: what they want, the knowledge they already have, their motivation, it all varies a lot. In my B class this year I talked about the Romantics and we went and saw this movie about John Keats (“Bright Star”).

E: Okay. I didn’t know about that one, was it good?

N: Yes, it was great, a very beautiful movie. And then we did a lot of the Romantics, especially the poetry.

E: And how did it go?

N: It went well, a lot of them liked it and some even said “I’ve started writing myself”. They thought it was fun to analyze the poems, look at personifications and all that. It felt good, I thought.
E: That must’ve been a treat to hear, that they do their own writing. Do you have any standard works that you use, any standard authors?

N: Well, you’ve got to do Shakespeare at some point, and he usually turns up during the B course. Sometimes it’s been in cooperation with Swedish, sometimes with history class… That they get something of Shakespeare and know a few things about him is important to me.

E: How do you introduce a work or an author to the students, how do you sell it to them?

N: Hmm… That varies too. I try to connect it with their own frame of reference, their world in a way. It could be that I begin with a quote from this author which is thought worthy and good, that they get to think about the quote before I tell them about who said it.

E: Okay.

N: Or like now, with this Keats-movie, you can show them clips and scenes from that to make an introduction. I think that’s what I did. But most of all, the important thing is to show them that these ideas and thoughts people had back then are the same as we do now.

E: The eternal themes.

N: Yes, exactly. That people have always been people.

E: How did you work with the poems you used then? Did you read aloud to them, did they get to read them on their own?

N: Both, and we also listened to a recording of *The Daffodils* by Wordsworth, read by Jeremy Irons, a clip that I found, and he’s got an amazing voice. So they heard him reading it, and they read it to each other, I think poetry should be read aloud.

E: So you do it all together?

N: Nae, there’s never one student reading alone. It’s more that they read in smaller groups. It might be a bit uncomfortable, reading aloud to others.

E: But there’s only one poem, and they’re split into groups discussing it?

N: Mmm, and they get a set of analysis questions to discuss. That way the separate groups find different answers which we then bring up in a whole class discussion. Often they see and bring up completely different things.
E: And that works all right?

N: Yes, I think so. Not everyone is a poetry buff, but some are. That’s the way it is, you can sow a little seed in some of them, but not everyone.

E: What about novels or short stories? Ever used anything like that?

N: Well yes, they read novels a lot, at least one every semester.

E: Do they have different ones then or do they all read the same one?

N: It happens that they read one and the same, yes, so that we can talk about it as a large group, but most of the time they choose from a list of titles I have.

E: Any examples?

N: Well, in one of my classes they’ve read *A Room with a View*, they’ve read *The Millstone*, they’ve read… Yes, some of them read *The Grass Is Singing*, they specifically wanted to read classics. Some read *The Star of the Sea*, if you know what that is.

E: Yeah, that’s a historical novel too.

N: Yes, exactly. They wanted to read that one because we had worked both in history and English class with emigration, and it fitted in really well with that book. Sometimes an idea can come from something you’ve done previously. They are presenting it in a series of seminars to the class, and the others get to answer a few questions in groups. I work as the leader of the seminars, I listen to them, ask questions, and it’s been very nice I think, it’s nice to present novels that way.

E: Yes, it sounds like fun. Do they get written tasks as well, like reviews and such?

N: Oh yes, absolutely. Last time they got to write a literary analysis where they also had to refer to quotes from the book to prove their points. They started with an interpretation of the book and then had to argue it, and it worked pretty well.

E: That seems rather ambitious.

N: Yes, some students find it difficult, and then you have to explain it to them, what you mean and all, and help them out a bit. You can’t just leave them to it on their own, you have to make sure that they have the guts to ask you for help if they need it.
E: Have you ever used any creative tasks where they make something of their own? Like writing an extra chapter, making up an alternate ending, role playing?

N: Yeah… I have a small group of student in year one at the moment, kids with learning disorders of various kinds. They read *Stone Cold*, a thin book about a homeless man, and they got to write a continuation of it. What happens to him later? Does he get out of his situation?

E: Okay.

N: My English C group dramatized, they all read the same novel. They got to pick some central scene to act out. The students who pick English C are very proficient and they did a great job of it. It was a little different from just doing written presentations.

E: How does the language work with them?

N: Well, at first they might say ”gaah, this is too difficult, weird words, what’s going on”, but they get to work with it for a while and then… They have a lot of use for their computers now, all the students have their own computers, and they search for answers and help using them. You sort of force them a bit to look at this one word and find out for themselves what it means, that’s also a way of learning language.

E: So you don’t give them the words but let them find them themselves?

N: Most of the time they get to search on their own. Unless they’re “weak” students, then they get some help.

E: Sounds like pretty independent studying.

N: Yes, and I think that when it comes to language, that’s the way to go. That’s a way of learning as well: finding the word, writing it down, and it lets them learn new words more actively than simply writing a list of words.

E: It might be tricky to read, for example, Dickens with an entire class, but there are a lot of movie versions of classic works. You mentioned the Keats movie, any others?

N: Well, there’s this one called *The Hours*, for example, which is great. I’ve shown them that, but at the moment I can’t think of any others. Most of the time I just use scenes, but we saw all of *Hamlet* at some point, I remember.
E: Have you ever noticed a gender difference when it comes to the students’ attitudes concerning classics?

N: Classics… No, not particularly. It’s a bit of an issue of maturity, and the girls at upper secondary are usually a bit more mature than the guys, but I’ve seen a lot of guys that are interested in classics as well.

E: How do you evaluate it all afterwards?

N: Most often they do some sort of written evaluation for every part. Sometimes I just ask them right out what they thought of it.

E: Have you ever experienced that they did not understand the poem or extract you gave them, that it all fell flat so to speak?

N: I’m sure that happens sometimes, that things fall flat, hehe. There’s always a few, you know, you can’t sell it to everyone. There’s always someone with their mind somewhere else, someone who’s only present physically, but that’s the age too. With poetry it usually is that some like it and others think it’s just blablabla, and in that case you have to adjust yourself to the students.

E: Have they ever written something of their own, like poems, during class?

N: It happens, how did we do that? I don’t think I’ve done it at all this year, but they have done it before, they wrote poetry inspired by the Romantics where they tried to imitate their style with the personifications, metaphors and all, but I haven’t done it this year.

E: Do you talk about the history around the literature as well? Like with Shakespeare, do you talk about his time and society or do you focus on his works?

N: No, I also talk about the world around it. It’s part of the B course that they be able to put the literature in its context. For this seminar they’re doing now, they’ve received instructions on how to do that, how to explain the environment this book fits into and so on.

E: Maybe then you can also catch the ones who aren’t that interested in classic literature or English, but who might find history fascinating.

N: Yes, certainly.
E: All right, I won’t keep you any longer. Thank you very much for wanting to participate and seeing me.

N: No worries.