



*Literature: Approaches to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*

Robert DiYanni

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Robert DiYanni combines a wide-ranging anthology of literary texts from antiquity to the present with a very useful introduction to approaching literature for undergraduate courses from various angles. Throughout the book, DiYanni proceeds step by step and writes in clear and economic prose, accessible to student readers. He introduces the volume with a general guideline on reading literature and on writing about literature, stressing the pleasure of the aesthetic experience, the subsequent intellectual interpretation, and the final evaluation of literature. DiYanni does not separate subjective reading from the discussion of texts at university, but invites personal responses as a stepping stone to interpretation and evaluation, which he sees as interrelated activities. While his introductions to reading and to interpretation are encouraging, his take on evaluation is somewhat problematic. It is true that judgements are connected to cultural and aesthetic values and are both difficult to avoid and to sustain due to our subjective (and partly unconscious) involvement in aesthetic experience [pp. 913-914]. However, the advice to partly depend upon "the informed and sensitive responses of other experienced readers" [p. 914], in addition to "experience in reading and living enriched by thoughtful reflection on both" [p. 915], skirts, rather than addresses, the problems of aesthetic judgment, which cannot be discussed here but is related to descriptive or prescriptive, historically and culturally specific theories of what art is and does. Like reading, DiYanni introduces writing in a carefully graded sequence of questions, concepts, and examples. He advises students to begin annotating texts and write informally about literature before proceeding with formal essays or research papers.

The three major sections on the genres of fiction, poetry, and drama are organized in a parallel way; the verbal echoes are rather didactic in nature and allow the reader to deal with the parts separately and in any order: 1) reading texts of the genre in question, 2) types or subgenres, 3) elements, 4) writing, 5) writers in context, and 6) a collection of texts. The sections on reading tune in on the student's experience of literature and combine short texts with a series of helpful questions for reflection. DiYanni also intersperses texts with comments and questions in order to focus the students' attention on what they are actually doing when they read a text. Thereby, DiYanni coaches students' close reading and raises their awareness of textual and mental processes. A useful introduction to types or subgenres precedes the presentation of general elements of each genre in a clear and concise way on a formalist basis.

However, the discussion of the elements is sometimes reductive. For example, the basic questions concerning point of view in fiction are certainly helpful but ignore the structuralist reconsideration of narrative analysis.

The definitions of theme and meaning are rather ambiguous. DiYanni distinguishes theme as the meaning of a text from its mere subject or topic. He defines theme as "an idea or intellectually apprehensible meaning *inherent and implicit* in a work" [p. 608; my emphasis], and/or as something that "we abstract" [p. 86] from a text and which can be summarized in a statement [p. 609], and/or as our aesthetic experience of literature [p. 935]. Reader-response theory has defined the aesthetic experience of literature in opposition to the New Critical concept of the inherent meaning of art, and both ideas are more comprehensive than the intellectual grasp of literature. It comes as a surprise that DiYanni, who distinguishes the open and closed form in poetry, ignores these helpful criteria in his discussion of dramatic elements but instead comes up with the prescriptive statement: "in the same way that a play's plot must be unified, so a character must be coherent" [p. 923]. I would argue that the discrepancy rather than the coherence between words and acts makes characters particularly interesting and that, in the history of drama and theatre, the breaking up of the unified plot has been at least as important as the adherence to its unity. In a note, DiYanni concedes that the theatre of the absurd violates these conventions as well as those of the realistic theatre but he does not consciously qualify his previous statement [pp. 1217-1218].

The sections on writing are encouraging because they present annotation and freewriting as stages of tentative responses to texts, which allow for uncertainty, but nevertheless prepare the student readers for a more coherent and in-depth understanding. Several examples of student papers per section give much desired models of formal writing. However, these papers usually do not include a discussion of secondary material and may therefore be of limited value for students in universities whose requirements for research papers differ from standard Anglo-American university requirements.

The sections in "Writers in Context" provide excellent material for case studies as they introduce Edgar Allan Poe (fiction), Flannery O'Connor, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Langston Hughes in their literary and cultural contexts, cite a good number of their texts and those by writers they inspired, in addition to their own and critics' comments on their work. The section on drama prefers to locate three icons of Western theatre, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Ibsen, in their cultural contexts.

The excellent collection of texts presents brief examples that are challenging to various degrees. Usually, a photograph and a brief biography precede the quotation of the primary text. Unfortunately, the section on poetry places the biographical information in an appendix and does not present biographies of all authors (such as those of Baca, Braithwaite, Cavafy, and Rompf), for unknown reasons. The majority of texts are taken from North American and British literature. While one can hardly take issue with DiYanni's selection of international poems beyond the great number of Anglo-American texts, the absence of poems from central Europe is striking. In the section on poetry, the "Transformations" chapter is particularly attractive because it provides special insight into poetic writing by juxtaposing various versions of poems, poems and their intertextual companions (such as parodies), and poetic responses to paintings, highlighting the choice of diction, imagery, punctuation, and rhythm in verse.

The last section of the volume deals with research papers and critical perspectives inspired by literary theory. The author

explains the use and retrieval of secondary material as well as the mechanics of writing papers and documenting sources. In addition, he presents ten critical approaches, explains their major ideas, offers a helpful checklist of questions, and applies each approach to William Carlos Williams's short story "The Use of Force" and Emily Dickinson's poem "I'm 'Wife." The discussion of the examples are followed by a list of critical works. Considering the intended audience for this work, I would have liked to see more collections of essays and brief comments on the books mentioned in order to ease the students' access to and choice of further reading.

In conclusion, DiYanni's introduction to understanding literature is very well written and geared to students' needs. While other hands-on introductions to literature with a similar student-friendly design define more up-to-date terms of analysis in a precise way and have to be complemented by additional primary texts (cf. my own *English and American Literatures*, Tübingen & Basel: Francke/UTB, 2004), DiYanni's combination of accessible approaches to literature and a splendid anthology of texts is unique in providing very good material for first and second-year courses of literature in one volume. The handbook for teachers and the publisher's website for students provide easy access to further information on working with the volume.