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HOW DOES IT MEAN? LITERARY THEORY AS METACOGNITIVE
READING STRATEGY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL
ENGLISH CLASSROOM

By

Lisa J. Schade

A Dissertation
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HOW DOES IT MEAN?: LITERARY THEORY AS METACOGNITIVE
READING STRATEGY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL
ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Lisa J. Schade, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2002

In the last two decades, serious scholarly attention has been paid both to theories of teaching reading and to theories of literary interpretation. These potentially related fields have been treated as separate, focused either on teaching reading in the elementary grades or on teaching interpretation to advanced college literature students. Until very recently the relevance of either reading theory or literary theory to middle school or high school pedagogy has remained unexamined. My research, as a reflective practitioner, addresses this important gap. I focus on the teaching of literary theory in the high school English classroom as a strategy to develop students engaged reading of literary texts, their interpretive strategies, and metacognitive awareness of the reading and interpretive process. I argue that it is logical and appropriate to emphasize the intersection of literary and reading theory in the secondary English classroom to form a comprehensive and powerful literacy pedagogy.

I investigated student receptivity to and application of several theoretical approaches to literature to see if knowing about theory would help students become more effective readers and interpreters of text. My methods centered on the development of a progressive and systematic study of reader-response, archetypal, structural, biographical theories, as well as an extensive student inquiry project centering on post-modernist and ideological literary theory. In doing so, I also

conducted extensive research into theories and theorists involved in the scholarly debate over teaching both reading and literature, tracing the developments of such theories since the 1970 s, and their implications for the English Language Arts curriculum.

This dissertation draws on classroom experience and practice in a suburban high school with academically diverse World Literature students; some of whom were preparing to go to college some of whom had not taken an intensive literature course. The results indicate that students can readily engage in theoretical discussion, and in doing so make significant progress towards becoming more proficient and engaged readers and interpreters of textual material.

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Lisa J. Schade

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"No theory of criticism is any good at all unless it can be adapted to kindergarten and grade one."
Northrop Frye

"In teaching any text, one necessarily teaches an interpretation of it."
Gerald Graff

"Whether or not they are conscious of it, however, teachers at all levels are always teaching their students how to read."
Kathleen McCormick

In the last two decades, serious scholarly attention has been paid both to theories of teaching reading and to theories of literary interpretation. These potentially related fields have been treated as separate theory-based pedagogies. Scholars applying reading or literary theory to teaching and curriculum have focused either on teaching reading in the elementary grades or on teaching interpretation to advanced college literature students. Until very recently the relevance of either reading theory or literary theory to middle school or high school pedagogy has remained unexamined. Too often, teaching literature and reading are considered separate processes; secondary or college literature teachers rarely consider themselves "reading" teachers. My research seeks to address this. I focus on the teaching of literary theory in the high school English classroom as a strategy to develop students' engaged reading of literary texts, their interpretive strategies, and their metacognitive awareness of the reading and interpretive process. I argue that it is logical and appropriate to bring together literary and reading theory in the secondary English classroom and that doing so will form a comprehensive and powerful literacy pedagogy.

Reading and Interpretation

Establishing a verified theoretical model for literacy instruction throughout the K-12 curriculum makes sense because reading and interpretation are similar intellectual processes. As indicated in my choice of headnotes, I believe all teachers of English and Language Arts can view themselves as both teaching reading and interpretation. My research indicates that making diverse theoretical approaches explicit in the practice of teaching literature builds on students' previous experience with text, encouraging them to synthesize elements of instruction that began in their first reading lesson. To clearly make my argument in this introduction, I will first discuss the ways in which the signification of the terms "reading," "interpretation," and "criticism" has been historically problematic by examining the various definitions posited by leading reading and literary theorists. Then I will discuss the implications of these terms in extending models of reading instruction into the secondary English curriculum, to show that teaching literary theory draws upon similarities in reading and literature pedagogies, unifying methods for teaching reading, interpretation and criticism. My overall purpose in this introduction is to show that (1) reading and interpretation are both the result of constructing meaning from text and involve the activation of a reader's schema, or prior knowledge, to elicit a response; (2) when students are aware of the strategies they use to construct meaning, they can more readily make the cognitive leap from reading and interpretation to criticism; and, (3) this can be accomplished by introducing students to different schools of literary theory, which extends constructivist education into the secondary English classroom.

