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When Comparative Literature Becomes Cultural Studies:  
Teaching Cultures through Genre

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The Comparatist, Volume 29, May 2005, pp. 123-147 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2006.0003>



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## When Comparative Literature Becomes Cultural Studies

### *Teaching Cultures through Genre*

A rapprochement in the classroom between the traditional elements of comparative literary study and the political and methodological imperatives posed by the turn to cultural studies is long overdue.<sup>1</sup> The teaching of literature in the 1950s and 1960s was largely an exclusive, intrinsic enterprise, stressing period, genre, and formal features of written texts, and in the comparative context, many of the same habits were preserved. Yet in the course of the “canon wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, training in literature changed radically, from the pedagogy associated with New Criticism (“close readings,” *explications de texte*), often formalist in inspiration, to pedagogy based on cultural studies and various reader-centered approaches (the most familiar of which appeared under the rubric of the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”). On the scholarly front, comparative literature has in many ways led the charge because of its early attention to postcolonial studies, a classic setting for studies of meetings between dominant and nondominant cultures and for debates about the impact of national literature canons.

For the most part, however, our classroom practice has not caught up with that shift: we have few models for transferring our scholarly theories into classroom practice, whether in the classroom in general, in comparative literature, or in foreign-language literatures. Nor have we projected into the classroom the implications of our focus on textuality as a privileged material form of culture, as the larger field of cultural studies would define it. Nor, finally, have genres been reclaimed as specific, established, and extended patterns of communication within cultural contexts—the textualities that constitute channels of cultural power.

The typical offerings of an undergraduate literature major up into the 1980s, for example, were often organized around period surveys, movements, or genres. “Comparative literature” tended to be a specialization at the graduate level, in no small measure because of its preference for reading literature in original languages rather than in translation. Although the tools of formal genre and period analysis that had for decades been the backbone of pedagogy in literature classrooms were gradually abandoned, little has replaced them, except scholarly study of identity

politics as it is represented in texts. There has, for example, been no systematic attention to a pedagogy that would help novice readers learn how to associate a text's narrative point of view with its identity politics—how to *read* identity politics out of the text, rather than adducing it from general social stereotypes.

I will argue here that “learning to read literature comparatively” and “learning to do critical cultural analysis” can and must be put on a continuum, in a constructivist, activist, and multilayered approach to teaching students how to read literatures in cultural contexts, comparatively and otherwise. The concept of genre is, I believe, particularly fruitful for the discussion, since it provides a convenient heuristic for talking about patterns of communication and conventions that appear in all cultures (hegemonic or subaltern), albeit in different ways, and which are used as the points of “judiciousness” (Lyotard) around which nodes of cultural power and disempowerment rise.

While the following discussion is based on a large body of research on teaching and learning, I will present my suggestions as a model framework for teaching practice.<sup>2</sup> The framework is anything but a modest proposal, however, because it works from the premise that teaching literature and cultural studies is both a necessary activity and an unaddressed need in today's postsecondary educational institutions. As I see it, the last two decades have called traditional canonicity into question but have developed few if any approaches to teaching literature compatible with a new focus on its cultural contexts. Thus, I will argue, in abandoning a blind faith in high literature and New Criticism we have sacrificed a concrete (if unacceptably limited) pedagogy for teaching students how to read texts, but we have not replaced it with a pedagogy for critical cultural studies.

#### TOWARD A NEW PEDAGOGY OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

The limits of older approaches to comparative literature are familiar to today's scholars and students (see Bernheimer). Earlier scholars of comparative literature, for example, traditionally defined their areas of specialization in terms of countries studied; period; genre; and problems, themes, or approaches, with the traditional high canon as their focus. The set of decisions created a specific (and perhaps overly narrow) definition of literacy, which privileged “great” literature, with “great” defined specifically as referring to a work's formal perfection in conveying its messages. The traditional “period, genre, and problem” professional identity for the comparative literature specialist also favored a set of hermeneutic and scholarly practices anchored in elite culture and literacy.

The elite-culture assumptions behind such practices, such as judgments about purportedly value-neutral abstracts like “beauty,” have long been revealed as exclusionary. In consequence, today's literary and cultural studies set new goals for

their interpretive practices: analysis of cultural processes, especially those relating to identity formation, inclusion, marginalization, and exclusion. In consequence, new textual canons purportedly worthy of study have also emerged, especially including texts that respond to specific cultural contexts, not just to the aesthetic and social codes of high culture. As teachers, literature scholars have embraced new canons for their teaching.

Yet the methods for teaching the new canons of texts—how to teach students to read texts in cultural context, and to read critically—have not been outlined in anything like a developmental sequence. Pedagogical tools are lacking that might help students become “literate readers” attuned to the new sets of problems and that might inculcate the habits of mind that recent scholars have privileged (Bernheimer).<sup>3</sup> The older canons’ approach through “period, genre, and problem” was shorthand for a specific kind of content literacy (a set of facts that needed to be mastered) and a set of skills for research and analysis that correlated with elite culture norms; at the same time, “period, genre, and problem” had at least been defined in systematic ways that could be taught. The traditional framework, today often abandoned, not only reified an ideology but also made concrete links between what scholars did and what students were learning to do.

“Genre,” “period,” and “movement” studies, for example, have their own imperatives. Genres are conventionally defined in formalist terms, as structural conventions that allow literary works of art to emerge within specific intertextual traditions. Each formal genre (e.g., *Bildungsroman*, Shakespearean or Petrarchan sonnet, or closet drama) is defined by characteristic linguistic features and rhetorical conventions (who is speaking, in what ways, and about which topics). Each “period” rubric is an umbrella term summarizing aesthetic and related sociopolitical issues from a particular historical era, and often as the articulation of the particular interest of identifiable institutions or of groups of artists. The third organizer, “movements,” is conventionally defined in terms of linguistic–stylistic or cultural–philosophical programs that privilege certain linguistic, stylistic, or topical markers and themes within specified historical contexts (e.g., “Impressionism,” “Naturalism,” or “Modernism”).

