

SEM12. Innovative approaches to the teaching of literature between theory and practice

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 14

Convenors

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Abstract

As scholars and teachers of English literature, we want to emphasize the value of literary studies in the Humanities. Despite the challenges of substantial cuts in the field and the impact of A.I. as a substitute of critical thinking, we vindicate the importance of getting to grips with the flexibility and ambiguity of the literary texts. In C. S. Lewis's words, "Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides".

Our aim is to explore and expand the range of ways in which literature can be taught and discussed inside a university classroom. Prospective contributors are invited to share their own experiences in organizing classroom activities that engage students at diverse levels, fostering the development of skills that comprise critical and interdisciplinary thinking, narrative and fictional creativity, teamwork, public speaking, forms of performance. The idea is that of using the classroom as a space in which instructors and students creatively interact among themselves and with the literary texts, within a wider historical, cultural and linguistic context.

Also building on the experience that the recent pandemic has enforced, this seminar welcomes and aims to foster practical and theoretical reflections concerning the teaching of literature through active learning and related instructional strategies such as flipped classrooms, rewriting and adaptation strategies, remediation from the verbal to the visual and problem-based learning – all teaching possibilities that can be enhanced by the use of dedicated online platforms.

The seminar itself is meant as a springboard for new reflections as well as a site for sharing teaching experiences across different generations of instructors. We welcome submissions that showcase firsthand teaching experiences, offering insights into practical classroom strategies and challenges. Additionally, we encourage papers that delve into theoretical perspectives on literature instruction, examining pedagogical frameworks, methodologies, and innovative approaches to engaging students with literary texts.

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SEM12. Papers

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- *Teaching Shakespeare through adaptations* (Laura Tosi, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia / Rachele Bassan, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)
- *Cordelia is doing yoga: Playing ecocritically with Shakespeare* (Shaul Bassi, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)
- *The wing wherewith we fly to heaven: Rethinking education across borders* (Mariacristina Cavecchi, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *Give beauty a chance: Teaching English language & literature through lyric poetry* (Richard Ambrosini, Università degli Studi Roma Tre)
- *Beyond anxiety: Pursuing hot cognition in a co-creative environment* (Maurizio Ascari, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)

SEM12. Abstracts

Give beauty a chance: Teaching English language & literature through lyric poetry

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The beauty of the English language should play a major role both in the language-acquisition process and in the study (and especially enjoyment) of English literature. That beauty comes to life in an English-learning environment when we apply a method aimed at encouraging ESL learners to identify the rhythmic patterns, the echoing of rhyme, assonance, or alliteration, and other prosodic elements. This is why I believe this seminar offers us an ideal opportunity for a discussion of how and why opening a space for poetry in our courses can enrich our work and make it more effective. (I write ‘opening a space’ because I don’t think poetry can be ‘taught’.)

The first innovation would involve devising a methodology based on developing in our Italian students an ear for the variety of rhythms, spoken and musical, rather than on metrical scansion, the method we find applied in English and American introductions to poetry. Over the past few years the beat prosody developed by Derek Attridge has earned a wide recognition among linguists and literary critics (see Duffel, Culler); a teaching practice based on this alternative to metrical scansion can now count on a substantial body of theoretical work; scholars teaching poetry in an ESL classroom can make a significant contribution to this body of work. (As Amittai Aviram wrote, “the test of a theory of poetry should be at once the vision it gives us of poetry and its pedagogical efficacy”.)

The variety of sounds and rhythms created by both the long and short poetic lines is of crucial importance for poetry readers who are learning English. This is why we need to reject the established hierarchy based on the pre-eminence of the iambic pentameter over the tetrameter and the trimeter, and explore instead the continuum between the poles of speech and music.

Finally, a cultural history of English literature and of the English language is not possible without an understanding of the way poetic forms and lyrical genres were reinvented in different periods, often by previously unheard poetic voices, and how the evolution of metrical poetry led to free verse.

These are some of the reasons why I believe we should find innovative ways to create a space for poetry in our courses on English literature and languages.

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Beyond anxiety: pursuing hot cognition in a co-creative environment

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The teaching of literature has greatly changed in recent years, shifting away from the transmission of notions as its primary goal. While enhancing our understanding of the ‘human’ by putting us into contact with various forms of *otherness* (be they related to the past or the present), the teaching of literature offers other related opportunities for personal and societal growth. Many of us now teach literature also with the aim to develop that cluster of abilities that goes under the definition of soft skills, ranging from critical thinking to public speaking, debating, team-building and creative writing.

These formative goals can be woven into the texture of literature courses also to implement an underlying educational strategy that pursues *hot cognition* and *embodied cognition* instead of traditional academic forms of *cold cognition*. Meaning-making is a complex cognitive activity, which is powered by the emotions and which is also effected through the body. Our cultural background can be likewise described as a psycho-physical complex, and relating new

learning experiences to our own horizon of interests, motives and emotions – also through various forms of performance – is the best way to ‘internalise’ them.

