
Teaching *Clarissa*: Can Students Be Coached to See this Book as More than Another Doorstop? Michael MacBride

When my graduate literature class was asked to read Richardson's *Clarissa*, the room was filled with groans (probably because it was coupled with *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, *Rob Roy*, *Emma*, and a few shorter works). We had purchased the books for the course and had seen this 1500-page monstrosity among the others, but there had been some doubt in our minds about whether we would be reading the entire thing or just selections from it. The plan was to read it all, in all its epistolary glory. After some signs of mutiny, our professor gave in to the cries of dissent and offered photocopies of the most important final letters instead of requiring the class to finish the last 500 pages.

At first this seemed like an excellent option—in a course filled with eight and nine hundred page books, this was the equivalent of a “get out of jail free” card. Something of a revelation occurred around page 1000, though; I actually became engaged by the complexity of the characters, Richardson's careful design of the story, and the picaresque elements that I began to notice in the text. I began to ask questions. Why did Richardson write such an incredibly long book? Where does this text fit into the grander scheme of literature? Why is our professor having us read it? More importantly, since I wish to teach literature in the future, could I teach this novel? How would I teach it? If graduate students struggled and groaned, what would undergraduates

do? Since I now had a strange kind of love for *Clarissa*, I struggled with these questions and came up with a possible solution.

There are, of course, many ways to attack this novel and in fact I and two other graduate students assembled a panel on *Clarissa* at the 2006 MCTE Conference in Rochester, Minnesota, to discuss a few of these approaches. The notion of the picaresque novel is the key that unlocks the lesson plan that I will layout in this paper. When I first heard the term “picaresque”, I assumed that the professor had really meant “picturesque”. However, the context in which it was used did not seem to fit with my understanding of the term “picturesque”. After shyly raising my hand and asking the necessary question, I quickly learned the difference and also witnessed the look of relief on all the other students’ faces in my class. Since the idea of the *picaro* and the resulting picaresque novel is so important to the development of the novel, anyone studying literature needs to grasp it. But, just because it is important does not mean that students are going to want to learn it.

At its heart, *Clarissa* is a picaresque novel. Some would debate this idea, and students will do just that after they are finished reading the novel. The *picaro* is typically a rogue, rascal, or scoundrel, and Clarissa seems to represent everything pure and good. How, then, can I justifiably call Clarissa a *picaro*? While the reader believes Clarissa to be pure and honest, her family thinks she has fallen horribly. She has ruined their family name and they see no reason to forgive her. Clarissa herself has doubts about her worthiness and constantly begs forgiveness. In this way, *Clarissa* represents an interesting variation on the picaresque novel. While she begins the novel in the upper class of society, her self-image and social status depreciate quickly “lower class.” In addition to the rogue characteristics, *Clarissa* also manifests other traditional elements of the picaresque novel: episodic adventures, a “hero” that lives in the lower rungs of society (as Clarissa does once she leaves her family’s home), and also exposure of the hypocrisy of the society in which Clarissa lives¹.

Alex Goudas, one of the fellow presenters at the aforementioned conference, opened his presentation with a statement

that succinctly explains a feeling that I share about teaching. He said, “the best way to reach students when teaching difficult material is to connect it to their personal lives. We all learn so much more when we make a mental bond between something we don’t understand with something we already do.” How does one make a foreign phrase or an 18th century text relevant and interesting to a student? The other important question that I struggled with was how to make students find connections from one text to another.

Often it seems that students think of each novel as a single island amid a sea called the library. Unless the author has written a series using the same character, or written multiple volumes that are tied together somehow, once one novel is read and students have taken the test, answered essay questions, or given an in-class presentation, the book can be quickly forgotten. Students move on to a new author, a new text, a new idea, a new period of time, just as they would a new clothing fad. Of course, connections between these authors, books, concepts, and eras are there to be seen; sometimes they just need to be prodded to the surface by an instructor that can make them show their relevance. With an understanding of the texts and the traditions, then the more abstract concepts in literature are accessible.