Under such rubrics, works, artists, or activists were associated as representatives of particular ideologies (aesthetic, social, or otherwise). “Comparing” such systems was straightforward: the English novel versus the French novel, the eighteenth-century novel versus the realist novel in more than one national literature. More recently, the turn to cultural studies has entailed that such terms and value scales receded in importance, because a focus on genre norms or stylistic epochs has tended to reify as most important the aesthetic values from dominant and often elite cultures. “Belonging to a period” or “a good representative of a genre” judges a text against a normative value scale and hence begins to put into play relatively pre-

dictable patterns of othering and marginalization. Texts written by certain groups (in whatever they define as their own favorite patterns or genres) thus emerge in these comparative contexts as favored or dominant, others as subaltern, marginalized, or completely rejected.

In the classroom, practice in paradigms of “comparison” was easily staged, because the unit of analysis was defined in terms of specific formal features (e.g., how many lines, what language conventions, what types of genres were perceived as appropriate tools for authors to wield in their causes), in basic historical contexts (e.g., the novel, before and after the French Revolution; the tragedy in eras when one believed in fate or in social Darwinism). Still, a clear gap emerged when the scholars teaching formal features started characterizing them as “well-wrought urns” in Cleanth Brooks’s sense rather than simply as well-made documents of culture. “Well-wrought” works of literature could indeed be traced and taught as complicated verbal art, yet to do so privileged a very small range of aesthetic ideologies — and, of course, ideologies only approachable in their original languages.<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s, however, scholars and teachers no longer started their analyses with formal features of texts, but rather with their valuation and affect — with the question about which texts “serve” which parties’ objectives, at which particular costs or benefits to the cultures in which they appear. At that moment, literary studies were on the way to becoming cultural studies. Answers to the questions are found not necessarily in analyses of works’ structures, but more likely in the texts’ plots and themes as correlates to historical or cultural debates, not just to aesthetic values: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959) represents the condition of the postcolonial subject; Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), the legacy of the postslavery subject. If texts were compared across national lines, they could be considered representations of social and political marginalization, at different times, as portraits of different gender positions, in the contexts of different national traumas. Still, comparative *cultural* studies of this sort are by no means comparative *literary* or *textual* studies.

The comparative literature redefined by approaches through cultural studies has not redrawn what the act of comparison might mean with respect to literature, either in the classroom or in scholarship. To work in themes or plot elements alone does not necessarily elucidate the materialities of texts or their service to ideologies — how *literature* specifically functions to communicate marginalization, for example. Part of the lacuna has historical roots: formalist definitions of genre and aesthetic definitions of period and movement, all reflecting the codification of categories within dominant cultures, have been largely abandoned as exclusionary practices of literacy, an abandonment that, I believe, has impoverished our vision about what might be taught, learned, or studied specifically in the contexts of *literary* study. Studying genres, movements, and periods can answer to the desiderata

of cultural studies, when genres, movements and periods are approached in terms of their textualities, as differentiated sites of communication. As communication patterns, genres need to be seen as potentially removed from and by no means automatically isomorphic with common cultural concerns.

Put more concretely: In terms of their acts as commentators on marginalization, authors like Achebe and Morrison are not only critics of their nations, they are also authors—or better, participants in the various “author functions” outlined by Michel Foucault. Some of those author functions are indeed explicitly ideological: the author positions texts within a social-historical context, using representations and semiotic materials generally shared within that context. The author, however, also positions texts within the textual materialities of a culture—within the traditions of literature. When authors tell “coming-of-age stories,” for example, they may also be negotiating their culture’s expectations about differing representational conventions in novels and journalistic feature stories, biographies, and conventional diaries, and perhaps even television and film. Each author is engaged in an act of communication within a specific historical context—ideological and textual.

Such acts of communication can, I believe, create a new model for teaching comparative literature in a way that can set the discipline off from cultural studies, cultural history, or mass-culture studies. The comparative literature classroom that results will speak about texts as genres, as acts of communication structured in ways recognized by their user groups. Each such group, in turn, will be revealed as hegemonic, or not; its favored texts may or may not be “literary” in the historical sense, and may or may not be part of traditional print culture. That is, a new generation of comparative-literature teaching can be built around notions of *genre*, *textuality*, and *intertextuality* within cultural contexts, taking texts as materialities of communication. Without such attention to texts and communication, there would be few (if any) features distinguishing what is done in literary studies (comparative or national) from what is done in cultural history or cultural studies—or anywhere else in the humanities.

Traditional literary-textual studies can be reframed straightforwardly to accommodate today’s cultural-studies perspective in the classroom, in order that the critical intelligence valued in today’s readers be teachable through approaches to critical cultural literacy. That will involve, I believe, teaching students how to bridge the skills of traditional close reading with other kinds of reading that point more directly to cultural identity politics and ideologies. That is, a new comparative literature can teach how linguistic, rhetorical, and other kinds of textual markers are manipulated at real communication sites to express, coopt, and manipulate the psychosemiotic materials through which individuals gain agency, enter cultural groups, cross cultural lines, or suffer marginalization.

Let us now turn to a reconceptualization of what genre is in this new framework, before addressing what stages in teaching and learning genres might be built into a typical comparative literature curriculum.

#### REDEFINING GENRE

As reified in literary history, “genre study” has been a project of western literary aesthetics. As European literature was cultivated in progressively more rarefied high-cultural forms after the Renaissance, the “epic, lyric, and dramatic” modes, purportedly grounded in Aristotle’s poetics, took on specific forms, such as Petrarchan sonnets or Shakespearean tragedies. Their provenance allowed certain literary texts to be considered canonical when they conformed to such late-Aristotelian forms. Russian formalists knew, for example, that their indigenous folk literature was not included; other genres, such as today’s Japanese illustrated novels (*manga*) or historical genre forms (such as story cycles in the vein of the *Arabian Nights*), did not fit into the templates. That kind of exclusion points to a shortsightedness in traditional genre theory that postcolonial cultural criticism has rightly criticized as siding with a normative, upperclass literacy. The categories “epic, lyric, and dramatic,” moreover, never did encompass all extant genre forms.

