

A Humanistic Approach to Literature

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Humanistic psychologists perceive man to be basically a loving animal. Personified, humanistic man is one who is constantly striving for actualization of the self. He is searching for the fullest possible realization of his potentialities in the here and now. He is neither subject to the determination of incapacitating childhood experience nor a victim of reinforcement history based on external control. This man is existential. He lives in and exists for the present moment, attempting to maximize his human potential and to realize his highest personal capabilities.

Humanists assert that man is motivated by growth. Freed from external and historical constraints, his potential to grow as a loving, productive, functional person is manifested. The process of becoming rather than a specifically defined goal is the ultimate objective.¹ Such a man is not static; his optimal growth is dependent upon cons-

tant personal experience directed toward self-actualization. He is freed to pursue the higher-order human needs which separate man from lower organisms to wit, love, aesthetics, productivity, and so on. The ability to fulfill one's own human needs on one's own human term, throughout life is fundamental characteristic of a self-actualized person.

Extrapolated to teaching of literature, the humanistic approach focuses on the quality of the interpersonal relationship that exists between teacher and learner. Mostly, in Thai universities, there are either gaps or barriers between these two kinds of people who share equal parts in literature. The teachers stay in one world; the students in the other. Hardly the teachers pay interests in differentiating their students. They only know who are better students. There is no need to bring out each student's self-actualization. Students finally are only a mass production coming out from a factory with long-lined degrees.

¹B. Claude Mathis and William G. McGaghie, "From Theories for Learning to Theories for Teaching", in Lindsay J. Stiles (ed.) *Theories for Teaching* (1974) p. 46

Literature is a subject that offers almost endless answers and interpretation. **Huckleberry Finn**, for instance, is story against racial discrimination as well as an adventure and a symbolic novel of an eternal relationship between human beings. Therefore, the study wholeheartedly agrees with a friendly understanding between teacher and learner. A humanistic teacher would not say, "What do I think of this novel is.....". But "What do each of you think is..... and I think your ideas, despite the varied viewpoints, are all interesting." There is nothing that more efficiently destroys relationship than a dictatorship in lecturing and interpretation. Learning must become a partnership experience in which each individual is worthy of the other's trust. No longer prescribing role-appropriate behaviour or learning requirement, he must be oriented completely toward the actualization potential of his students.

The Role of Teacher as Facilitator

Carl Rogers, the major spokesman for Humanism has coined the term "facilitator" to replace "teacher". That is, teachers must become facilitators of learning¹.

Some teachers conclude that only literary scholars can make good teachers of literature. This is partly true, literature needs good and profound under-

standing when taught. The dark side of this truth is, unfortunately, scholarly teachers press students to the nearness of breakdown. They select hardest literary pieces possible, obscure the understanding, monopolize interpretation, hoping the procedure will lead to genuine intelligence. The impact, if evaluated, makes literature a frightening experience. Later on, students are discouraged even to lay hands on books.

Literary snobs feel that facilitating lessons do not express their literary ability. This idea is completely horrible for a humanistic approach. Hardness does not only bores students, but also builds a large gap between teacher and student. Some teachers feel that teaching classical literature is the ultimate ability, therefore it must be hard. In fact, **Hamlet** is not a bit more difficult than **Finnegan's Wake**; and the **Dark Lady Sonnets** are much clearer than the poetic works of Sylvia Plath.

Humanistic teachers do not discourage students by their scholarship or literary snobbishness. Students must feel free to express their ideas and their own interpretation, to pursue their own interests, without interference, under a warm guidance. Teachers might not succeed in creating intelligent robots, but surely, they inspire human beings with good understanding and love. What could be more expected?

1 Carl R. Rogers, **Freedom to Learn** (1969) p. 5

References

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