

Working with literature in a Second Chance School in Denmark

Horsens HF og VUC is a so called “second chance” school. The class we work with is at the entry level and most of them want to continue to a higher education. This class consists of young people who have had difficulties in motivation and focus, and therefore they are with us for a year to get ready for high school.

Our main question for working with the novel: *How do you make today’s young people read old literature?*

We have chosen the novel **Night Watch**, written by Henrik Pontoppidan in 1894. In the following we will present the methodology, of “*Before reading, during reading, after reading*”, that we have used for working with the book.

But first a summary of Night Watch:

Novelist Henrik Pontoppidan (1857 – 1943) is considered Denmark's foremost prose author. The Nobel Prize winner earned recognition for his exceptionally accurate portrayals of his native Denmark - contributing three epic novel cycles and a set of memoirs that helped shape the country's literary heritage.

This novel is set in Rome, Italy, in the years of the modern break-through (1870-1890). It presents two different political views –conservatism, wanting to preserve society and the way that everything is, and socialism, wanting to revolutionize society. The story takes place in an art milieu.

There are three main characters in Night Watch, forming a love triangle.

Jørgen Hallager, son of a socialistic school teacher from the Western outskirts of Jutland, Denmark. Hallager is the leader of a group called “the lump”. Their goal is to make paintings that show how poor people are living, and how the people in power suppress the lower classes.

One of his famous paintings depicts a wet and naked field, where a worn out land worker is pathetically half buried under a land slide, screaming with bloody mouth for help in vain.

Hallager is engaged with Ursula, whom he secretly wants to change into his own socialistic mindset.

He is a very good and aggressive speaker, and likes to provoke the Danish conservative milieu in Rome, (also Ursula’s father), whom he mockingly refers to as “the good-natured seals”, due to their harmless nature.

At the end of the novel he is back in Denmark, unpopular in the art milieu, married with a poor and ugly woman.

Thorkild Drehling, son of a landowner. The women call him ‘the beautiful painter’. Drehling is Hallager’s protégé, and is known to draw heavily upon Hallager’s paintings, something that has made the press mock him as an art plagiarist. Drehling loves Ursula secretly, and this love forces him to leave Denmark and Hallager, because he cannot stand to see Ursula and Hallager together. They meet again in Rome, where Drehling has developed a new painting style, merging romantic themes with fantasy, something that really frustrates Hallager. (You too, Brutus, my son!)

At the end of the novel Drehling becomes a very famous and popular painter due to his romantic and very strong love themes. One of the paintings shows Agathe and the Merman, a 28 verse long Danish folk song, where Agathe, married with a merman and living in the sea, ends up leaving him and her longing little children without any remorse.

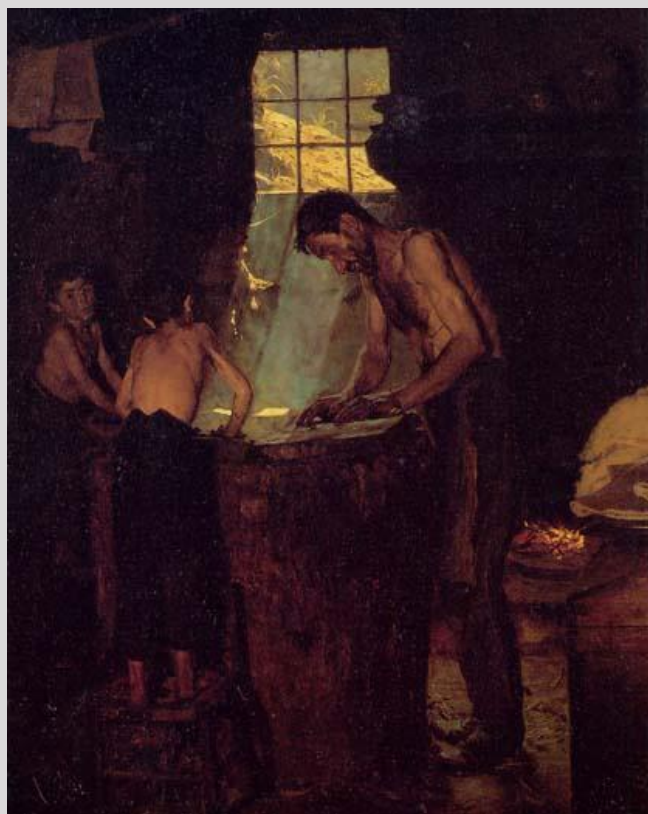
Drehling makes a painting where the merman is at the beach, reaching his hand towards shore, his little boy is playing with a shell. But in the merman’s eyes you can see an incredible longing and loss, and of course this is an allegory of his own destiny, his strong and impossible love for Ursula.

Ursula Brandt, daughter of Councillor of State Brandt, a very wealthy and conservative man. She is a fragile and beautiful woman, and loves Hallager of all her heart. She secretly wants to change Hallager into her own conservative mindset. Her method for this is to move the wedding and honeymoon months to Rome, because she believes that the old beauty of the city will make Hallager see the beauty of the past architecture and art.

Possibly pregnant and fatigued, Ursula has a nervous breakdown and dies during a serious row with a very angry Hallager.

Working with the novel

In the novel Pontoppidan describes eight important paintings in detail made by Hallager and Drehling. Our idea is to make the students paint these pictures again from Pontoppidan’s descriptions.



P.S. Krøyer, Italian Hat Makers, 1880.

Before reading:

The students were given a text about the modern break-through (1870 – 1890) and the famous Danish painters at that time.

To illustrate the impact of the modern break-through in literature and art, a conservative newspaper comments the shown painting by doubting that *”such imaginative monstrosities” exist*, and that *“this nose-dripping monkey and the dirty children is an image of reality.”*

They were also given a short presentation of the two dueling political ideologies in the book: Conservatism and Socialism.

We were also looking what happened in the same period in Ireland, to see what influence living conditions has to the cultural expressions. This part we based on our visit In Ireland in connection with LINA.

During reading:

They took notes about important behavior/change considering the three main characters Jørgen Hallager, Ursula Brandt and Thorkild Drehling.

As mentioned the novel contains descriptions of several paintings done by Jørgen Hallager and Thorkild Drehling. Each student chose one of these and made his or her own sketch version of the painting.

After reading

We made planches of character traits of the main characters and looked for antitheses. These were hung on the wall in the classroom.

We discussed motives and theme of the novel.

The sketches are now used in Art, where the students are working on making them into paintings, and it will be used as part of their portfolio in their Art exam this summer.

Conclusion

This method of working with literature has had a good impact on the students. The “Before reading” materials made a foundation for somewhat understanding a difficult and complex novel. They have worked interactively with Pontoppidan’s descriptions and they have made his themes become alive again by sketching and painting the motives.

This doesn’t mean that everybody actually succeeded in understanding the complete novel, but they have been working with literature in a more practical way than they usually do.