Ideological approaches to defining genre can be challenged through a more materialist approach, which would stress how textual forms conform to the constraints and emerging possibilities for textual production and dissemination. Epic poetry, for example, took on the form of poetry in no small measure because it originated in oral performance and hence was connected to issues of memorizability; nineteenth-century prose fiction took its shape from the serial format in which it was originally published.

Material histories of genre open up a new vista on understanding text and textuality: each genre is not just an aesthetic form but also the enactment of communication in a particular situation, a set of meanings transacted within a horizon of expectation for communication, part of a group’s social contract. Each genre is marked by specific forms to be mastered as part of high-status and high-register expression and communication. As a social performance communicating ideas, a genre formalizes a group’s rules about who can speak, in which ways, where, and about what topics. A genre is thus likely to take on a different form in each “period,” an era characterized by its own stylistic perspectives and its own set of preferred language- or other semiotic-system-based conventions. When such conventions become programmatic for a group of authors, they constitute “movements” in political, social, or aesthetic terms, programs associated with specific speech acts in their cultural context and privileging certain language markers or topic markers.

A genre, as Tzvetan Todorov explored in *Genres in Discourse* (1990), following in the traditions of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986), is thus profitably analyzed as a pattern of communication, cultivated in a particular era by a specific group.

Such perspectives begin to redefine genre in ways that make genre teachable in terms of literature in general, and comparable, as various kinds of group practice. Moreover, the individuals engaged in particular genre practices may easily be seen as crossing borders, transgressing limits, as gerrymandered internally, or as marginalized by social-historical norms imposed by the group. As such, a genre is not defined only by formal features, but also by issues of context and taste, such as

- the status of writer and reader
- the mechanisms of being public
- community expectations
- the genre's social role
- narrative types
- the materiality and distribution of the written word (or other semiotic systems).

Genre canons preferred by scholarship in comparative literature have created the illusion that a critic must study high art, texts favored by cultural elites and moved across borders to other elite groups. Yet it is at least equally correct, in the sense of modern discourse analysis (associated with names like Ruth Wodak, James Paul Gee, Teun van Dijk, and Norman Fairclough), to consider all formalized norms of communication as discourse genres, as genres *medialized*, i.e., taken as forms *within certain media* in context, as acts of communication assuming material form.<sup>5</sup>

If there is to be a new “genre theory” taking cultural communication rather than aesthetics as its point of departure, it should concern itself with any of a culture's formalized communication patterns, from the meeting and greeting rituals of everyday life all the way up through the forms of “literature” proper cultivated by elites. Each such form, however, takes place in a material space and is reinforced by social expectations — it is not just a pattern of words. Each genre emerges instead as a framework within which individuals are authorized to engage in specialized acts of communication as they create, maintain, or negotiate meanings within a group. How each group uses specific cultural forms constitutes a literacy that can ground critics' practice, as well — comparative literature as the comparative study of acts of communication in cultural context (some literary, some otherwise, yet all characterized as occurring within the constraints of specific genre formalizations).

Traditional comparative-literature studies did indeed compare texts in terms of their genres, as forms of high culture, tracing influences, forms, and aesthet-



ics across cultural and temporal lines. Yet communicative forms within elite culture are not the only ones important for literary study. As critical paradigms since poststructuralism have stressed, the class positions of groups, ethnicities, gender identities, and regional conventions for the transaction of meaning also affect how a genre is “performed” and understood. Comparison of the sites of a genre’s performances, in turn, requires theorizing about which cultural borders are affected when performances recur or find parallels in different cultures. In its discussions of how specific groups coopt cultural forms for their own purposes, Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School showed in the mid-1970s that “genre literacy” of this sort is neither just a fact of high culture nor monolithic within a culture.<sup>6</sup> In fact, all groups and subgroups perform genres and set their performances next to those of the dominant culture. When matters are framed thus, “comparative” studies can be defined as social-historical studies of groups whose consciousness is defined with respect to others within a shared (but not uniform) cultural space. The act of comparing need not, therefore, cross national lines to find its exemplars.

Reading literature in the West does indeed constitute a particular kind of high-cultural literacy. Some genres, such as film, often conform to mass-market expectations shared by several groups. All genres participate in readers’ horizons of expectation, as forms joining the individual to a community understanding about what kinds of narrative or linguistic acts are possible, what status such acts have, what mechanisms and media disseminate them, which themes the genres tend to present, and how those genres are to be evaluated by the community. In addition, there is a strong association of various genres with particular historical contexts, in terms of the themes they represent. Graffiti, Japanese *anime* (animated films), oral storytelling, and other forms are all genres that naturalize communication patterns within a group and situate individual performances ideologically within a nation. A study of genre that includes traditional poetry, drama, and prose as well as less elite genres, then, becomes the study of the forms, sites, and ideologies surrounding performances of meaning—a study that focuses on broader definitions of critical cultural literacy than simply those embraced by the elites of culture. Such a study moves from the concrete materialities of culture into the politics of its performance.

Material tie-ins between genres and their cultural sites also make genre teachable in concrete ways. In rough terms, students can first learn to identify the who, what, where, and when that uncritical readers of texts locate, and then move to the why, to a specific analysis of a genre performance as reflecting a group’s identity politics and the ideological forces which constitute those groups or are vested in them. All genre literacy is, in this sense, comparative, since it requires a learner to analyze how one group relates to others sharing (parts of) its cultural space of

communication — how a text functions the same or differently from how the learner herself would. In consequence, each genre — high or popular, national, local, resistant, or international — can be taught and learned starting from such material premises as a stylized or extended form of communication, and thus as straightforwardly connected with basic linguistic markers (syntax, semantics, rhetoric).

The teacher of (comparative) literature, then, can teach genre as a key to critical literacy. The hierarchy in the curriculum is straightforward. Students learn first to identify the components of communication structures, then to place them within a culture's horizon of expectation for the "usual" novel, play, poem, or other performance, using known semiotic materials. Finally, for a learner to be considered literate in a given set of communication patterns, she must understand the communication patterns comparatively, showing how they might differ across groups' dominant and nondominant patterns of communication and possibly across national lines as well. That is, learners' literacy will necessarily address how patterns serve to confirm as Other or to confirm as hegemonic, revealing their inherent ideologies within a group: a speaker will automatically be marked as better, stronger, more articulate, more innovative, more politically astute, more aimed at one particular readership than another. Redefining literature in such a way means redefining the teaching of literature as the study of forms of communicative literacy within a culture's horizon of expectation<sup>7</sup> and using the semiotic materials at the culture's disposal (words, pictures, gestures, and the like).