What is *Clarissa*’s relevance? Can students in the twenty-first century see any glimpse of themselves in a novel written in 1748? Originally Richardson wrote *Clarissa* as a serial novel. In unabridged form *Clarissa* is 1500 pages long, not including the appendices or postscript. Several abridged versions of the text exist but, to foster a full appreciation of Richardson’s work, this course is built around the unabridged version. By breaking the novel into smaller, easier to digest, pieces students should be able to get through it in ten weeks. In terms of relevance, each chunk of the novel could be approached as TV mini-series that is ten episodes long. Most of the drama within the novel is probably most applicable to the soap opera format.

Aside from being anchored in a format familiar to most students, *Clarissa* contains many issues that are relevant today. The full title *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady: Comprehending the Most Important Concerns of Private Life and*

Particularly Showing the Distresses that may Attend the Misconduct Both of Parents and Children in Relation to Marriage, displays the primary conflict in the novel—Clarissa’s battle with her family—certainly something to which students can relate. Another issue raised midway through the text is what best equates to date rape, when Lovelace takes advantage of Clarissa. Before the rape occurs, Lovelace terrorizes Clarissa. At first that terror closely resembles stalking, then obsession, abuse, and eventually the final act of ruin. Any and all of these issues are just as relevant now as they were nearly 300 years ago.

Below is an outline of an approach for a 15-week, undergraduate course in literature. These are my recommendations to ensure this book is relevant and interesting as students form a knowledge base in literature and understanding of the picaresque novel. The basic approach is to break *Clarissa* into 150-page sections that are discussed every other week; then students will watch a film (6 films total, which are explained in detail in the week-by-week breakdown of the class below) in class on the alternating weeks. The films will provide a break from their reading and will help demonstrate how picaresque elements are represented in our times. In addition to reading *Clarissa*, students will also be assigned short readings from other texts that should provide a background in the history of the picaresque novel.

This class design is structured for a 100 or 200 level undergraduate literature or humanities course. Students need only to bring their life experiences and a basic knowledge of literary terms to the course. In its most basic form, this course is a survey of world literature. The texts explored during the course will span 400 years (16th-20th century) and will expose students to novels from Spain, England, America, and Central Europe. It is designed to be a *reading* intensive course requiring students to read 150 pages a week for five weeks and 250 pages a week for five weeks. The readings will alternate (150 pages, 250 pages, 150 pages...) for the first ten weeks of the course. To make this bitter pill easier to swallow, two concessions have been made. First, movies will be shown in class on the weeks with lighter reading assignments. The films will be used in place

of more modern novels and will allow students to make connections from the written texts to another medium. Second, aside from the reading there will only be three writing assignments and only one of them will be of any considerable length. These other assignments are explained in more detail below.

This course could also be adapted for higher-level undergraduate, or even graduate courses, by assigning more readings and in-depth writing assignments to supplement the curriculum. There are many other picaresque novels that could be included; alternatively non-picaresque novels could be added to offer contrast. The addition of foreign films would shape the course to fit a world literature class model, introducing students to other cultures through multiple modalities.

There are many learning objectives that would be possible from a course designed this way. Most basically, as with any course in literature, students will gain an appreciation and understanding of classic literature. They will also see connections from classic literature to novels and films of the 20th and 21st century. This last outcome can be expanded to encouraging students to look outside the genre of literature for literary traditions in other genres. Certainly students will be familiar with books being made into movies, but it is hoped that they will acknowledge elements of novels that also appear in films (and perhaps even in the other arts). Last, this course will provide students with a better understanding of what is meant when something is described as “picaresque”.

In terms of assessment of these objectives, the course will consist of four equally weighted items: a reading log, a paper, a presentation, and a final essay examination.

The reading log will require students to: keep a “character” list that includes page numbers that pertain to characters that they perceive as being important to the story, and to write descriptions of characters in their own words. It will also require students to track themes throughout each text, and of course provide a plot summary. While this exercise is designed to help students keep track of characters, plot elements, and themes throughout the novel (since it will be read

over the course of ten weeks), it is also expected that students will include comments and connections between *Clarissa* and the other novels and movies they read and watch. Students will be required to include at least one journal entry per week, each entry no shorter than 2-3 pages. In addition to ensuring that students are doing their assigned reading every week, it will also serve as a guide as they navigate this lengthy text.

