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Source: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Oct., 1972), pp. 77-86

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3331602>

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Defining Art: A Classroom Discussion

EDITH DAUBNER

In this article, we shall examine one aspect of the teaching of an undergraduate course in aesthetics. Leaving aside the more obvious matters such as choice of reading material and sequence of topics, we shall focus on one of the most perplexing elements. It is this: the students attracted to such a course are those usually termed "original" or "creative." Some of them produce art objects, and almost all of them have an interest in performance or appreciation in one or more of the arts. Learning the history of aesthetic theories or becoming acquainted with established current theories is, of course, appropriate and necessary in such a course, but it is not entirely satisfactory to such students: they like to think through aesthetic problems on their own, and this propensity becomes evident as soon as they engage in free discussion of the theories developed by philosophers who have written about aesthetics. How, then, can the instructor in aesthetics, while presenting the views of acknowledged authorities in the field, as he is certainly obligated to do, provide for the students a substantial experience in working out their own answers to some of the basic problems of aesthetics?

The reader of this article may think that undergraduate students are not yet sufficiently mature or competent in philosophizing to develop

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original answers to aesthetic questions. In reply, we might say that few statements have ever been made of what qualifications are necessary for solving the classic problems of aesthetics. Clive Bell has made some modest but cogent suggestions on this subject, though.¹ He says that the formulator of an aesthetic theory first should have a fund of experience in creation, performance, or appreciation in one or more of the arts, and second, should be able to think logically and express ideas clearly. Bell does not appear to believe that an extensive knowledge of other fields of philosophy is necessary. His criteria qualified our class to do original thinking on aesthetic problems, and for this reason we accepted them.

A brief description of the nature of the class is in order here. There were sixteen students: nine seniors, four juniors, two sophomores, and one freshman. Twelve students had taken *no* philosophy course previously; three had taken a course surveying the history of philosophy; one had taken courses in both ethics and the philosophy of education. All sixteen had elected to take this course — as a first philosophy course for three-fourths of the class members. (There was no philosophy major offered at the college.) Five of the students were art majors and two were English majors. Four were majoring in social science, one in psychology, one in home economics, and one in Spanish. Six students had a strong personal interest in creative work in the visual arts; almost all had an appreciation of one of the visual arts. Eight played a musical instrument “fairly well,” to use their words, and four were interested enough in writing to write prose or poetry on their own. Almost all reasoned clearly and expressed their ideas well orally and in writing.

Up to this point, the students had read widely and had been exposed to a fairly broad spectrum of the traditional views on one specific and fundamental question: What are the defining characteristics of the work of art? Working in seminar fashion, with a student appointed to lead each discussion, the class had studied readings from such authors as Collingwood, Tolstoy, Plato, Bell, Maritain, Croce, and Sibley. Even unusual theories had been considered, such as the possibility that no definition could be given that would cover *all* types of art and, to take this one step further, that no definition could be given to cover all art objects within even *one* form, such as music. Too, the possibility that *every* object might be in some sense a work of art had been discussed.

It was time now to bring the discussion of this particular question to a close by making a cooperative effort to formulate our own definition of an art work — either a definition covering all forms of art or a definition relating to one form. But how were we to proceed? The most

practicable suggestion seemed to be that of Professor Ziff,² who had proposed that we should choose a “clear-cut case” of a work of art, an object generally accepted by competent critics to be a genuine art object, an object which was not “extreme” in any way. We should determine the characteristics that set this work apart from nonart works and consider these qualities, provisionally at least, to be the defining notes of an aesthetic object.

Professor Ziff had chosen for his representative work a painting, Poussin’s *Rape of the Sabine Women*, and it was apparent to the class members, as to him, that the essential characteristics he listed for a work of art in painting would not apply to other types of art objects, such as music or literature.³ On reading Ziff’s article, the class readily agreed that a different set of characteristics would have to be worked out for each form of art. The class could not work with a representative object in some of these art forms, because it was obvious that a considerable amount of technical training was necessary to attain any understanding at all of such art forms as music or the dance.