Put another way, a reader who is a novice must learn to understand the patterns of communication defined as genres by entering into a culture's horizon of expectation about its "usual" tale, play, or poem: the material and psychological substance forming its cognitive and expressive worlds. A more fluent "reader" of a culture needs to learn — and a scholar studies in detail — the linguistic and cultural dominants of each genre. A critical reader studies the effects of these dominants in forcing a group's evaluations of communication. The learner thus needs to learn to make systematic connections between elements of the texts (specific genre markers present in them) and the kinds of understanding in which those elements are implicated. That is, the characteristic elements of a genre key its fluent reader into specific conventions of meaning that constitute the horizon of expectation in which it operates. In basic form, some conventions might be summarized:

#### *Data Conventions in Representative Genres*

##### FOR A NOVEL

- Setting: narrated details, purported reality, historical frame;
- Character: gender, status, communication norms for each individual;
- Plots: problems, markers of language, timeline conventions;

- Narrative point of view: narrative as logic pattern (before, after, because, etc.).

#### FOR DRAMA

- Setting: time held constant, or at least linear or clearly marked;
- Character: conversation, performatives, dialogues, behavioral norms;
- Conflict and resolution structures (logical relationships between scenes);
- Conversational norms for various sociological groups;
- Conventional act structures (three- and five-act forms, etc.) as aesthetics;
- Acceptable plots (e.g., tragedy and fate, downfalls, moral censure);
- Performance norms: acting styles, stage types, audiences.

#### FOR POETRY

- Epic: formal storytelling connections, represented stereotypes and scene figures;
- Lyric: grammatical or mental links to the point of view of a speaking subject;
- General: normality or deviance in patterns of usage (semantics, syntax, figures, dictionaries);
- Intertextualities: cross-references among poetic tropes, masterworks, etc.

If the list were to be extended to include less elite, more popular genres, it might include the following:

#### FOR FILM

- Setting: who, what, where, when — visual and verbal;
- Character: gender, status, communication norms;
- Plots: problems, markers of transition (e.g., cuts, dissolves), timeline;
- Visual logic and point of view: camera focus, depth of field, framing, lighting, soundtrack;
- Sound and spatial logics: foregrounding, backgrounding, cutting strategies and effects.

#### FOR ADVERTISING

- Visual semantics as a correlate of verbal semantics.

Such charts are at best loose heuristics, summarizing how a genre's basic elements (the first part of each entry) can be broken down into syntactical and semantic patterns that define the genre's characteristic pattern of communication. For example, the opening pages of a novel narrate its world-space into existence with greater or lesser detail, but whatever appears in those pages sets the parameters against which

all subsequent actions are to be judged, be that world a house or a nation. The setting of a film, in contrast, is more literal at first, since convention requires that the audience be shown who, what, where, and when the action is taking place rather than telling (explaining) its world in other terms. In contrast, drama is based on dialogue modified from ordinary language; poetry may stylize not only conventions for dialogue, but other basic expectations about syntax and semantics. Each characteristic of a genre therefore correlates with expectations about how communication functions within a user group. A novice reader needs to be taught to recognize the markers as organizers and as the basic patterns of a specific culture's communication—the tools of its ideology. To address these markers comparatively, in turn, requires that two or more examples of particular patterns of communication be assessed in parallel.

Understanding how individual texts function within known communication patterns (genres' horizons of expectation) can thus be identified as the basis for a learner's critical literacy. For instance, when a learner sees how patterns upheld by groups within a culture are violated by texts and what reactions the texts evoke, the student will see ideology in action. Thus, individual texts will emerge as individuals' attempts to empower themselves as writers and speakers within a cultural context, working with and against the culture's preferred pattern of communication. Students will evaluate each such act of communication as "normal" or "transgressive," depending on where and when it can be appropriately enacted, by whom, with what contents, and how it is to be marked. The patterns permitting basic comprehensibility (e.g., subject-verb agreement), however, eventually lead to more detailed or profiled sociocultural practices that mark individuals in other dimensions (e.g., whether the subject and verb chosen are of the "correct" register or dialect for a given situation).

Novice readers will not necessarily know how to make the transition between what textual elements mean literally and what they mean in terms of a culture's ideology of communication, let alone what can be at stake when patterns occupy similar positions in different cultures. Students will need to be taught, systematically, how to build up such horizons of expectation—how to become culturally literate—and then how to compare equivalent sites of literacy across cultures. Moreover, as students' awareness about what is at stake in using genres increases, they can be held accountable for the strategies they use. At the same time, the teacher can evaluate learning in ascertaining a learner's basic comprehension of a genre's significant elements, up through more complicated articulation of ideologies of communication and comparative analyses of those acts. The literacy valued by today's cultural studies, in other words, correlates explicitly with genre formalisms—with language acts in cultural contexts—not just with dominant ideologies.

The elements of those language acts must be defined carefully in the classroom if literature is to become teachable in new ways.

#### TEACHING GENRES AS CULTURAL LITERACY

In general terms, there are three levels of competence through which students will move as they learn to “read genres” in a way generally recognized as culturally literate: an initial stage, in which the principal organizing elements within a genre are introduced as significant data points for students to attend to and build into systems; a second stage, whose focus is establishing the patterns on which individual genres rest and which are defined as the obligatory moves in the genres’ communication patterns, seen individually or comparatively; and finally, what Jean Piaget might call a “formal operation” phase,<sup>8</sup> beyond a learner’s ability to read or perform individual acts of communication fluently within genres. The third stage is where the abstract, formal rules and other issues around genre can be discussed in encompassing ways: comparisons reveal ideologies as well as differences in operation of analogous sites in different cultures. Each stage has a set of material markers that are organized into culture-bound patterns; each such pattern, in turn, can begin to be interrogated for its ideological content, as today’s cultural studies would insist is critical.

