

# THE TEACHER IMAGE IN FICTION

*John Farrell*

A talk's a talk; it drops down dead  
After the bloody thing is said.  
A talk becomes mere fossilization  
When stripped of flesh for publication.  
A thing of leftover woofs and warps,  
Like making out with a day-old corpse.  
Vanished the mild and magnificent eye,  
The scintillant wit, the mellifluous cry,  
The well-timed gesture, the anecdote,  
The slotted pause, and the comical quote.  
Once a talk's ended, its body is slain.  
Only the cold bakemeats remain.\*



Our lives should be floodlighted by two kinds of truth: the truth of science and the truth of literature. The truth of science has been dominant over the last century. Yet, while science provides the picture tube, it isn't much help in deciding for us what pictures to show. Education texts can tell us about the theories of teaching, but only fiction, perhaps, can bring to life the teacher as an individual. Only fiction can convey the very private Gethsemane of such an individual facing a jeering class each morning.

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\*This paper is based on a talk Prof. Farrell gave at the Learned Societies meeting in Winnipeg, May, 1970 — hence this caveat.

Each of us wishes to remain an individual despite efforts to number us, punchcard us, and feed us into IBM monsters. We refuse to become Auden's unknown citizen. We want to withdraw into our uniqueness. I feel that Shakespeare and Dostoevski and Goethe knew this, but I never really feel that the new-day scientists of the Western world, the economists, the psychologists, the sociologists, see me as any more than a nondescript ant on a statistical ant-heap.

Clearly, in the twentieth century one cannot be against science. The trouble comes when you begin to *equate* science with education, when you try to make human relations and love and teaching and values the slaves of standard deviations, coefficients of correlation, and all the other abracadabra. Among educators I always seem to hear too much about science and the need for research and too little about values and literature and instincts and people. Here is where literature provides a useful, I would say, indispensable corrective.

Suppose we look specifically at the image of teachers as found in literature, past and present. For convenience I have arranged these images into ten categories.

### I — *The Birch-cane Image*

The first class we could call the "Birch-cane and Hard-bench" type. He is a male and he teaches boys. He is one part God, one part Mephistopheles, and two parts Regimental Sergeant-major.

Here is a description from Tudor times:

His next care must be the demeanor of his countenance: he looks over his scholars with as great and grave a countenance as the emperor over his army . . .

As he sits in his seat, he must with grace turn his moustachios up; his sceptre lies not far from him, the rod; he uses martial law mostly, and the day of execution ordinarily is the Friday . . .

In American literature he appears as Ichabod Crane, "with hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely hung together." "He was a native of Connecticut, a state which supplied the Union with pioneers for the mind as well as for the forest." And he's rough on the kids. Tom Sawyer's teacher is of the same vintage.

Dickens is full of these sergeant-major types and they run what some modern principals like to call "a tight school," closer to a marine boot camp than a fount of knowledge. Mr. Wackford

Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby* had one eye, you remember, "when popular prejudice runs in favor of two." He and his wife rammed treacle and sulphur down the throats of their students at Dotheboys Hall much like Mussolini forcing castor oil down the throats of tepid Fascists. One thing to be said for Squeers, he believed in student activity. The boy would be asked to spell "window" (W-I-N-D-E-R) and then translate the orthography into relevance by spending the rest of the morning cleaning the windows. Mr. Creakle in *David Copperfield*, brutal headmaster of Salem House, spoke in a whisper, but it was a most terrifying whisper. Laurence Olivier contributed a little gem to the recent television performance of *David Copperfield* playing the role.

A slightly offbeat variation of this type is Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. He taught the boys (his "little dears") to pick pockets and he performed this immensely utilitarian task with tremendous success and verve. He has, of course, renewed his literary immortality recently in the successful musical *Oliver*.

Another variation is the sinister Svengali who hypnotizes Trilby into singing divinely in that popular late-Victorian novel by Gerald Du Maurier, forebear of Daphne Du Maurier. Trilby's last name was O'Ferrall. I have had an affinity with her ever since my early reading days. What did Svengali have, what power over women, that she would turn down nineteen proposals of marriage to follow him? Maybe that's why I decided to be a teacher and mesmerize impressionable young ladies. You remember that Svengali died in the opera box while listening to Trilby. As a result Trilby lost her voice forever. But Svengali added his name to the long list of English eponyms.