The instructor had the task, then, of finding a representative art work in one of the media that she knew would be familiar to all the students. The novel, the film, and poetry were all possibilities. But because of the practical difficulties of having all class members read the same full-length novel or attend the same film, the teacher decided to choose a poem.

Mindful of Ziff’s cautions, she tried to visualize a continuum along which all works of art with some claim to being poetry could be placed. At one extreme, she imagined “just-barely-poems,” perhaps so sentimental or banal that they could hardly be included on the continuum. At the other extreme, she pictured poems of excellence, acknowledged by competent critics to be brilliant examples of the poetic art, but comprehensible to only a limited number of readers because of some esoteric element such as sprung rhythm or highly unusual made-up words. Such, for example, were some of the poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins. Steering a middle course, the instructor chose a sonnet from Untermeyer’s collection *Modern American Poetry*.⁴ This poem had been described by H. L. Mencken as “the greatest sonnet since Shakespeare”⁵ and had been judged by another critic, Saintsbury, to be “the third best sonnet in the English language.”⁶ This sonnet was *Tears*, written in 1887 by the Baltimore poetess Lizette Woodworth Reese. It contained no turgid or strained expressions, no puzzling allusions, no unintelligible figures of speech, and no peculiarities of rhythm. It was not sentimental. The language used was straightforward and lucid. The poem had the further

advantage of having apparently fallen into relative obscurity in recent years: it was unknown to all the students, so that the reading of it was a fresh experience.

The students agreed to accept the judgment of the critics named above: they would consider *Tears* to be a work of art. They understood that they were going to use Ziff's method to identify in this sonnet its defining characteristics. There was a tacit assumption that they would not bother to list nonaesthetic characteristics, such as "constituted of a group of words." The inadvisability of including all such characteristics had occurred to them after reading Professor Sibley's article "Aesthetic Concepts."⁷ At the outset of the discussion it was suggested that this last-named difficulty (including a nonaesthetic quality along with aesthetic ones) could be obviated if while examining *Tears*, they kept in mind a roughly similar object that could not possibly be considered to be an art object, such as the nursery rhyme *Hey Diddle Diddle*. By ruling out all characteristics shared by *Tears* and *Hey Diddle Diddle*, they might perhaps identify the nonaesthetic (but yet necessary) qualities of *Tears*. For example, both objects "could be recited"; both "could be written on paper"; both "were the products of human minds," and so on.

The students chose as their discussion leader Carol Young, an English major and a senior, who first proceeded to read the poem aloud, a copy being in the hands of each student. The ensuing discussion, somewhat shortened and edited, shows how the students arrived at a set of criteria different from any they had studied (up to that point) in the standard literature.

CAROL: The poem we are going to use is *Tears*, by Lizette Woodworth Reese. Each one of you has a copy. Listen carefully as I read it.

When I consider Life and its few years —
 A wisp of fog betwixt us and the sun;
 A call to battle, and the battle done
 Ere the last echo dies within our ears;
 A rose choked in the grass; an hour of fears;
 The gusts that past a darkening shore do beat;
 The burst of music down an unlistening street,
 I wonder at the idleness of tears.

Ye old, old dead, and ye of yesternight
 Chieftains, and bards, and keepers of the sheep,
 By every cup of sorrow that you had,
 Loose me from tears, and make me see aright
 How each hath back what once he stayed to weep:
 Homer his sight, David his little lad!⁸

Now we are going to distinguish this poem from another set of rhyming words, "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle. . . ." I'm sure everyone is familiar with that children's rhyme. The first thing that I think we might consider is the subject matter.

VIRGINIA: I just want to say that I think one thing that distinguishes this sonnet from the nursery rhyme is the fact that it deals with a universal aspect of life — a topic everyone would be concerned with.

CAROL: That's a good point. You feel that the subject matter is the universal experience of sadness, of tears, a topic that must matter to everyone.

SHELLEY: I just have one question I'd like to present for consideration. That is: Which is more important in any work of art, the *form* or the *content*? I have been wondering about this, and I think the content is the more important element. But I've read several sources in which the writers disagree with my view. About this poem specifically, I feel that it could still be a good poem — a genuine work of art — if it were in another form but still concerned with the same subject matter.

