

Cultivating Literary Aesthetics in English Literature Teaching in the Image Era

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Abstract: In the image-reading era, people's reading patterns have changed significantly. Traditional classic reading has been largely replaced by enjoyable shallow reading and literary adaptations in film and television. In the teaching process of English literature courses in colleges and universities, it is crucial to guide students to avoid falling into "image fetishism" and return to text-based reading. Teachers should not only strengthen text reading in class to cultivate students' interest in literary reading but also combine the development of the image-reading era, use multimedia means, and integrate interdisciplinary knowledge to comprehensively improve students' literary appreciation ability and humanistic qualities. This article analyzes and explores the teaching strategies of English literature in college English teaching in the image-reading era.

Keywords: Image era; English literature teaching; Literary aesthetics

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1. Introduction

Much like the print revolution's impact on oral traditions, the current proliferation of images is fundamentally reshaping, though not erasing, the role of written language in human communication. People's traditional reading patterns are increasingly replaced by fragmented and entertaining electronic reading. Students spend much less time reading long-form classic literature. Against this background, how to re-ignite students' interest in literary reading and cultivate their literary aesthetics has become a problem that must be faced in English literature teaching. In classroom guidance, teachers should not only guide students to correctly view image culture and recognize the respective advantages of words and images but also lead them back to long-form text reading. In English literature teaching, teachers should pay attention to strengthening text reading, improving students' sensitivity to words, creating a diversified teaching environment, and integrating interdisciplinary knowledge to comprehensively improve students' literary aesthetic ability, as well as enhancing their humanistic qualities and multi-dimensional thinking abilities.

2. The “decline” of literature in the image era and the evolution of students’ reading patterns

The art historian E. H. Gombrich asserted in 1972 that “our age is an age of vision”^[1]. Ales Erjavec, an aesthetician, stated in his book “Towards the Image” that the “pictorial turn” in the fields of art and culture had become “the subject of numerous discussions and publications in philosophy and social theory”^[2]. In the image era, modern mass media, especially movies, television, and the Internet, have developed rapidly.

The arrival of the image era has triggered the relative “decline” of traditional literature. “In post-modernism, literature quickly moves to the background, while the central stage is illuminated by the bright glow of visual literature”^[3]. The best-selling novelist Hai Yan said, “We are now in an age of vision, not an age of reading. Far more people watch movies and TV than read. People who watch movies and TV no longer read...”^[4]. Many experts have debated whether film and television can replace literature^[5]. The image era has triggered a reading evolution and publishing transformation centered around the “image turn”^[6]. The media consciousness of commercialization, secularization, flattening, and popularization has taken root in people’s hearts, causing traditional classic literature to be gradually pushed out by the information age. In terms of reading patterns, in the information age, people pursue the convenience of reading. Fragmented reading on screens has largely replaced the traditional paper-based reading mode. The summary-style short-term reading that pursues efficiency has greatly compressed the time for traditional long-form reading. In text publishing, there has also been a trend of symbol transformation from “single-dimensional text” to “audio-visual integration.”

Against this background, students’ interest in reading traditional literary classics has greatly diminished. While the vividness of images brings fun and pleasure, it also causes people’s thinking to shift from abstract logical thinking, mainly based on words, to intuitive thinking, mainly based on images, making reading and thinking increasingly superficial, shallow, and nonchalant^[7]. To cultivate students’ literary aesthetics in the image era, the traditional teaching model must evolve. It is imperative to align with the contemporary trend and explore innovative approaches within the new environment and era.

3. Classroom guidance: Returning from images to words

To cultivate students’ literary aesthetics in the image era, it is first necessary to guide students to correctly view image culture. Teachers should guide students to understand the characteristics of aesthetic culture in the image era, encourage them to think independently, and avoid falling into “image fetishism.”

Teachers should focus on cultivating students’ image-critical awareness and be vigilant against the negative impacts of the proliferation of images. Students should consciously judge the authenticity and subjectivity of images, avoid being misled by false images, learn to analyze the purposes and values behind images, avoid blind acceptance, and consciously resist the erosion of questionable images.

Teachers should guide students to understand the complementarity between images and words. Students should not only recognize the advantages of images and rationally utilize the characteristics of images, such as intuitiveness, vividness, and rapid information transfer but also fully realize that images cannot replace words and reading. Words have the characteristics of logic, systematicness, and in-depth expression. To conduct in-depth thinking and reasoning, it is necessary to avoid over-reliance on the “image-viewing” mode and return to words and reading.

In this process, teachers can guide students to return to text reading and experience the unique charm

of words by comparing the differences between literary works and their film and television adaptations. In English literature classes, many works such as “The Color Purple, The Joy Luck Club,” and “Pride and Prejudice” have excellent film adaptations. Many students may have watched the movies. In this case, teachers can lead students to analyze the differences in plot, character creation, and theme expression between the original works and the movies, guide students to think about which contents cannot be expressed through imaging means, help students understand the depth and complexity of words, and let students realize the irreplaceable role of traditional long-form reading. Taking the novel “The Color Purple” as a prime example, teachers can facilitate classroom discussions that guide students to uncover the various changes made in the movie adaptation. These changes include the downplaying of racial discrimination, differing perspectives on Christianity, and the separation of male and female characters. Affected by factors such as the historical environment and the purpose of film shooting, the profound connotation of the original work is not fully presented on the screen. In addition, teachers can point out that the excellent epistolary style of the novel cannot be shown through imaging means.

4. English literature teaching strategies in the image era

In the image era, the cultivation of students’ literary aesthetic ability in English literature teaching can start from the following aspects.

