
The Discipline of Literature & Philosophy

As Taught in Great Hearts Academies

New Faculty Orientation - July 2016



Philosophy undergirding the GH pedagogy

I. What's our understanding of and general approach to literature and philosophy?

Philosophy as the King of the Sciences:

- Philosophy is the direct study of human purpose (telos) and thus is explored across the curriculum; we teach students to think philosophically about all subjects. We want them to define things carefully and clearly. We want them to discern true or reasonable categories. We want them to recognize the various causes of things, and we want them always to look to the telos. In many places in the curriculum (mainly high school), students will be asked to read works with philosophical content as well as other works that are overtly philosophical.
- An example of the first kind of reading is the Declaration of Independence which, though a rhetorical work, requires following definitions and reasoning through a syllogism to get at its meaning.
- Other philosophical treatises our students read are of two kinds: **speculative** philosophy and **practical** philosophy. The first asks questions about the nature of things; the second asks questions about the good life.

Literature

- When we speak of literature in the curriculum, we generally mean imaginative literature. A work of imaginative literature is an insight about the world (or something in the world) given to us in the artistic medium of words. In this way, literature as a subset of Philosophy, but as requiring its own methods of instruction.
- Imaginative literature differs from expository writing in that it tries to convey experience rather than knowledge. That is to say, although the work of literature may contain ideas, the explication of those ideas in themselves is not its overall purpose. The artistic challenge of the writer of literature is to effect by words a response in the soul of the reader akin to that which might occur in natural (i.e. not "artistic") experiences, and this he or she does through imitation of action. Insights and understanding may certainly occur in the heart of the reader. But they are not

evoked in the same discursive manner that other forms of writing may employ. Expository writing leads us to conclude, but imaginative literature invites us to see; said another way: Philosophy states Reality, Literature portrays Reality.

- Of course, there is diversity within literature (its genres and purposes). Literature includes poetry, drama, fables, short stories, novels and so on. These structural styles embody greater elements of genre such as lyric, epic, tragic, and comedic action or inclinations. Moreover, the writer as an artist employs a host of tropes and figures to make his work compelling and enjoyable.
- Literature - the idea of story - is fundamental to the human experience. Aristotle notes that “poetry in general seems to have sprung from causes lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated” (*Poetics*, Book IV). Literature uses our natural desire for narrative (images, plot, and characters) to convey a fundamental truth of the human condition.

II. How does the study of literature and philosophy fit into a liberal arts education, and, relatedly, why do we study them at Great Hearts?

- Philosophy is a liberal study in that it introduces the student into a tradition of thought and reflection that will inevitably transcend the chat-world of the student’s time, place, and peers.
 - Philosophy welcomes the students into the “great conversation” and requires that they learn to do the hard work of understanding before exercising a reckless reaction of judgment.
 - A familiarity with this “great conversation” helps one to see how much we owe to others in those things we assume about the world. If we know more than people of previous ages, as T.S. Eliot reminds us, it is because they are what we know. If we see more than they did, it is because we stand upon their shoulders. But if a student does more than merely study philosophy—if he or she genuinely pursues wisdom—then philosophy can be an assent from the bondage of cultural assumptions to a vision of things themselves and to how it is that we see, or know, them. In Plato’s allegory, it is liberation from the cave.

- The literary works of the Western canon act as windows to a wider world, showing young people a broad spectrum of options for thought and action, while also providing the opportunity to observe the consequences of such actions from a safe vantage point. It is a way of pursuing Truth through human experience in ways that a writer crafts - a laboratory for the human heart. Reading the literary works we call “the classics” also shows the students that they are not alone in managing the joys and sorrows of life, and it is a benefit for any modern student to read in the lines of an old Greek poet the very agonies that torment her young American soul. Remove not only bondage of the present but even constraints of our current physical realities.
 - We study literature to stock the “inward eye,” as Wordsworth suggested. We supply the students with images and interpretations of the world embodied artistically in words, phrases, stories, images, and paradigms. This contributes to a fuller expression of the human soul (power of the trivium) and therefore contributes to freedom and the pursuit of beauty.
 - We teach literature as part of the project of initiating our students into the broad human reflection on life, its meaning, and its potential. Imaginative literature is one of the forms in which we humans have packaged these reflections. It brings us into a communion of human experience, and gives to that experience a place in memory and a hope of meaning.
- We teach literature and philosophy to help students understand the greater questions and to help them know how to pursue those questions in ways most likely to provide plausible answers: to be aware of examples of conclusions others have arrived at and to make them part of the greater conversation, to cultivate a love of truth and a confidence that it is in significant degrees attainable.