The levels may be summarized as follows, each suggesting which kinds of texts are most appropriate to include in the classroom and what specific genre organizers ought to be taught:

##### *Stages of Teaching Literature, after Initial Approaches to Reading*

(e.g., after the learner has mastered the first 250 words  
in a foreign language or after “reading for reacting”  
in English literature or composition contexts)

#### STAGE 1 (lower division and bridge courses)

##### LEARNING PATTERNS FOR GENRES

*Texts:* longer prose, film, drama, poetry.

*Organizers to learn:* Period and pregenre structures, such as

- Story: narrative markers: who, what, where, when;
- Cultural Markers: facts, themes / concerns, institutions;
- First Genre Markers:
  - Grammar markers: norm / deviance;
  - Point of view: conversations, verbal, visual, semantic and syntax markers;
  - Story grammars: action / rhythms, behavior clues.

*Primary Learning Goal:* mastery of organizers as evolving patterns for creating competent readers of single texts and typical textual patterns (establishing a “horizon of expectation” about how textual types communicate).

## STAGE 2 (upper division)

### GENRES AND PREPROBLEM

*Texts:* pairs or series of texts in particular genres, with materials on the historical setting of each genre; introduction to comparative literature as a comparison of materialities of culture.

*Organizers to Master:* Typologies of storytelling; discourses of each genre, set up as patterns; main institutional monitors (media, distribution, and arbiters) that promulgate the norms; cultural politics inside groups, across classes, across borders (markers for hegemonic and resistant forms of expression).

*Learning Goals:* Building communities of genre readers: aesthetic and cultural markers that make prototypes of genres into productive dialogues across time, class, and national borders—including institutions, high and popular culture distinctions, “the order of books” (Chartier), the physical organizers to which books are subject in cultural context.

*Prototype Task in Comparative Contexts:* compare two examples of a genre, in light of their prototypes (e.g., *Don Quixote* as a picaresque novel; *The Bell Jar* as setting the horizon of expectation for autobiography or the feminist novel). Account for differences in terms of cultural, sociological, and historical factors.

## STAGE 3 (capstone seminars; graduate studies)

### THEORIES AND FORMAL DESCRIPTIONS OF GENRE

*Texts:* primary literature (as above), together with secondary literature and reference materials.

*Organizers to Master:* technical vocabulary describing systems for organizing the available knowledge in the field (e.g., bibliographies and reference books).

*Learning Goals:* To address the problems and ethics of the whole practice of literary studies and genre studies; to study the social uses of literature and their attendant patterns of exclusion based on artificial distinctions of value; to provide access to technical discussions and expert knowledge; to employ models for the relation of genre form to media, cultural contact, cultural transmission, “resistant” consumptions; acts of comparison involving any of the above.

The preceding list presents a heuristic for structuring teaching choices. It outlines what kinds of systematic development in reading practice can turn a naive reader into a more culturally literate reader (and perhaps ultimately into a scholarly one).

My assumption in outlining the levels is that language organizers, genre expectations, and various acts of communication all have to be identified (and the acts of naming practiced) before a reader can learn to see their logics (and ideologies) of organization and before texts can be compared across national, linguistic, class, or other borders. Curricula, in other words, must teach students to read systematically—take them out of reading as reacting and move them toward reading in cultural contexts and finally to a position from which the ideologies embedded in cultural contexts are revealed.

My proposal is intended to oppose the present tendency in the curriculum to divide and conquer by setting freshman English (or the lower division of foreign-language study) apart from the literature major. The goal for a curriculum that is both “literary” and answerable to today’s call for cultural literacy must be present at initial levels to enhance learners’ sensitivity to the structure of communication; then, at a subsequent level, to the historical, sociological, and ideological variants in communication patterns; and finally, at a third level, to institutions and professional norms for expertise that manage, disseminate, and validate the use of specific patterns. The summary recommendation is as follows: students must be trained across levels in the skills that will enable them to recognize, manipulate, generate, and critique ideologies, allowing them to interpret texts on the basis of textual and cultural evidence (not just opinions) and to create comparisons implicating not only aesthetic norms but also cultural ones.

In the discipline of comparative literature, accepting that a curricular hierarchy exists—a set of learning stages—will require scholars to reframe their specific fields of knowledge production in order to specify what it means to compare texts (literary or not) as acts of communication occurring in varying cultural contexts (at the very least, across subgroups, national lines, class lines, and lines set by ideologies). Comparative literature can thus profitably be redefined as a discipline studying a distinctly organized set of sociocultural practices, so long as the scholar remembers that comparing texts is not the same as comparing the cultures that use the texts. The latter study belongs to anthropology and sociology, both of which acknowledge how cultural practices are implicated as cultural ideologies, while not necessarily addressing the specific materialities of textual practice.

Comparatists in general prefer to study culturally supported acts of communication at moments of contact, at moments of adaptation and cooptation, at moments when two practices do or do not show parallelisms. Comparative literature differentiates itself from other humanistic or social-scientific investigations (e.g.,

mass communication studies) that are equally comparative in the moment when specific textual artifacts emerge as significant. The specialist in comparative literature starts from the systems that establish the conditions for texts that participate in acts of communication, rather than from social organizations, rituals, or the historical formations of cultural institutions. To be sure, texts are not divorced from other systems of culture, but they constitute a specific literacy different from that involved in understanding social behaviors, institutions like governments or hospitals, or the rituals which signal an individual's adherence to specific ideologies.

Thus a (comparative) literature curriculum needs to frame specific acts of analysis for its students, so that they can be pushed toward what may be called a critical cultural literacy—moving from participating in and comprehending text-based acts of cultural communication to critiquing them in terms of the ideologies they serve (any sort of ideologies, not just aesthetic ones). The “native speaker's” horizon of expectation includes knowledge about the compulsory moves in a genre (the way it is structured as communication), the sociology of use as part of that horizon, and the various intertextual problems that tie into various materialities of culture. The learner must be led to understand such facts and strategies, which yield discernible successes and failures within the cultural community. The critic adds to the native speaker's knowledge the ability to place the communicative acts that constitute texts within a cultural context, as part of a culture's ideologies.