CAROL: It seems to me that the content is, as you say, the overriding element in an art work. But the fact is that the sonnet form is the particular framework within which this content was placed. This object before us was deemed to be a work of art as a sonnet, and it must be placed in a class with sonnets (not with limericks or epics) in order to be considered a work of art.

SHELLEY: Yes, well, is this classification *the* important element in making it a work of art?

CHERIN: It seems so. This work of art could not be classified as such if it did not have the sonnet form. This artist, Lizette Reese, has the ability to express these ideas in the sonnet form. The excellence of the *form* is what makes this poem a work of art.

CAROL: Maybe a way to bring out this point is to say that people are constantly discussing such ideas as life having only a few years and so on. I'm sure that there are many essays and plays and even poems that have been written on the same theme, but they are not works of art.

GLENNA: Maybe the form and the subject matter together are what make this a work of art. Excellence of form is important, but form does not stand alone. Content is just as important, because this "universal" idea could be expressed in many other ways that are *not* works of art. Maybe a work of art is achieved when you have this marriage between the two.

CAROL: That's a good point. Does anyone else have anything to add?

INSTRUCTOR: You've spoken several times of the content. Maybe someone could say what the content *is*. It certainly isn't like the content that you find in a ditty like *Hey Diddle Diddle*. The content seems to consist not of trivial but of profound ideas. I hesitate to say what they are, as I don't want to bias you. What do you think this "content" is?

CAROL: Well, in a Mother Goose rhyme, the ideas are not in the abstract, metaphysical realm.

PINCKEY: Well, I think that one interesting aspect of the content of this poem is in the last stanza: the idea that we should have hope — the feeling that we should have a positive outlook on life. It's like a statement that we

should stop wasting time with tears, because things will turn out all right in the end.

MARGARET: I think that the poem gives hope, too. I believe the poet is trying to say that life doesn't really give us time to feel sorry for ourselves or our losses, and so we should go ahead and keep on living in the hope that someday we'll regain what we feel we have lost.

SUSAN: I don't totally agree with what Margaret just said, because the poem doesn't give me hope. That isn't the interpretation I got. This poem makes you think that all the tears you've ever had have been wasted, and why should you bother to cry about something? That doesn't make you get it back. I really like this poem because I never thought about it like that — that your tears are totally wasted, that if you've *lost* something, you *can't* get it back, and no amount of weeping is going to get it back. I do see the point about her hoping she will get back what she wept for, but I also see a hopelessness in the fact that she isn't really sure she will ever get it back.

TRICIA: To me, the idea she presents is that in life we cry and fret over material things. Maybe these things are important to us, like sight to Homer, but they are still temporal, physical things. She says that since life is so short, just "a wisp of fog," we shouldn't worry about material conditions. In death, which is eternal, physical states won't be important.

VICKI: Well, I think the element that makes *Tears* a work of art is that it appeals to your intellect. *Hey Diddle Diddle* couldn't do this.

CAROL: Exactly. I couldn't agree with you more, Vicki. But let me go back for just a moment to something Tricia said about the last line of the poem. I would just like to say that even though Homer was physically blind (I am purposely avoiding the argument about when, if ever, he *did* go blind; let's just agree for now with the scholars who consider him the blind poet), he probably "saw" much more than we the sighted ever do. So the poet might be saying that despite his physical blindness, Homer was never *really* blind (or blind in a spiritual sense), and perhaps that we are.

SHELLEY: I'd like to agree with what Vicki said, with just one qualification. I think that this sonnet not only appeals to your intellect but to your emotions. For example, if you read *Hey Diddle Diddle*, it's merely a repetition of familiar sounds. But if you read something like *Tears*, it stimulates your mental processes and involves your emotions to a great extent, too. I feel that a poetic work of art involves an emotional as well as an intellectual reaction.

BECKY: I agree with Shelley. You may have an intellectual reaction or an emotional reaction, but the *union* of the two is what makes an actual aesthetic experience.