## II — The Governess Image

The governess is now virtually extinct like the bustle she wore. Jane Eyre is the prototype. And she always worked for low salaries in eccentric families with Gothic groans coming from demonic attics. She had no security of tenure unless she married the boss, as Jane Eyre ultimately did with Mr. Rochester. This wasn't easy, since there was usually a wife in the woodwork somewhere who frequently had bats in the belfry. The course of study seemed rather heavily slanted to French, needlework, Czerny piano exercises, and decorum.

Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals* outlines what every young woman should be taught by her governess: "She should have

a supercilious knowledge of household accounts, should be mistress of orthodoxy, learn about contagious countries of Europe, and any other such inflammatory branches of learning."

A rather irreverent example of the governess type is Lady Carlotta who teaches by the Schartz-Metterklume method in a maliciously sardonic story by Saki.

"I shall talk French four days of the week and Russian in the remaining three," says the ineffable governess.

"Russian?" says the alarmed mother. "My dear Miss Hope, no one in the house speaks or understands Russian."

"That will not embarrass me in the least," says Lady Carlotta coldly.

Miss Carlotta decides to dramatize some history. "It's the Schartz-Metterklume method to make children understand history by acting it themselves; fixes it in their memory, you know," she tells her employer.

So Irene and Viola and Claude and Wilfred were caught by their fond mother acting out, of all things, the Rape of the Sabine Maidens. Miss Carlotta's term of employment ended rather abruptly. She did not request a board of reference. You will all be relieved to know that Lady Carlotta had had no teacher training.

### III — *Anne-of-Green-Gables Image*

We now come to the commonest of all early types of teacher literature on this continent, what I call the "Lil-Abner-Daisy Mae" type. It involves the rural school, the box social, the plugged-up chimney, the many grades, the meadowlarks, the spelling bee, the ginghamed girls and the barefoot boys with cheeks of tan. We read it in order to refurbish our nostalgias. Many of us had our first contact with schooling in this kind of school, now gone with the buffalo and the buckboard and the buggy whip. We look back fondly on such schools and such teachers. We conveniently forget the inconveniences, but remember the Christmas concert and the swain who used to pull our pigtails.

One of the early examples of this pioneer fiction is *The Virginian*, a sort of Ur-Western by Owen Wister, not to be confused with Thackeray's *The Virginians* or with the television show. Molly Wood came from the east to teach at Bear Creek, Wyoming. She was pretty — God, she was pretty! — how pretty you can tell by the fact that the Virginian purloined her delicate handkerchief on their

very first meeting. These were rough, tough, ridin', shootin' men, these were. Their idea of fun was to switch babies and baby clothing at a barbecue so that the mothers rode miles and miles jouncing over potholed trails only to discover when they got home that they had the wrong baby.

But Molly Wood, our cow-country culture carrier, tamed them, or at least one of them. She taught the Virginian how to read. This was such a successful stepping stone to matrimony that dozens of other rural teachers in later novels tried the same gambit with like success. At one stage, the Virginian lynched some thieves. As a result of this Molly nobly refused to marry him, but she realized that she was being a little sticky about it when the Virginian pointed out in his new-found articulateness that he was merely doing his duty. They were married and spent two months high in the Rocky Mountains where no other humans ever went. The curtain is best drawn at this point on the question of whether the reading instruction continued in the mountain retreat, or whether this high-minded couple found some equally diverting way of passing the lonely hours.

Two other famous examples of this idyllic backwoods literature are *Hoosier Schoolmaster* (Edward Eggleston) and *Glengarry Schooldays* (Ralph Connor). *Susan Cornish* (by Rebecca Caudill) has appeal for young people of the non-grass-hash-acid brigade and is a more recent version (1955). There are dozens of other examples. One should not leave them without mentioning the best of them all from a literary standpoint. *Where Nests the Water Hen* (Gabrielle Roy). It is written by a Winnipeg woman. It is set "deep within the Canadian province of Manitoba, remote in its melancholy region of lakes and wild waterfowl, where lies a tiny village known as Portage des Pres, or Meadow Portage." It is there that Mlle. Cote, fresh from Winnipeg Normal School, comes to find her vocation.

#### IV — *The Dominie Image*

The fourth teacher image is what I call the "Dominie" image. The school-master is the scholar, the learned man, the fountain of knowledge, the father image, often monastic. You find him in small villages as in Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village," where,

Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around;  
And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew  
That one small head could carry all he knew.

