

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

## A CASE FOR TEACHING “OSCAR ET LA DAME ROSE” BY ÉRIC-EMMANUEL SCHMITT

The traditional literary works that we read in high school French classes—*Le Petit Prince*, La Fontaine’s fables, Maupassant’s short stories, Voltaire’s *Candide*, Molière’s plays, the poetry of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Prévert, works on the AP literature reading list—are there for a reason. They are within the range of competence of high school students; they deal with issues that are still relevant today; they lend themselves to good discussion; they are paragons of the beauty of written French. Nevertheless, there are two good arguments for trying to find contemporary works that measure up to these standards and that we could add to our regular reading list. First, it is important that students realize that the literary scene in France today is lively and vital and that important works are still being written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Secondly, as veteran teachers, we need the stimulation of new material, and it is exciting to introduce and develop new works.

I had been on the look out for some time for a suitable contemporary writer, and, thanks to some French friends in Paris a few summers ago, at last I found what I was looking for, a contemporary writer whose works met all my criteria. They gave me a book, *My Life with Mozart* by Éric Emmanuel Schmitt. The book came with a CD with all the Mozart pieces he talks about in the book. I had never read such an articulate and moving account of how music can change one’s life, so I did some research on Schmitt and discovered that he is one of the most widely translated and read French authors in the world today. I asked my friends what book by Schmitt I should read next. They said unequivocally, *Oscar et la dame Rose*. After reading it, I realized that this was the book I had been looking for.

Schmitt was born in Lyon in 1960. He studied philosophy at *l’École normale supérieure* and was a professor of philosophy before becoming a full time writer. He has won many prizes including several *Prix Molière* for his plays, the *Grand Prix du théâtre de l’Académie française* for the whole of his work; in Berlin, the *Prix Die Quadriga* for “son humanité et la sagesse dont son humour réussit à nourrir les hommes.” Schmitt has been called “un intello populaire,” “un sérieux penseur... qui ne se prend pas au sérieux,” “le Diderot du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” “un optimiste lucide.”

*Oscar et la dame rose* is one of four stories that make up “Le Cycle de l’Invisible” series of stories about youth and spirituality. The protagonist is ten-year-old Oscar or “Crâne d’œuf” (Egg head). He is dying of

cancer in a hospital. *La dame rose* is an older woman who volunteers at the hospital (a candy-striper) and who helps Oscar die while also enabling him to experience a full life. The book raises questions about relating to one’s parents, falling in love, suffering, what “living” means and how to think about death. It invites reflection about transcendence and one’s spiritual nature. So that Oscar will feel less alone as he is dying, Mamie Rose convinces Oscar to write to *Dieu*, and the book is made up of the twelve letters Oscar writes before he dies, and one final letter from Mamie Rose. The letters are irreverent and make the reader laugh and cry at the same time. They show us the follies of human nature seen through the eyes of a young person.

I was uncomfortable at first at the thought of reading a book composed of letters to *Dieu* in my school and with my students. But this is not a Christian book. Schmitt said that he himself is an agnostic. The idea of God in *Oscar* can and should be construed in the broadest sense as representing the spiritual and transcendent part of oneself.

I taught *Oscar* last year with AP language students, but it was too easy for them in spite of slangy passages such as “j’ai envie de lui gueuler dessus...” and “Oh, toi, le môme, lache-moi la grappe.” I assigned them the first couple of letters over a long weekend, and they came back having finished the whole book. They couldn’t put it down and recommended that it absolutely stay on a reading list, but not for AP. So this year, I am reading it with my French Conversation class, and they love the book for several reasons. It is within their range of competence. They find the current slang expressions like “faut pas déconner” et “bouge-toi le cul” amusing. The book makes them think about issues in their life in new ways. Oscar has an “attitude” that keeps their interest. I believe *Oscar* would also be appropriate for levels III or IV.

*Oscar* works as a high school text because it lends itself to creative and interesting assignments that develop all language skills. In addition to checking for comprehension and discussing the ideas, there are many ways to use the text to work on oral expression. For example, my students drew portraits of and introduced Oscar, Mamie Rose, Popcorn, Einstein, Dr. Dusseldorf, Bacon, Peggy Blue. “Classe, je vous présente Popcorn. C’est un copain de l’hôpital. Il est là parce que...” It gave them a chance to practice this useful language function, to use “c’est” and “il est” correctly, and to be creative at the same time.