In short, to conceive of genre and the act of comparison as a hierarchy of cultural structures that need to be learned will require teachers of comparative literature at the very least to define for our students how “reading literature and other culturally revealing texts” is *not* the same as reading for personal purposes. *Pace* Stanley Fish, there is a “text in this class,” a text that will, within a community of its users, emerge as an instance of a specific genre, within a horizon of expectation about what kinds of messages the genre can contain, how it will “speak,” and how any cultural-historical framework of power will negotiate with it (evaluate it, judge it, position it). A curriculum defining beginning and intermediate study of texts as communicative acts will need to account for how learners' cultural literacy is to be developed—their ability to see how a text works within culture and its various ideologies of power (aesthetic, social, political, and so on).

In contrast, advanced study of comparative literature has to be acknowledged as something more. The structure of interpretation implicates professional acts of communication, not only the general culture's norms for communication and for evaluating successes and failures in that communication; it requires attention to the materialities and sociological variables at play within the texts' cultures, and especially how particular interpretive communities use texts for their own purposes. Topics like textuality, canonicity, the specific literary uses of genres, and the ideologies of power that each genre is involved in require that a teacher acknowledge her



own complicity in an interpretive community. Simply to assert that a reader embraces counterhegemonic perspectives toward texts (and to teach learners to value and affirm a single ideological perspective) does not foster more than a midlevel cultural literacy, since any particular oppositional perspective is itself implicated in a larger cultural context. When students reach advanced levels of literary study, then, they need to be exposed to the literacies asserted by critics, not only those of the general culture.

Such levels of development within a literature curriculum are, to be sure, complicated in the case of comparative literature, which requires of its students and scholars more and different kinds of language competence (several languages, together with, perhaps, the semiotics of other cultural practices, in more than one culture).<sup>9</sup> The comparative study of literature particularly shares general features with the study of other cultural forms. “Genre analysis” converges with other forms of critical analysis, in a more general framework defined by Julia Kristeva as *sémanalyse*, “semanalysis”: a critical study of complex verbal and other symbolic forms of a culture, the power relations in which these forms engage, and their ability to create, mediate, and recreate forms of subjectivity for individuals, anchored in a culture’s materiality of communication.<sup>10</sup> *Comparison* as a particular strategy for semanalysis sets such symbolic forms next to each other, aiming at crafting *evaluations* of how those acts and forms work across the lines of communication communities (nations, subcultures, majority/minority communities, competing ideologies with their supporting institutions, and the like).

In a comparative semanalysis, however, not only cultural settings for communication are compared but also genres—specific classes of cultural artifacts implicated in communication, textual or otherwise. Thus it is critical to be critical about what genres are studied, if one is claiming to study comparative literature rather than from the social-scientific perspective of comparative cultural studies. Genres of longer prose are the most straightforwardly implicated in cultural identity because stories rehearse conventional narratives drawn from a historical moment, and so they are the most favored in classrooms stressing the postcolonial position of individual subjects or the ideologies of marginalization. Yet such choices of genre to be studied and the perspectives from which to study them flatten cultural communication and foreclose other ways into literary studies.

For instance, poetry (from high-culture lyric through popular song or rap lyrics) plays various roles in cultural communication, manipulating language’s syntactic markers to establish points of view and to evoke emotional and cognitive states in its consumers. A broad variety of genres and texts needs to be inserted into and analyzed as part of communication contexts—historical, aesthetic, social, and others—since they all contain the shared knowledge of the community, functioning as part of various groups’ horizons of expectation. Poetry echoes ad-

vertising; prose genres take on different forms as they are to be translated or circulated beyond a single culture's borders, or if they are to be adapted as screenplays, or if they are to be published as serials before they appear in book form. To "compare" texts in their contexts mean paying attention to different historical manifestations of each genre and within communicative communities: how, for example, lyric poetry in the Romantic era may differ from today's; how novelists from two eras or two countries tell stories about women, using different narrative strategies and showing different ideologies about what women are and what their place in society was and ought to be. The act of comparing two texts (or genres, as groups of texts) is the core activity that has to be built into a curriculum, both in terms of literary form and of the cultural sites of communication in which they engage.

Today's comparatists engaged in cultural studies follow their peers in national-literature departments, assuming that texts bear ideologies. Within a Western culture's horizon of expectation about literature, for example, specific texts or authors are given privileged or canonical status as prototypes for their speech genres within literary history and in the community of cultural producers (*Don Quixote* as the prototype for the picaresque novel; Tolstoy for the realist historical novel; Frank Capra, Martin Scorsese, or Woody Allen for particular film genres). Canonical texts set norms for the horizon of expectation of readers (or viewers or listeners) in their eras and create obligatory moves that later authors react to or react against. Canonical texts also set stylistic, philosophical, and formal markers in place that later texts must follow.

When genres, defined as forms of communication, are adopted across borders, they may, moreover, have different impacts even as they retain their forms. When *Jane Eyre* became *Wide Sargasso Sea*, two versions of one story took on divergent cultural meanings. When Hollywood discovered martial arts movies, it did so for purposes other than those of the community of film viewers around the Pacific Rim. Which discourses of power in which texts figure prominently will change, as the texts move between different social groups and historical moments and those groups' or moments' privileging of particular groups, standards, or utterances. Each text is a document of gambits within its own genre; each text documents its involvement in various systems of cultural production and consumption and in identity politics within and across cultures.