Curricular Guidelines to Teach Students to Know and Understand, Practice, and Love Language

I. What curricular choices has GH made based on the notes above? Is there a path/progression in the discipline of the languages?

• In Archway academies (K-5), we look for books that are "classics," including many works of 20th century fiction – Narnia, Charlotte's Web, "Little House," et al.

• Children's literature does not represent a whole other purpose because of its different audience. C.S. Lewis describes his own choice of writing children's literature because sometimes "a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say." He continues:

Where the children's story is simply the right form for what the author has to say, then of course readers who want to hear that, will read the story or re-read it, at any age. I never met The Wind in the Willows or the Bastable books till I was in my late twenties, and I do not think I have enjoyed them any the less on that account. I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last. A waltz which you can like only when you are waltzing is a bad waltz. – from "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" by C.S. Lewis

• In the middle school, the canon furnishes us with selections from Shakespeare, Dickens, Chaucer, and Beowulf. But we also read books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Chosen*, works not from the canon of the greats, but certainly modern classics worthy of reading, accessible to young readers and rewarding to adults as well. For High School grades, we select works from the canon of the Great Books

• Questions for selecting texts for all grade levels:

- Does the work cultivate moral, intellectual, and aesthetic development?
- Should the work be read at this time in their education? Is it age appropriate?
- Is the text aligned with other topics the students are learning in other classes?
Is it properly situated in the sequence of literature through high school?
- Does the work present essential truths about the human condition in a way that stretches and challenges the reader while remaining accessible?

Our belief in these texts - that they speak to the deepest elements of the human condition - has implications for how we prepare and how we engage continuous learning as teachers around these texts. We believe the following must be prerequisites to teaching these texts well:

1. The teacher must have a *deep and refined adult understanding* of the literature – a literate, liberally educated adult reader’s general understanding of the text.
2. The teacher must have an ability to convert or translate this adult understanding into meaningful lines of inquiry commensurate with the mental development of the students.



II. How do we go about teaching this based on what we believe about it and its purpose?

Philosophy

- Students should be initiated into the “great conversation” rather than be given a catechism of correct and incorrect ideas. They should be familiar with the more profound questions that have provoked thoughtful reflection. They should know how a variety of thoughtful writers have wrestled with those questions. Finally, they should learn to raise such questions throughout the curriculum and throughout life. But here we tread near the abyss of relativism, and teachers must be careful not to cultivate sophists and cynics. Be a thoughtful and cautious guide to these young people, and try to instill in them not merely knowledge, but a love for goodness, harmony, and truth.

Literature

- At Great Hearts, we approach literature as
 - A work of art that must be understood on its own terms
 - A whole that cannot be boiled down
 - As contact with Reality on *its own terms*

Flannery O’Connor wrote that “*literature ought to deepen the reader’s sense of mystery by contact with reality, and his or her sense of reality should be deepened by contact with mystery.*” She continues:

I prefer to talk about the meaning in a story rather than the theme of a story. People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were like the string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you pick out the theme, the way you pick the right thread in the chicken feed sack, you can rip the story open and feed the chickens. But this is not the way meaning works in fiction. When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied within it, has to be made concrete within it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said in any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing to tell him is to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning, but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you to experience the meaning more fully. From "Writing Short Stories" in *Mystery and Manners* by Flannery O'Connor