I chose two different days at the hospital

when interesting events occurred. I formed two groups of students and assigned a different day to each group. In pairs in the language lab, they had to come prepared to gossip about what went on. This gave them practice using the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*. In another oral assignment in the lab, they played the role of Mamie Rose telling a friend about Oscar’s condition as it deteriorated in a physical sense but progressed in an intellectual or spiritual sense. With each assignment I asked them to use certain new vocabulary and certain grammar concepts. For this one, it was, among other things, using *depuis* with the present tense. For example, “Depuis plusieurs jours, Oscar ne veut plus rien manger.”

The epistolary format of *Oscar* invites interesting writing assignments. After reading each letter, I ask my students to write back to Oscar. They can choose to write as themselves telling Oscar about an event in their lives that relates to something he has experienced or to write as a fictitious person.

In the very first letter, Oscar says: “j’ai horreur d’écrire...Écrire, c’est rien qu’un mensonge....” Many of our students can relate, and they actually enjoy writing about how much they dislike writing. In the third letter, Oscar writes: “...ouf, le pire est derrière moi. La puberté, merci! Une fois mais pas deux....Je comprends que l’adolescence, on appelle ça l’âge ingrat.” I had my students react to this sentiment in a letter to Oscar where they talked about their own feelings about adolescence. In their letters as in their oral work, I require that they use new vocabulary and practice certain pertinent grammatical concepts. They always have to rewrite and correct their mistakes, but they enjoy writing the letters because the subject matter is personal. When we are finished reading *Oscar*, I am going to have my students write to Schmitt himself. He has a Web site where readers can write to him. How wonderful for students to have the opportunity to use their French for real communication with a great author!

In all the letters we are reading a first person account. It is easy, then, to use the text as a platform to practice grammatical concepts.. To take just one example, Oscar writes, “Je serais d’accord pour une petite visite. J’aimerais bien que tu m’en fasses une.” In pairs, students use this as a starting point for original sentences such as “Je serais d’accord pour une petite promenade. J’aimerais bien qu’on aille aujourd’hui.” Another simple example: Oscar says, “Je suis sûr qu’il lui plaît plus

que moi. Il est plus fort..." In a circle, each student has to redo the sentence using different pronouns. "Je suis sûr qu'elle leur plaît plus que toi. Tu es moins connu."

What are the major themes of the book? I return to the quote on writing from the first letter, "Écrire, c'est rien qu'un mensonge." This is a very startling statement, especially given that Schmitt is a writer! What is he implying? What does he mean by "mensonge?" Lying is one of the themes explored in this book. Oscar's parents lie to him, which is a source of alienation. A careful reader will see that Mamie Rose also lies about a lot. She tells Oscar that in her younger days, she was a lady wrestler and finds regular occasions to tell him about some of her more challenging matches. A careful reader will conclude at the end that she was just making up these stories and that everything she knew about wrestling she got from watching TV. She tells Oscar these stories to entertain him, but her struggles in the ring are a metaphor for Oscar's struggle to live. She is trying to tell him that there is always a solution if one is clever. So my class had a heated debate about when and if lying is appropriate.

Another theme is "la santé physique et psychologique" and the existentialist idea of being in charge of your own destiny. When Oscar learns that he has twelve days to live, he is bitter and full of self-pity. Mamie Rose convinces him to write to *Dieu*. In psychological jargon, this would be called "journaling." She is very astute when she writes, "Livre-lui tes pensées. Des pensées que tu ne dis pas, ce sont des pensées qui pèsent, qui s'incrument, qui t'alourdissent, qui t'immobilisent, qui prennent la place des idées neuves et qui pourrissent. Tu vas devenir une décharge à vieilles pensées qui puent si tu ne parles pas."

As the book progresses, Oscar's physical health declines, but his mental health improves. With Mamie Rose's help, Oscar realizes that he is in control of his emotions, and this leads to liberation. On Christmas Eve, in church, Oscar learns an important lesson.

- La souffrance physique, on la subit. La souffrance morale, on la choisit.
- Je ne comprends pas.
- Si on t'enforce des clous dans les poignets ou les pieds, tu ne peux pas faire autrement que d'avoir mal. En revanche, l'idée de mourir, tu n'es pas obligé d'avoir mal. Tu ne sais pas ce que c'est. Ça dépend donc de toi.

When Oscar dies, he is full of joy and at peace because he has chosen to see life as a gift and death as a fact.

These ideas are very powerful and empowering. Oscar speaks to high school stu-

dents because it dares to broach issues that concern them. It uses language that is current and appealing. It lends itself to classroom activities that help students develop fluency. For all these reasons, I recommend this book and this writer for consideration by high school teachers.

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Note: There is an edition in the "Classiques & contemporains" collection by Magnard which is glossed and includes discussion / comprehension questions for each of the major themes in the book.