INSTRUCTOR: I would like to add this piece of information that you may find interesting. I've read another sonnet of Lizette Reese's, one called *Prayer of an Unbeliever*. Apparently, when she wrote this other sonnet she was not an orthodox believer, accepting the ordinary Christian doctrines, although I know that she attended the Episcopal church. In the *Unbeliever* sonnet, she says she can't believe in the orthodox teachings on the soul's immortality and so on. Yet here in *Tears*, she seems to contradict that. This is confusing. Despite what she says in *Tears*, I don't think we can put her in a category

with persons who believe that they'll go to heaven and receive rewards for suffering . . . regain what they've lost.

LAURA: That's very interesting and I think, very pertinent to our discussion of some of her basic metaphysical truths.

INSTRUCTOR: Perhaps you could get someone to list, Carol, the metaphysical truths that we have thought the poet seems to be getting across in this poem. What is she saying?

CAROL: Maybe we could examine the poem stanza by stanza, beginning with the first stanza. A belief about the brevity of life — corporeal life — seems to appear in the opening line.

GLENNA: I think also that here she sees the sun as eternal or as the symbol of eternity and maybe she sees us as eternal, too. And I see this hint of our immortality at the beginning and then again at the end. Life is a "wisp of fog betwixt us and the sun." She says that life is brief and fleeting, but then she indicates that there is *something beyond* and that *we too* will be beyond when this "fog" of life lifts and is cleared and past. Then it will be ourselves and the sun; we will be in eternity.

PINCKEY: Let me ask this one question. When she is speaking of life, is she thinking of an individual person's lifetime or life as represented by the existence of all humanity?

CAROL: First of all, notice that she has capitalized the word "Life." I can't help but think that she means the life of all mankind, the material and therefore temporal life of mankind.

SHELLEY: I disagree. It seems to me that her whole attitude is strictly on a personal level. And naturally, an individual's life is brief compared to the life of mankind or the life of everything in the cosmos. On closer examination, the first stanza seems to me to refer to a person's life on earth, and the second stanza seems to mirror the existence that follows a person's temporal appearance on this earth. And it is within this existence after death that things like eyes for sight become meaningless. The loss of sight in this temporal realm is so inconsequential that tears are truly idle.

PINCKEY: I think the very fact that we can get into a discussion as deep as this shows that this poem is a work of art. We might consider this as one criterion. This sonnet is thought-provoking, and we are able to discuss it in an intellectual manner.

INSTRUCTOR: That's good. It's a criterion to think about. A true poem is thought-provoking.

MARGARET: I feel that the fact that each of us can identify with the poet and that each of us sees something slightly different in the poem is important in making it a work of art.

VIRGINIA: I also think that in this poem we see a good *balance* in the way it appeals to the intellect and the emotions. It appeals to our intellect because it states an idea of concern to every one of us; so it's an idea we want to discuss. But we wouldn't get involved in this deep discussion if this idea wasn't linked with some feeling. I think we can see that this discussion is appealing to us emotionally, because life in its shortness and the idleness of tears are things that matter to each one of us deeply.

INSTRUCTOR: Virginia has stated again a second criterion we've discussed: appeal to the emotions. And then several of you had a criterion before — the confrontation with a "universal" truth, a truth accepted by all — the brevity of life on this earth. Glenna suggested still another truth coming through. You were suggesting, Glenna, that the poet indicates that there might be an afterlife. Even though she may not have the conventional Christian belief, she's hoping that there is a life after death.

GLENNA: And we are a part of it.

CAROL: Maybe someone would like to comment on the form of the sonnet. We agreed that these concepts may have been presented before but perhaps not always in the form of an art work.

TRICIA: I think that if this had just been in prose form without the metaphors and allusions, we might have read it and been interested in it; we could even have had a discussion on it. But she's creating a mood by comparing life to a wisp of fog and a burst of music and a rose choked in the grass; she's skillfully creating an atmosphere in your mind by these means. I believe if this were in prose instead of poetry and if it lacked these figures of speech, it wouldn't be a work of art. It might be the statement of a profound idea, but it wouldn't be a work of art.