I am suggesting that the cultural literacy involved in a new comparative literature is a literacy of linguistic and semiotic form and cultural intent as well as a literacy of cultural content, and I am arguing that the beginning or novice student learner, as a comprehender or producer, will not (be motivated to) gain the kinds of cultural insight necessary to move towards advanced levels of language use and of cross-cultural understanding unless she is introduced to them systematically.<sup>11</sup> Just as seriously, the advanced learner, particularly the graduate student,

will be cut off from 200 years of professional discourse, and hence from a critical perspective on her own professional community, if she is not required to engage in an additional level of dialogue with existing and previous scholarly communities. That is, advanced levels of literary studies require learners not only to approach texts and their cultures but also the scholarly communities that enforce or privilege particular readings; advanced learners thus need to learn how such communities interpret or how to refute them successfully. Without systematic study of such questions, a learner will not see that the scholar is a member of a particular communicative community, with its own ideologies and epistemologies. Reacting to literature instead of studying it systematically will, in such contexts, emerge as a way of espousing of the affective fallacy.<sup>12</sup>

A comparative literature that accommodates insights from cultural studies while retaining its own identity needs to respect both literature as a particular kind of textuality, broken into genres conceived as particular communication patterns, and the cultural particularity of the location in which communication takes place. Up to the present, the best-developed of such models for cultural comparison belong to the new generation of translation studies, which are explicitly engaged in comparing how texts and textualities function when transmitted between a source and a target culture. The first-rate comparative studies of scholars such as Susan Bassnett, Andre Lefevere, Sherry Simon, and Andrew Hurley focus on the *ideologies* of adaptation, rewriting, and cooptation of texts across the lines of languages (and often of countries as well).<sup>13</sup> The new generation of studies focuses not just on how critics can render equivalents to aesthetic texts, but also on cross-cultural uses of classics. Therefore a comparative literature studies attentive to cultural studies is also necessarily interdisciplinary, for it considers textualities as more than aesthetic masterpieces.

#### SPECIFIC TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING LEVELS

The following chart proposes curricular benchmarks for a learning sequence tailored toward teaching literature. Such a chart is a crucial tool in planning how a comparative-literature perspective can be turned into a comparative-literature curriculum. The chart is not a template for any particular curriculum, since what genres will be studied differs according to the characteristics of the student body, of the institution, and of the students individually. Instead, the chart summarizes general tasks corresponding to stages in learning that can move learners toward the kind of cultural literacy described here.

In all cases, the framework for describing how to teach individual genres assumes that the learner must move from being a competent reader of a single text to taking each text type or discourse genre as an example of a more general typology

## Tasks Setting Up Levels of Understanding for Specific Genres

STAGE 1:	POETRY	LONGER		
		PROSE	FILM	DRAMA
Generating competent readings by attending to systems of markers	(and advertising) Verbal Markers Attention to norm or deviance patterns built up from ordinary-language syntax and semantics	(fictional or nonfictional) Verbal Markers Attention to narrative point of view	Visual and Verbal Markers Attention to narrative point of view in two channels (verbal/aural and visual) that might not coincide	Behavioral and Verbal Markers Attention to sequence, presence, and absences in storytelling, interpolations of behavior. Scene connections
Internal: Who What Where When	Special semantics: figures, tropes, etc.	Special organizing chains: episodes, settings, verbal figures, historical references, etc.	Identifying special point-of-view devices: camera angle, color, other sound-and-framing issues	Systematizing special stylization in drama (e.g., fourth wall, nonrealistic space, telescoped time)
External: Cultural Historical Gestural Institutional Thematic				

### STAGE 2:

Joining communities (comparing two readings — making types out of tokens)	Identifying conventional poetry types; using reference materials to define “standard” patterns of communication;	Taking genre prototype (e.g. Don Quixote) and comparing another member of the genre against it —as form —as members of genre from two different epochs	Taking genre prototype (e.g. <i>Gone with the Wind</i> ) and comparing another member of the genre against it —as form —as members of genre from two different epochs	Taking genre prototype (e.g., <i>Inherit the Wind</i> ) and comparing another member of the genre against it —as form —as members of genre from two different epochs
Internal: Conventional forms Prototypes (canons)	Style and aesthetics analysis	Reception explanations (culture) Modifications of genre	Reception, remakes.	Restagings, reviews.
External: History of the forms Sociology of the forms, source and	Content/media analysis: analysis vis-à-vis prototype Analysis of			

STAGE 2: Continued

adaptation studies	lyrical “I” and probable audience
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STAGE 3:

Expert knowledge (generating genre and period knowledge; tracing vectors of transmission for comparison)	Application of theory texts to genre; Periodization; Cultural context and “influence” as basis for comparison	Application of theory texts to genre; Periodization CULTURAL STUDIES; Publishing and distribution as keys to comparison	Screenplay versus film versus technical systems—analyses of interrelations; Adaptation and rewriting for audience as “comparison”	Performance versus textuality study; application of theory texts to genre; Periodization; Adaptation and rewriting as basis for comparison
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of communication. Finally, the learner must learn to analyze both individual texts and more general text types—genres—in cultural context, in the technical vocabularies in use in reference books and other professional discourses. Learners, in other words, should move from identifying building blocks of cultural and textual meaning to comprehending patterns within a communication situation and finally to evaluating literacy patterns as artifacts of cultural power. That learner must learn, for instance, period and genre norms for narrative syntax or the technical limitations of publishing that exert other kinds of pressure on narrative prose.

The description of each level characterizes what elements must be addressed as the learner is prompted to build up patterns of understanding in cultural context. Each chart entry summarizes goals for individuals’ learning the negotiations and power structures inherent in specific genres, along with tasks that lead toward acquiring a particular literacy.

Critical for such cultural literacy in the first stage of learning to read literature is that the learner be forced to account for discourse patterns that extend over longer sequences: scenes, not individual dialogues; books, not short stories; speeches, not responses. Learners must see what elements of texts can be combined into patterns of meaning—points of grammar, narrative point of view, behaviors, themes, descriptions of clothing or space, and the like. That is, the learner must learn to sort the mass of largely unarticulated data in a text into categories and to understand these categories as part of a community’s social literacy. For success in the

first stage, then, a learner must be able to generate a “reading” of a text or film; a successful performance of a conversation, speech, or act of letter writing.

In the second stage, texts must be considered in sets—as *tokens* of known cultural discourse *types* that “native speakers” or members of particular groups know to associate with each other. Texts must therefore be compared with each other, and with the performance norms that cultures use to evaluate texts in various dimensions (singly as well as comparatively, across borders). The learner must move to make generalizations about discourse genres. What distinguishes a successful speech from an unsuccessful one; an artistic novel from a popular one; a mass-market film from an art film? Or more sociologically: which text would please a male audience more than a female one; a youthful audience more than an older one; an upper-class reader more than a working-class one?