In a hyper-mediated world – in which information can be easily retrieved through a click of a button, but in which an inner sense of direction seems to become more and more difficult to develop – literary teaching practices need to be redesigned in order to avoid the danger of scarcely productive, exam-oriented memory efforts. We face the challenge of promoting a new sense of dialogue or conversation, a co-creative learning environment through which participants are offered the opportunity to evolve.

At a time when students increasingly suffer from forms of anxiety that they describe as paralysing – and consequently voice their preference for solitary activities, like writing a paper at home or answering multiple choice questions, to the detriment of in-presence exchanges – we need to create new arenas for guided peer interaction. Fostering a condition of intellectual and emotional trust is a central component of the university’s formative mission, for it this openness that strengthens the cohesive texture of society, while also triggering progress thanks to the mutual sharing of intellectual landscapes.



Cordelia is doing yoga: Playing ecocritically with Shakespeare

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What happens when Shakespeare meets climate anxiety, digital storytelling, old printing techniques and a group of curious students in Venice? This paper traces the evolution of a series of playful experiments in BA and MA courses such as *English Theatre* and *Ecology and Literature* at Ca’ Foscari University. Born during the isolating days of the COVID-19 pandemic, these projects have grown into imaginative ways of reading—and rereading—Shakespeare through an ecocritical lens. At the heart of these experiments is collaboration: small, self-selected groups working together as creative micro-communities, defying the convention of the lone student essay and/or oral exam. From digital tales to handcrafted books made in unplugged classrooms and fascinating print studios, students have reimaged Shakespeare with environmental urgency and artistic flair. Expect to encounter Ophelia floating in climate-changed waters, and *Tempest*-inspired volumes drifting ashore on the island of Lazzaretto Nuovo—a historical quarantine site turned theatrical stage. In a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, these hands-on, minds-on approaches to literature invite us to reclaim the power of collective, playful, and planetary thinking.



The wing wherewith we fly to heaven: Rethinking Education Across Borders

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The paper explores the pedagogical and social implications of an experimental prison Shakespeare workshop held annually since 2016 at the “Cesare Beccaria” juvenile detention centre in Milan. Based on participatory theatre, the workshop brings together two seemingly distant learning communities – detained minors and university students – to promote emotional literacy, mutual recognition and civic awareness through the rewriting of a Shakespeare play. By inviting university students to engage with incarcerated peers through creative and embodied practice, the project redefines the university as a space not only for the transmission of knowledge but also for the cultivation of empathy, critical thinking, and social responsibility. It positions education as a collaborative and affective encounter that transcends institutional walls, and it demonstrates new possibilities for inclusive and socially engaged learning in higher education.



Teaching Shakespeare through adaptations

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Shakespeare and Adaptation Studies is a growing field that offers multidisciplinary perspectives on the teaching of Shakespeare, extending beyond drama to include film and other forms of media (see Iyengar 2023). It is now difficult to imagine an English literature module focused on Shakespeare that does not include some element of adaptation.

Adaptation studies have equipped students with new approaches to interpretation, encouraging engagement with the texts and the creation of original, creative responses (Cartmell and Whelehan 2014).

In this paper, we present a selection of rewriting and creative activities designed to engage a class of Italian and international students enrolled in the first year of the *Corso Magistrale* (LLEAP) during a 60-hour English Literature module at Ca' Foscari University. The course was delivered in a blended format, comprising 40 hours of in-class teaching and 20 hours of online activities (without live online instruction). These online components included both passive tasks (such as listening to custom-designed podcasts, watching selected video excerpts, or reviewing narrated PowerPoint presentations) and active ones, where students produced creative responses inspired by the texts and guided by prompts, questions, or quizzes. The challenge was always to guide students beyond the question of fidelity and encourage them to explore notions of intertextuality and regard sources as re-sources (Drakakis 2021).

A portion of the course focused specifically on narrative adaptations of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* for children, including the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850–52), several YA novel adaptations of *Macbeth*—such as Lisa Klein's *Macbeth's Daughter* (2009)—and contemporary picturebook versions. These adaptations, which are often simplified both linguistically and ideologically, illuminate the complex relationship between dramatic language and prose narrative, or more broadly, linguistic storytelling. They invite discussions around key choices: what kind of language should an adaptor use? Should they translate it into a modern idiom, offer a paraphrase, or preserve Shakespeare's diction? And what is the relationship between text and illustration—far more than simple visual translations, illustrations can function as critical interpretations in their own right. Another central issue is relevance: all adaptors, in different ways, attempt to make Shakespeare's works meaningful and convincing to child readers across different times, cultures, and languages. What strategies do they use—or could they use—to achieve this? All of these questions require students to make critical decisions. They begin by analysing and evaluating existing adaptations, and then become adaptors themselves—making choices that they previously only observed. In doing so, students gain agency, becoming collaborators with Shakespeare across time and space.

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