CAROL: So then you are getting into the idea of the writer as a creator. She has created this particular *method* (*her* metaphors, *her* allusions) of presenting the idea. It seems evident that the form as well as the content is necessary to establish this poem as a work of art.

PINCKEY: Another criterion for establishing this as an art work was in Collingwood: the reaction of the audience. It is clear as we discuss this that each of us has understood and has developed within her own mind some concepts. There is no one here who has read this work and been totally baffled by it. We all have gotten something from it. So another criterion might be the ability of the artist to relate to each member of the audience.

INSTRUCTOR: I would like to add this: I chose this poem because it was far removed from your generation. It appealed to and was read by college students in my own generation, and I was fairly sure you hadn't read it. Maybe someone would comment on that. It doesn't seem to appeal to young persons of the 1970s, whereas it did appeal strongly to college students when I was your age. (Actually, though, the sonnet was written long ago, in 1887.)

SHELLEY: I don't agree with that. We're getting back to the same thing we said before: this sonnet expresses truths, and concepts like that will appeal to any generation. I don't believe a good poem can be "dated."

TRICIA: Maybe the *way* the ideas are expressed *is* out of our generation, but the ideas are universal and timeless. Aeschylus said something about death freeing man from sorrow and sighing. And Tennyson said, "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean." So these ideas have been pondered for ages.

CAROL: Let me now add a thought that seems to follow these comments. This work has withstood a relatively long test of time; this could be another criterion for a work of art.

GLENNA: I agree. I just wanted to say too that I think one of the definite criteria for a work of art is that it will stand the test of time. I tend to be a little skeptical of our own products. I think that this may be a work of art,

because it has survived nearly ninety years, but the true test will be if it is ageless. We can't know that yet.

INSTRUCTOR: Well, Carol, perhaps you could sum up what the whole group has extracted from this sonnet as criteria for a poetic work of art.

CAROL: Please help me with this if I leave something out. First of all, this sonnet deals with universal truths: the brevity of life, the possible uselessness of tears, the hope people have that there is a life after death, and maybe there is an idea here about justice — reparation. This subject matter has depth. Second, the appeal of these ideas to human beings is probably timeless. These ideas have been pondered from many viewpoints throughout the ages. Third, as a work of art, this sonnet unites excellence of form to the profound content. The ideas are expressed in a very concentrated form of language, with rich imagery. Fourth, the sonnet certainly has emotional appeal. And fifth, it touches or reaches all of us who have read it, but seems to appeal to each reader in a slightly different way.

We have shown how the method suggested and explained by Professor Ziff can be used in teaching an aesthetics course. Students who are interested in art and who have a good background of reading in aesthetics can discern and list the essential aesthetic qualities of a work of art in one form — in this case, poetry, and more specifically, a sonnet by an American poetess writing in the late Victorian period. No doubt the students could have gone on with this discussion for much longer, refining their comments. Too, they could have used a film or a novel as their subject in a subsequent attempt. The most important reason for presenting this particular student discussion in this relatively unfinished form is to show that this method of defining a work of art is a usable method, that it makes possible maximum student participation, that it elicits fresh, spontaneous, original remarks from the students, that it results in a working definition that is truly their own, and that it indicates a way for them to proceed in working out a definition of the art work in other forms. Perhaps its greatest value lies in the uncertainty with which the discussion is concluded: the students know very well that they have not said the final word on this difficult subject and that their definition is subject to further reflection and revision.

Notes

¹ Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1928), pp. 3–37.

² Paul Ziff, "The Task of Defining a Work of Art," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (January 1953), 58–78.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Louis Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936).

⁵ Bissell Brooke, "Lizette W. Reese, 1856–1956," *Baltimore Sun*, January 8, 1956.

⁶ George Saintsbury, in *Baltimore Bulletin of Education*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (September–October 1939), 18.

⁷ Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (October 1959), 421–50.

⁸ Quoted with permission of Harcourt, Brace (see note 4 above) and of Houghton Mifflin Company.