Finally, in third-stage or capstone literacy—especially as a literacy of high culture, or of professional groups—the metadiscourses (e.g., “secondary literature”) about discourse genres come into play: the cultural stereotypes about how cultural forms are used, what they reveal about the status of their users, what cultural purposes they serve. The “Organizers to Master” in the third stage are correspondingly more complex: not only the norms against which discourse genres are evaluated need to be considered, but also the social uses (e.g., professional, class-bound, regional) to which the norms are applied. The learners move from such simple comparisons to more complex arguments about cultural norms—about how specific text types, discourse genres, and communicative acts are managed, evaluated, and circulated as reflections of cultural values.

Put another way, in poststructuralist terms, the learner in the third stage has to be initiated into the discipline of literary and cultural scholarship: the technical discussions, the organization of knowledge of the field (the forms in which it is produced, archived, and distributed, and what each is valued as), as well as into the practices of the field, from bibliographic and research norms, through conference and professional organizations and the like. In the case of comparative literature, the initiation also entails a critical reappropriation of literary history and scholarship, the kind of knowledge that allows a scholar to establish or question canonicity, to advance discussions, or to question ethics and uses of professional practice and expert knowledge.

Not all students of literature will move to the third stage of specifically aesthetic literacy about genres. The typical English major who will become a high-school teacher will be a competent reader who can introduce the facts of literary history, taste, and reception systematically (stage-two literacy outcomes), but not necessarily critical interpretations and discussions of the genres they take. While “good” English programs introduce their students to more aesthetic (elite) forms of literacy, majors in foreign-language literatures are rarely challenged to reach this third

level at all. It is critical, however, that upper critical levels now include more than primary literature, more than the texts themselves and the material facts of their contexts and circulation.

#### SOME CONCLUSIONS

Saying that a new generation of comparative literature curricula can be interdisciplinary and intercultural as well as grounded in aesthetics does not, however, even come close to resolving the discipline's major tensions and difficulties. Not least among those remaining is a persistent identity problem for comparative literature in a non-Western or cross-political-bloc framework. The "texts" familiar to Western literatures, for example, somehow seem more permanent cultural artifacts than do texts which document oral performances in other cultures. That permanence translates all too easily into assumptions of the superiority of written texts over oral ones.

Nonetheless, comparative literature in the universities still often seems Western, I believe, because present curricula emphasize prose as the purportedly most accessible form of contemporary literature. The vast majority of innovative courses over the last two decades have focused on the novel, on one tradition of text transmission and its attendant norms for text production, rather than on diversities of cultural communication. At the same time, our understanding of the norms that prose forms share in the modern world of publishing has not been nuanced for the positions of such prose forms within various cultures. What is, for example, the nativeness of a prose-fiction text originating from within a nonwestern language and culture, yet which has been written with the clear intent of being circulated through broader Anglophone or Francophone contexts, as "world literature"? What does it mean when a text in an indigenous language is produced with the intent of being translated and circulated as a book in western contexts? And how do such texts "compare" to texts from nonwestern cultures "written" or otherwise performed for indigenous traditions (that is, as texts originating within different cultural spheres)?

All too often, performance-based cultural texts are judged according to anthropological rather than aesthetic criteria, in no small part because the texts are not part of traditional "literary" distribution networks (book publications, book reviews, periodicals). Scholars of comparative literature focusing on minority literatures from around the world not infrequently end up in anthropology programs or ethnic studies programs, because of the exclusionary boundaries imposed by national literature departments. Not surprisingly, such institutional practices cannot serve a literature curriculum trying to move away from exclusionary elite-culture canons. Older aesthetic norms for valuing texts are too narrow, but redefining the

communication situation of such “alternative” texts as socio-anthropological and hence as in some way removed from “official” culture is a similar falsification. Both are false generalizations: aesthetics are culture-bound, but once even a form derived from folk culture (let alone from subcommunities) has achieved a recognizable form within a community, it becomes available to the same kinds of social and ideological forces that have fueled canon debates.

My stance, I hope, is clear by now: comparative literature needs to evolve a paradigm for its scholarship that accounts systematically for both textuality and cultural communication, and it needs to interpolate that paradigm into a coherent curriculum. By “coherent,” I mean a curriculum that teaches systematic strategies for reading, for research, data-gathering, and analysis in many modes. Without all those things, there is little reason why comparative literature should be supported at all as a field distinguishable from cultural studies or national literary studies.

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#### NOTES

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Convention of the Southern Comparative Literature Association in Austin, Texas, 19 September 2003.
- 2 For an outline of the research, see Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes, as well as Swaffar.
- 3 One exception is Freire.
- 4 The limitations of comparative formalist studies of literature have often been rehearsed, stressing how texts studied as forms elide cultural specificity. The best model for an updated approach may be the new generation of translation studies, which takes the act of translation as a moment of cultural contact that may be studied in terms of one culture’s appropriation of another. For an introduction to such approaches, see Lefevere.
- 5 Critical discourse studies is evolving as a cross-disciplinary field concerned with language use and power. For overviews, see Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse; Language and Power*; and *Media Discourse*; Gee; Van Dijk, *Discourse as Structure; Discourse as Social Interaction*; and Wodak.
- 6 For an outline of how subcultures behave vis-à-vis the dominant culture, see Hall and Jefferson.
- 7 The term “horizon of expectation” comes from phenomenology. It is used prominently in literary studies by Jauss.
- 8 For an explanation of the term and the overall developmental framework to which it refers, see Piaget.
- 9 Detailed examples for how curricula may be structured are available in Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes, as well as in Swaffar and Katherine Arens.
- 10 For an explication of *sémanalyse*, see Arens, “Discourse Analysis” and “Linguistics of French Feminism.”
- 11 Nance makes the case that “very few students enter the literature classroom with the



expectation of full participation" (31) and that we do not, in general, take pains to facilitate that participation. She suggests that one way of doing so is to change classroom management schemes to make classrooms more student-centered.

12 The term derives from the classic study by Wimsatt and Beardsley.

13 See, for example, Bassnett and Lefevere; Simon and St.-Pierre; and Hurley.

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