However, the dominie is not limited to the small village school. You find him in *Goodbye Mr. Chips* with his erudite jokes in Greek. You find him in Kim's *Lama*. You find him as Dr. Max Gottlieb in Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*. You find him as Father Zossima, Alyosha's teacher, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. You find him in feminine guise as the influential teacher in *The Corn is Green* and *How Green was My Valley*. You find him in William Gibson's beautiful book, *A Mass for the Dead*.

You find him as Mentor Graham in Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. Abe boarded with him. He taught Abe the rudiments of grammar. He awakened a love for oratory and poetry in the gawky youth, and he understood Abe's melancholy. He advised Abe to go into politics, for "there are only two professions open to a man who had failed in everything else — schoolteaching and politics."

#### V — *The Cloud-Cuckoo-Land Image*

Often confused with this Dominie is the "Cloud-Cuckoo-Land" type. This man is the pseudo-academic, the dilettante in professorial garb, the compulsive talker with little to say, the shallow thinker who tries to cover his paucity of ideas with a plenitude of words, the spouter of jargon like this:

The teacher in an educational institution must find a viable methodology for dealing with the disadvantaged child. This involves an exploration in depth of the rationale of the socio-economic continuum in which the child finds his entity.

Of one philosopher it is said that he sounded as though he had fallen into an automatic washing machine with Immanuel Kant. Well, some of these jargoneers sound as though they have fallen into a mixmaster with John Dewey.

Let none of us be too contemptuous of this Cloud-Cuckoo-Land type. The danger of slipping down the academic slopes into this Slough of Gooptalk is ever present. One of the best antidotes to the danger is to keep reading the satirical literature in this field. It is plentiful. It begins with Aristophanes and *The Clouds*; it comes right down to the present.

There are the mock academics in *Gulliver's Travels* on the Island of Laputa. On Laputa and at the Grand Academy in Balnibarbi, the self-styled scholars are engaged in hundreds of research projects of

a most impractical nature. It is fortunate that such mock research has completely disappeared from Colleges of Education!

There is the soft-headed Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*, a dithering fellow who taught Candide, his pupil, "metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology" and assured Candide "that all was for the best in this best of all possible worlds."

Joyce's *Ulysses* is full of trenchant fun, as Joyce mimics English teachers — Stephen Dedalus mildly and Mr. Deasy maliciously. Joyce's parodies of literary styles should be forced reading for all teachers of English once a year, preferably before the fall semester.

In more recent days, Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe* flays university types. Ed McCourt of the University of Saskatchewan has performed the same function for the prairie pundits in *The Wooden Sword* and *The Fasting Friar*. Read Chapter 9 of *The Wooden Sword* for an account of a faculty meeting whose authenticity will make you wince. I'm sure Prof. McCourt can only get away with it because he came originally from the University of Alberta, and all Saskatchewan professors assume he is depicting Edmonton and all Edmontonians assume he is depicting Saskatoon. Both end up happy that they are not as other men in other places. Incidentally, it is not parochialism, I hope, that makes me consider both of McCourt's books much more worthy of attention than Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, a rather amateur novel about academics.

## VI — *The Puff-Spot Image*

Image Number Six we might call "Dick-Jane-Puff-Spot." This teacher is a woman, usually unencumbered by a husband and, as found in literature, she falls into two categories. Oscar Wilde has said that "a woman begins by resisting a man's advances and ends by blocking his retreat." Well, Category One concentrates on those who resist a man's advances and Category Two concentrates on those who block his retreat.

The exemplar of Category 1 is the divine Miss Dove in Frances Gray Patton's *Goodmorning Miss Dove*. She has no interest in men as sex objects (to steal a phrase from the Women's Liberationists). She is only interested in men as former students who have made good as a result of her teaching. She is a thoroughly delightful creature, a sort of flannel-board Mary Poppins.

I am ashamed to say that I stayed away from this book for years because I suspected that it was marshmallow fiction. I was

wrong. It is one of the best books about teachers that I know. It is almost impossible to quote from the book without giving the wrong impression of the affectionate irony that pervades it.

Her children left the classroom refreshed . . . for within its walls they enjoyed what was allowed them nowhere else — a complete suspension of will . . .

[They] drew pictures of robins. They drew them in crayon on eight-by-eleven sheets of manila paper. They did not draw them from memory. They copied the bird Miss Dove had drawn for them on the blackboard. (She knew exactly how a robin looked and saw no sense in permitting her pupils to rely upon random observations). They left an inch-wide margin, measured with a ruler, around each picture. (Miss Dove believed in margins — except for error!) All the first-grade's robins would look alike. Which was as it should be. Which was true of robins everywhere. Miss Dove was concerned with facts, not with artistic impressions.