This reading log will make writing their final paper a much easier task. Since I am encouraging students to make connections between novels and films, the paper will require that they compare and contrast *Clarissa* and any other two texts used during the course of the class (one such text must be a movie). For example, students can choose to write about *Clarissa* and two movies, or one movie and one novel. The paper should be at least seven pages long, but no longer than ten. While they certainly could do outside research for this paper, I would encourage students to find linkages on their own using the texts they have read and watched throughout the course. They should have plenty to draw on from the class discussions and their own notes in their reading log. As an educator and lover of literature, I want to privilege their *own* thoughts more than what others have already written. *Clarissa* is a novel on which few recent scholarly works have focused upon²; requiring that they write about it as it pertains to one of the other films or novels on the syllabus should help minimize plagiarism attempts.

The third method of assessment will be an oral presentation of an abbreviated version of their paper. Throughout the course, students will watch six films, read excerpts from two novels, and read three novels in their entirety. Thus, the combinations possible should provide for enough interesting presentations that students would not be repeating each other. Each presentation should last no longer than fifteen minutes, with five minutes for questions from the audience.

Finally, the last element of assessment will be a comprehensive essay examination. The exam will feature several issues that were brought up in class, such as: defining what is meant

when someone refers to something as picaresque, how this notion applies to the text we have read and viewed, and how this trend differs from other forms of storytelling or other texts they have read or viewed. Students will be allowed to use any of the texts for the course and their reading log during the course of the exam. Questions for this exam will require students to utilize examples from the texts to help make connections between them.

Week 1: The First Taste of *Clarissa*

Reading assignments:

- *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes, His Fortunes and Adversities* (1554), 128 pages
- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages

There is little argument that *Lazarillo de Tormes* marks the beginning of the picaresque novel. It is a quick read and filled with dark humor and satire. While it may take students a while to get into the rhythm of *Clarissa*, *Lazarillo* should pique their interest right away. The discussion this week will be focused around *Lazarillo*, its style of writing, and comparisons to other novels they have read.

Week 2: The First Movie

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages

Students will watch *Thelma and Louise* (1991, 129 minutes) in class this week. Since *Clarissa* features a strong female character, the first movie will mimic that theme and incite discussion in this area. After viewing the film, discussions will be centered on the episodic nature of the story and whether Thelma or Louise can be viewed as heroes. Are they *picares*? What similarities, if any, do students see in the text and the film?

Week 3: *Don Quixote*

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages
- Excerpts from *Don Quixote (Part II)*, ~100 pages (Duke and the Duchess episodes)

In addition to the regular 150 pages of *Clarissa*, stu-

dents will be provided with about 100 pages of *Don Quixote*. Since Cervantes borrows heavily from *Lazarillo*, the connections between these two texts should come easily. Discussions will attempt to make these connections in detail and explore whether Cervantes has changed the notion of the *pícaro* from its representation in *Lazarillo*. The excerpts from *Don Quixote* will be from the second part, Chapters 32 through 48. These chapters will introduce students to the Duke and the Duchess, and will provide them with a glimpse into the narrative style to allow them to make connections to other texts throughout the course. Additionally, students should be encouraged to look for connections between the narrative style of the previous works with *Clarissa*. At this point students should be nearly a third of the way through *Clarissa* and will have experienced Richardson's style enough to make these connections. To help place these chapters in context of the larger work, it will be necessary to provide a summary of *Don Quixote*. By including the table of contents from *Don Quixote* with the excerpt, students can see obvious connections to *Lazarillo de Tormes* and the chapter titles provide a sort of summary by themselves.

Week 4: The Second Movie

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages

Students will watch the film *Pulp Fiction* (1994, 154 minutes) in class during the fourth week. While this movie does have violence, strong language, and nudity, it does a wonderful job of portraying picaresque elements in film. Violence is prevalent in *Lazarillo* and *Don Quixote*, and students will easily see that connection between the written works and the movie. Comparisons of crass language may come up as well, since picaresque novels typically involve the lower class and such language is more common with less-refined characters. Discussions should focus on similar elements: whether the characters in *Pulp Fiction* can be viewed as heroes and if they might represent the modern day version of the *pícaro*.