4.1. Strengthening text reading and appreciation

Return to the essence of words. Heidegger regarded language as the home of human existence, believing that “language is the house of being”^[8]. The core of literary classics is still words. Literature teachers should avoid turning literature classes into film appreciation classes. Therefore, teachers should guide students to deeply study literary works in class. Through the detailed analysis of selected excerpts from classic works, and through repeated reading and close reading, teachers can lead students to experience the charm of language, feel the rhythmic beauty and rhetorical beauty of the works. For instance, when teachers teach British Romantic poetry, organizing in-class recitations of poems like “Ode to the West Wind” can enhance students’ sensitivity to the English language and enable them to fully appreciate the rhythmic beauty of English poetry. When teachers teach novels, focusing on detailed descriptions for analysis can be particularly effective. For example, examining the nuanced inner feelings of Paul as he interacts with his two girlfriends, Miriam and Clara, in Chapter 8 of “Sons and Lovers”; the evocative scenery descriptions before and after Tess’s confession to Angel in Chapter 4 of “Tess of the d’Urbervilles”; and the scattered thoughts of Mrs. Dalloway as she strolls through the streets in “Mrs. Dalloway.” These analyses can often allow students to directly experience the charm of the language.

Cultivate literary sensitivity. In the image era, when superficial, fragmented, and summary-style reading prevails, teachers need to help students transform from ordinary readers to professional readers and lead them to conduct in-depth thinking. By designing appreciative questions, teachers can guide students to analyze works from dimensions such as text, context, and connotation, and lead them to pay attention to the language features, styles, techniques, and ideological connotations of literary works, thereby enhancing their appreciation and comprehension abilities of the works.

In addition, college teachers should teach students basic literary theory and literary aesthetics knowledge and introduce relatively cutting-edge literary criticism discourses (such as new criticism schools like

ecological criticism, post-humanism, and literary geography). This allows students to think about literary works from multiple angles. “Theory is not knowledge to be memorized but a way of thinking that helps expand thinking and deepen understanding”^[9]. Theoretical learning can cultivate students’ critical thinking and broaden their academic horizons. In this process, teachers should encourage students to voice their unique insights, respect their right to interpretation in classroom discussions, and foster a teaching atmosphere rich in cultural depth and critical thinking.

4.2. Creating a diversified teaching environment

Utilize modern educational technology. The English literature history course is characterized by its extensive scope, rich and diverse teaching content, yet it has to contend with limited class hours. The amount of information provided by traditional teaching methods is relatively limited. Therefore, teachers’ media literacy is of great importance^[10]. The reasonable use of pictures, film and television adaptations, audio readings, etc. in class can enhance the sense of presence and emotional appeal of literary works. When teachers teach “The Grapes of Wrath,” an American map can help students visualize the protagonist’s journey. When teachers teach “The Bluest Eye,” a photo of Shirley Temple can quickly convey the idealized doll image that the young girl Pecola idolizes. When teachers teach “The Great Gatsby,” showing a scene from the film adaptation of Gatsby’s mansion party allows students to directly experience the extravagance of New York’s wealthy elite as depicted in the novel.

Enrich teaching activities. Carry out activities such as literary work recitations, role-playing, continuation writing and rewriting to let students experience the charm of literature in practice. For example, through role-playing, students can deeply understand the characters’ personalities and emotions, thereby enhancing their literary aesthetic ability^[11].

4.3. Integrating interdisciplinary knowledge

Interdisciplinary teaching helps students integrate knowledge from different disciplines and form a systematic knowledge system. To be “new”, the new liberal arts first need to break the barriers between disciplines and majors, break through the closed-door development model of traditional liberal arts, and take the initiative to change^[12]. The combination of foreign language majors and other majors is the need of the era^[13]. Integrating interdisciplinary knowledge in literature teaching provides students with multiple perspectives, enabling them to analyze and evaluate literary works from different disciplinary angles, which helps students comprehensively understand the background and connotation of literary works.

For instance, incorporating philosophical concepts into classroom discussions enables students to critically examine the values, worldviews, and philosophies of life embedded in literary works. When students read “Hamlet” through an existentialist lens, they can better understand the protagonist’s psychological turmoil and philosophical questioning of life’s meaning. By incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives from visual arts, music, and cinematic media, educators can cultivate students’ ability to analyze literary texts through multiple aesthetic frameworks. For instance, examining Woolf’s painterly color symbolism and musical narrative structures helps students experience the full sensory richness of her literary style.

5. Conclusion

“Each new reading gives birth to a new literary work”^[14]. Engagement with literary texts serves as a catalyst

for imaginative cognition, creative ideation, and profound introspection, fostering both intellectual and emotional development. In our age of visual saturation, the ceaseless flicker of pixels has displaced the quiet reveries once nurtured by the interplay of inked symbols on ivory pages. The sense of distance between readers and reading objects has disappeared, and readers' imaginations have been continuously suppressed and dispelled. In such an era, it is of profound significance to adhere to the spiritual pursuit of reading classics, return to traditional reading, and cultivate literary aesthetics. Literary classics are original literary works with rich life connotations and eternal artistic values, which are repeatedly read and appreciated by generations of readers^[15]. Teachers play an important leading role in the inheritance of literary classics. To cultivate students' English literary aesthetic ability in the image era, teachers need to have a higher literary literacy to ignite students' reading interest, guide students to return from images to words, and also need to have a higher media literacy to create a diversified teaching atmosphere and integrate interdisciplinary content with broader knowledge to help students grow into literary lovers with independent thinking abilities and profound humanistic qualities.

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