Two examples of the other category, the man-seeking female teachers, are Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Rachel in Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*. One is a fine play and the other a fine novel (made into a movie as *Rachel, Rachel*), but the teaching side of these women is incidental to their traumatic sexual experiences.

#### VII — *The Milquetoast Man*

The seventh teacher image involves the "Milquetoast Man." He is the sheep before the classroom wolves. He is the pedagogic lamb being led to the classroom slaughter. He is the foolscap Christian being fed to the classroom lions.

He is Mr. Parkhill in *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, surely one of the funniest books about teaching or anything else that we have been blessed with in this century. True, teacher Parkhill tends to fade into the background before his most rambunctious pupil, the unsinkable Hyman Kaplan, with his accent, his blonde wavy hair, his two fountain pens in his outer pocket, and his ability to fracture the English language by giving the degrees of comparison of "sick" as "sick, worse, dead."

Then there is Ursula Brangwen in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. The novel contains a fine chapter about the agony of the teacher whose class is out of control. Ursula carries the starry eyes of youth into her first classroom. Chapter 13, a long one, shows in



harrowing fashion her disillusionment and her hardening under the pressures of realities. I have seen the same thing happen too often with many young teachers. Teachers seem to spend their days either on beds of spikes or Cloud 9.

### VIII — *The Ghetto Image*

The most popular recent image of the teacher is the one I call the "Ghetto" image. A fresh young teacher, attuned to the voices of today and tomorrow rather than the dull tones of yesterday, enters a slum classroom in a big city and teaches high school students who comprise, in the main, knife-toting males and thigh-flaunting females. He has a bad time at first because the rest of the teachers, from the stuffy principal down to the sterile old history teacher, have ruined the students by their insistence on old-fashioned regimens and Victorian curricula.

The forerunner of this type of book is *Blackboard Jungle* (genus melodramatic). It was followed by *The Way It 'Sposed to Be* (cynical), *Up the Down Staircase* (humorous), and *To Sir, With Love* (sentimental). The fundamental philosophy is outlined by one teacher as follows:

There is no generation gap. My students and I are looking at the same things. No one view is right . . . Everyone is entitled to their opinion and no one is right or wrong . . .

I learn more from the students than they do from me. The teacher's role is not to tell the students facts . . . Schools should wipe out the distinction between academic and non-academic students.

Up to a point, I can go along with this image of the teacher as simply another student who has been aged in the wood . . . It is a reaction (probably needed) against the Jehovah image of teachers. But beyond that point, certain things stick in my crop. Is it, basically, as realistic as its proponents argue? Are future employers going to go along with the notion that no one is right or wrong in his business and that the greenest bank teller knows as much as the bank manager? Are universities going to go along with the complete lack of distinction between academic and non-academic students? Is the future doctor going to be able to tell his patients, "I learn more about yanking gall bladders from you than you learn from me"? And who is going to be willing to put his money into such a bank or his gall bladder under the scalpel of such a doctor?

IX — *The Robot Image*

I now come to the final two teacher images, images that have suffered an almost complete neglect in fiction. The first of these I would call the "Robot" image.

This image depicts the modern teacher as a sort of superefficient machine manipulating thirty-odd other machines who sit in desks, and he manipulates them by means of still other machines known variously as teaching machines, audio-visual aids, emotional inventory tests, overhead projectors, intelligence tests, programmed learning devices. The teacher is a sort of super-manager in a firm devoted to kids rather than corn-flakes. Education is a science and reflexes are conditioned, and nothing should be left to such chancy things as unresearched instinct and vague sentiments like affection for students and personal involvement with children. This gospel embraces the view that as long as you have a whole lot of stuff in a school that plugs in and lights up and costs a lot of money and has chrome trimmings, you can replace teachers and books in the future education of children.

A machine is efficient, accurate, fast. The trouble is that it just doesn't give a damn about children. It is aloof, impersonal. It has no sense of values. It is part of the dehumanization of our society. It does not laugh, it does not cry. It does not care. Teaching by machine is like procreating children by artificial insemination. It may be efficient but it isn't much fun on a cold Canadian night. It lacks human warmth, human dignity, human understanding, human love. Robot education can lead to robot products. In education as in sex, it's impossible to leave out the personal factor.