- Consequently, it will be important to guide students to see what the author is presenting poetically, and to avoid reading such literature as though it were something else (e.g. *The Divine Comedy* as theology, or *The Brothers Karamazov* as philosophy).
- We should also avoid historicizing these works. If any work is reduced to its role in some historic movement, it will lose its living significance when that movement is no longer a current struggle. The insights that come from noting that Milton wrote in a time of rebellion will be nothing compared to his artistic vision as one who wrote in the epic tradition. As Bakhtin said, "Everything that belongs only to the present dies along with the present." Let us step out of ourselves and the conspirations of our parochial companions to see the author's vision and to enjoy the author's art. Accept the genre of the work, and try to see according to the artistic vision.
- Students should learn literature from literature. They should understand more about life as a result of reading and discussing. The task of reading and understanding the text is different from using it to illuminate, or deepen, our experience. We want to do both, but the first is the more important.
- Teaching literature at the elementary and middle school level will include more didactic instruction and coaching exercises, and, of course, teaching reading with level readers (K-2). At each level, there is a path to reading in accordance with the developmental needs of our youngest students (ex: *A Bargain for Frances*). At the high school level, our goal is to help them obtain an enlarged understanding of ideas and values by means of Socratic questioning and active participation.

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III. Is there is a language of the discipline that we help kids understand during their course of study?

The teacher should make the following array of content regular elements of lesson planning:

- General Vocabulary- This could be vocabulary from lists and books or, preferably, from literature.
- Categories of literature- Genres etc. (tragedy, comedy, epic, and lyric)
- Elements of a story or poem- aspects of plot (complication, resolution, peripety, discovery), characters (protagonist, antagonist, supporting...), points of view (limited and omniscient 1st, 2nd, and 3rd), setting;
- Figures of speech and tropes- rhyme scheme, meter, assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme, metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, etc. (these should be drawn from works studied.)
- Aspects of style- i.e. high, middle, low; use of vernacular; use of archaic language...
- Major themes- i.e. friendship, honor...
- Significant citations by memory – students should memorize passages, speeches, pieces of dialogue, or simply nice phrases and expressions (“he crumbled to the ground like a falling tower,” “they looked at him with mild bovine interest”)



Epilogue

Humane Letters

Humane Letters is the capstone course of the Great Hearts high school experience. The class typically begins the high school day and sets the tone for the other high school courses.

Humane Letters is first and foremost a *Great Books seminar*, in which the reading and Socratic discussion of great works of prose fiction, political theory, epic poetry, philosophy, autobiography, drama, and selections from Jewish and Christian scriptures are the work of the course. There are no tests/exams on the Great Books—only daily discussions that usually fill the whole 1 hour and 50 minutes of class time.

The selection and sequence of the Great Books is not strictly chronological: there is an intentional working-backwards in the sequence from 9th grade (American) through 10th (modern European) through 11th (ancient Greek), with a springing back forward in the 12th grade (from Virgil to Dante to Shakespeare to Descartes to Dostoyevsky). This sequence is above all a developmentally appropriate one for students, both because a) it starts with the most familiar and moves back to the least familiar, and b) because the depth/difficulty of the books in each course increases throughout the four year sequence. The books that are in 9th grade have been time-tested and proven to be perfectly suited for 9th graders; so too with 10th, 11th, etc. The books could not be moved from one course to another without disruption to a proven sequence. Machiavelli is for 12th graders; Homer and *The Republic* are for the emerging adult minds of juniors; *The Brothers Karamazov* could not be anything other than the last book in the 12th grade; and the sophomore year's *Crime and Punishment* is the most perfect pairing of book and age group in the entire Humane Letters sequence..

- Not a Western Civ. Class or survey course.
- Students are graded on the basis of their participation in discussion.

Good Practices for Humane Letters Teachers:

- Come to class prepared with a few leading questions for the seminar.
- Practice restraint during Socratic discussion—silence can be the greatest asset of an HL teacher
- We train habits of conversation and listening throughout the 4 years. A 9th grade seminar can look substantially different than a 12th grade one.