Week 5: *Huckleberry Finn*

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages
- Excerpts from *Huckleberry Finn*, ~100 pages (The Raft, Grangerfords and Sheperdsons, and King and Duke episodes)

The reading of *Clarissa* this week will be supplemented with roughly 100 pages of *Huckleberry Finn*. These readings will include chapters 15 through 22, which cover Jim and Huck missing Cairo in the fog, the Grangerfords and Sheperdsons episode, and several episodes with the King and Duke. Comparisons between these readings and *Lazarillo*, *Don Quixote*, and the two films should come easily to students. Discussions will compare how and if the picaresque has evolved, and if students are starting to see any of these elements in *Clarissa*. At this point in their reading, they should be approximately halfway through the novel. *Clarissa* will be in the clutches of Lovelace and, if needed, comparisons can be made to modern day Soap Operas, sitcoms, and the like to encourage students to stick with reading this huge book. While there is certainly drama in *Clarissa*, there is no action. Richardson provides readers with first and secondhand accounts of action but no action itself. Can students think of any other modern day programs that do this?

Week 6: The Third Movie

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages

Decidedly lighter than *Pulp Fiction*, *The Princess Bride* (1987, 98 minutes) will be presented in class and will grant some comic relief for students. A discussion this week will center on books that are made into movies, such as the *The Princess Bride*. There is a debate about whether or not the author William Goldman (the author of the novel *The Princess Bride*) creates a false history within the introduction of the novel. Goldman claims that his text is simply an abridgement of an ancient Florentine author named S. Morgenstern. At this time, students will be provided with a few excerpts from the introduction to the

novel, and from the introduction to *Don Quixote*. A discussion can then be aimed at what the purpose of providing such “red herrings” might be, or if they are meant to be taken seriously.

Week 7: The 1st Half of *The Painted Bird*

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages
- The 1st half of *The Painted Bird*, ~115 pages

Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* provides a number of opportunities in a classroom. First and foremost, it is a modern (1965) picaresque novel. Certainly discussions can be directed around that topic, as with the previous texts. Repetition can be a useful learning tool in this class discussion, as the teacher asks again: How has the notion of the *picaro* changed? Do they see changes? However, it also presents a chance to address Holocaust literature. Some students may be familiar with Wiesel’s *Night*, especially now that it is part of the Oprah Book Club. If so, then comparisons can be made between the different approaches the two texts take, but most importantly Wiesel claims that *The Painted Bird* is “one of the best indictments of the Nazi era... Written with deep sincerity and sensitivity.” Do students agree? What connections does this text have with *Clarissa*? Has it somehow enhanced their understanding of the novel?

Week 8: The Fourth Movie

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages

This week students will view the most modern film that will be examined in this course, *Sin City* (2005, 124 minutes). While *Sin City* is best recognized as a detective noir film, it has many picaresque elements included as well. Comparisons between *Sin City* and *Pulp Fiction* should be readily apparent. Students will be asked to inspect it closer to identify linkages between characters in each of the texts. Who are the main characters in *Sin City*? What do these characters have in common with characters from *Clarissa* and the other texts in the course? How does the violence in *Sin City* resemble the violence in the other texts?

Week 9: The 2nd Half of *The Painted Bird*

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), 150 pages
- The 2nd half of *The Painted Bird*, ~115 pages

After finishing Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, students may now be better able to answer some of the questions that came up earlier in the previous week's discussion. Excerpts from Wiesel's *Night* could be provided, to show differences in narrative style. Both novels are about the holocaust, and both authors are holocaust survivors. Why might Kosinski have chosen to tell his story the way he did? How effective is his approach? Which *picaro*, from the other texts, does Kosinski's unnamed young boy seem most similar to?