Is this a straw man I'm building? Well, let's admit that I may exaggerate for rhetorical purposes. But is there not a strong trend in Colleges of Education to make the teacher simply one more fully researched item in an efficient education factory?

I detect hints of concern about this robot trend in books like *Fahrenheit 451*, 1984, *Brave New World*, where learning has reached a stage of almost complete mechanization, which means a stage of almost complete brainwashing. There are also hints of this trend in John Barth's uproariously virile novel, *Giles Goat Boy*, and in John Hersey's *The Child Buyer*. These books are all dystopias, or negative utopias. Negative utopias have had an alarming tendency recently to turn into nightmarish realities. The great novel

of the teacher as ultimate robot is yet to be written. Perhaps it is simply waiting for a robot author to write it.

### X — *The Prima Donna Image*

The final teacher image I call the "Prima Donna" or "Grand Virtuoso" image. This teacher is the grand-daddy of all the teachers — the eccentric exhibitionist. He is learned but irreverent. He has all the vibrant pride in knowledge and his own mind that the Renaissance man had. He is never orthodox, he is never boring. He believes that there is but one mortal sin in teaching — dullness. He is Falstaff with a university education. He is Cyrano de Bergerac with or without the nose. He has the temperament of Callas, the language flow of Churchill, and the romantic grandeur of Don Quixote.

Each of us has a sort of approximation of such a teacher coming through vividly from the dim mists of our past. Such teachers become household names in the places where they teach and some like Osler and Jowett and Kittredge, Billy Phelps and Joseph Wood Krutch and Mark Hopkins, gain fame beyond their immediate milieu.

But somewhat curiously, these colorful dramatic teachers have not been utilized in fiction. I have had to hoard my favorite example of this type until the last. It was no easy job, since she's not a young lady who is easily suppressed. She kept wanting to jump into the other categories. Had she not been past her prime, I'm sure that I could not have held her locked in my cupboard so long. Her name is Miss Jean Brodie and she appears in Muriel Spark's delectable novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

It is not easy to explain why I have developed this affinity with Miss Jean Brodie. I espouse neither her pedagogy nor her politics. She was an ardent follower of Mussolini and the Blackshirts during that part of her teaching career covered in the novel, the 1930's. She even encouraged one of the young ladies in her charge to fight during the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Falangists against the Loyalists. Unfortunately the young lady, not one of Miss Brodie's brighter lights, managed to mix up the armies, got on the Loyalist side and was killed.

Miss Brodie dominated her girls "in a mysterious priesthood." She expected them to be a scaled-down model of herself. She taught her girls to feel superior to other students, a most undemocratic course of action, I'm sure you'll agree. She resented authority and

bucked the Establishment in the form of the headmistress. When the headmistress summoned her to a 4:15 appointment, Miss Brodie said indignantly, "She thinks to intimidate me by use of quarter hours." She would interrupt her teaching of "The Lady of Shallot" by saying, "Eunice, come forward and do a somersault in order that we may have comic relief."

"Who is the greatest Italian painter?" she asked.

"Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie."

"That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favorite."

She tells dramatically of her lover who "fell on Flander's Field the week before Armistice was declared. He fell like an autumn leaf, although he was only twenty-two years of age. When we go indoors we shall look on the map of Flanders, and see the spot where my lover was laid before you were born."

This touching idyll moved the girls no end.

Why do I love Miss Jean Brodie? Well, lack of space makes it necessary to capsulize it by saying, for the same reason I prefer Mephistopheles to Faust, Scarlett O'Hara to Melanie, Touchstone to Orlando. These people thrived vividly, and in living color — as did Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.

### *In Conclusion . . .*

So much for a brief survey of the teacher image in fiction. Skill, in teaching as in anything else, is its own most effective public relations man. Mediocrity needs an artificial image. Genius is its own image.

The teacher is not just an efficient transmitter of knowledge. He is a human being. It is the teacher who can feel sorry for you, ask about your sick mother, bandage your cut finger, praise your poem, laugh at your jokes, understand that you are worthwhile even though you may have a slight problem with quadratic functions.

To put it simply, the teacher cares. This is not idle rhetoric. Perhaps caring is the most important thing a teacher can bring to her students. There is one common quality running through all the good teachers in the novels I have mentioned. They cared — some eccentrically, some prosaically, some quietly, some exuberantly — but they cared. In a world where more and more of us are caring less and less, this is not unimportant.