Week 10: The End of *Clarissa*

Reading assignments

- *Clarissa* (1748), the last ~150 pages

As students finish off the last 150 pages of *Clarissa*, they will watch *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003, 111 minutes). Discussions again center around the concept of the *picaro*: has it changed? Since they are both written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, what similarities do students see between *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill Vol. 1*? Both films have main characters that are unsavory—asassins. How do the *picaros* differ? How are they the same? Is The Bride, from *Kill Bill*, more justified in her mission than Jules and Vincent or Butch from *Pulp Fiction*? Most importantly, are these *picaros* the same as the ones students find in earlier texts? Or has Tarantino tweaked the *picaro* for his own purposes?

Week 11: Reading Log, and Draft of Final Paper is Due

Now that students are finished reading *Clarissa*, a discussion should focus on what picaresque elements (if any) they see in the text. What relation does a novel like *Clarissa* share with the other texts and films in this course? Any questions that may have arisen from the reading should be addressed now as well. Another useful exercise would be to require students to reduce

the novel to a few simple plot points, or episodes (for example: leaving home, the temptation, the rape, the fall, and her death).

Week 12: The Final Movie

During this last week of new material, students will watch the film *Memento* (2000, 113 minutes). *Memento* offers another example of a modern film that features a *picaro* as the main character—Leonard. The story unravels in reverse as Leonard pieces together his broken life and eventually comes to understand how he lost his ability to retain new memories. What other *picaro* does Leonard resemble? With all of the reading completed, and all the films viewed, students will now be asked to discuss any connections they have seen throughout the course. How do they view picaresque novels, their development, and the idea of the *picaro* and its development over time? Do they see these elements through film as well, or do they believe that is too much of a stretch? Can they think of other novels or films that represent these same ideas? Any suggestions that can be successfully expanded upon and defended are fair game for inclusion in the final paper or essay exam.

Week 13 and 14: Final Paper is Due, Presentations of Papers

These weeks will be set aside for presentation of papers. Presentations should last 15 minutes followed by a 5 minute question and answer period. In Week 13, the rough draft of the final paper will be handed back to students to allow them a week to make any final edits. The only difference between these weeks will be that the final papers will be due during week 14. This should allow enough time for the instructor to read and evaluate them.

Week 15: The Final Essay Exam

This class period will be dedicated to the final exam. Students should be granted the entire class period to take the final.

The design for this survey in literature, or humanities, course allows a lot of flexibility. It demands that students wrestle with a difficult text, but it also allows for some excellent discussion. During the course of the class, students will gain some exposure to novels from the 16th to the 20th century and they will

also have read Spanish, English, American, and Central European literature. The course will have introduced them to several films that hopefully expanded their thinking about literary concepts and opened their eyes to the prevalence of these concepts in modern day entertainment as well as historic and modern literature. Finally, it also serves to introduce them to the beginnings and progress of the picaresque novel. While a 1500-page novel may seem a daunting task, and some doubt the relevance of such a book, breaking it apart into smaller pieces and exposing students to other, perhaps more approachable, works can be done with wonderful results. I hope that college students will benefit from a literature class structured this way and that it would show them that *Clarissa* is more than just a doorstep or defensive weapon.

Notes

1. See Robert Alter's *Rogue's Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel*, Frank Wadleigh Chandler's *The Literature of Roguery*, Carmen Benito-Vessels and Michael Zappala's *The Picaresque: A Symposium on the Rogue's Tale*, Stuart Miller's *The Picaresque Novel*, or any other number of works for a more thorough examination of picaresque novels.

2. A search of the major literature journal databases (Academic Search Premier, Biography Reference Bank, Essay & General Literature, Historical New York Times, Humanities & Social Sciences Retrospective, JSTOR, MLA Bibliography, WorldCat, and Xreferplus) returned 273 possible documents. The majority of these hits referenced *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Samuel Richardson*, edited by Lisa Zunshine, and published March 2006 by MLA; and *Passion and Virtue: Essays on the Novels of Samuel Richardson*, edited by David Blewett, and published March 2001 by the University of Toronto.

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The Princess Bride. Dir. Rob Reiner. Perf. Cary Elwes, Mandy Patinkin, Chris Sarandon, Christopher Guest, and Wallace Shawn. 1987. DVD. MGM, 2001.

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