Differences do exist in scholarly definitions of "reading" and "interpretation" among some theorists, even those with similar conceptions of the reading process. Established reading theorist Ken Goodman, in *On Reading* (1996), defines the act of

reading as “a process of making sense from print” (3), while the National Council of Teachers of English defines reading as “the complex act of constructing meaning from print” (*Position Statement on Reading*, 2002). Similarly, reading is defined in *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools* (1998) as “a transaction between the words of an author and the mind of a reader, during which meaning is constructed” (Zemelman 30). Some literary theorists distinguish between the concepts of reading and interpretation, viewing reading as the developmental beginning of the interpretive process, while interpretation only takes place when the reader has developed more “influence” on his/her construction of meaning from a text. For example, Terry Eagleton describes “the state of reading...[as]one of intense attention...a state in which the text works on us, not we on it” (32). Stanley Fish argues that reading is “a set of interpretive strategies, which, when they are put into execution, become the large act of reading...interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading...they are the shape of reading” (Fish, *Variorum*, 2085).

These different conceptions of reading, however, both point to the fact that cognitive *processes* involved in both reading and interpretation are hard to distinguish. Recognition of this provides a link between reading research and teaching literature. Sharon Crowley points this out by saying “The practice of reading pedagogy [is] called ‘teaching literature’ in English departments...” (26). Literary theorists often refer to a “reading” of a text with the understanding that they really mean an “interpretation” of a text. Descriptions of the reading process by literary theorist Terry Eagleton and reading theorist Ken Goodman provide an example of the similarities between reading and literary theory. Goodman argues that “reading isn’t a linear process—we have all kinds of information available all the time. And the information is sufficiently ambiguous that we are constantly leaping to conclusions while, at the same time, being tentative enough to look out for conflicting information” (93).

He goes on to say that the “meaning a reader is constructing depends on the reader’s *purposes*, the *functions* the reading serves for the reader, and the *field, tenor* and *mode* of the particular *genre*...Comprehension depends not just on reading proficiency, but also on the knowledge the reader brings to the reading...” (109, emphasis in original). Eagleton, in his overview of reception theory, acknowledges that

Reading is not a straightforward linear movement: our initial speculations generate a frame of reference within which to interpret what comes next, but what comes next may retrospectively transform our original understanding... We read backwards and forwards simultaneously, predicting and recollecting... To read at all, we need to be familiar with the literary techniques and conventions which a particular work deploys; we must have a grasp of its ‘codes’, by which is meant the rules which systematically govern the ways it produces meanings (67).

Here, Eagleton’s reference to “initial speculation and frame of reference” corresponds to Goodman’s emphasis on the “knowledge the reader brings to meaning, while Goodman’s “field, tenor, mode and genre” clearly describe the same “literary techniques and conventions” described by Eagleton. Both theorists are describing the intellectual process of constructing meaning from text and alluding to the prior knowledge a reader must bring to bear when processing text. Comparing their descriptions indicates that the activity we call reading does, in fact, require the activity we call interpretation. I will use the terms “reading” and “interpretation” throughout this manuscript almost interchangeably, although in some instances I will refer to interpretations that students have constructed as being more “experimental” in nature than their initial “reading” of a text.

Methods for teaching reading and/or literature have been traditionally based on objective (seeking to find the “correct” construction of meaning from text) or constructivist (constructing individual or “authentic” meaning from text) models of instruction. My perspective reflects basically the latter.

Objectivism in Reading and Literary Interpretation

Objectivism is a term that incorporates theories of reading and literary interpretation that emphasize textual form over subjective experience. M. H. Abrams defines objective criticism as an approach that recognizes a text

as something which stands free from reference to the poet, the audience, and the environing world. It describes the literary product as a self-sufficient and autonomous object, or else as a world-in-itself, which is to be analyzed and judged by 'intrinsic' criteria such as complexity, coherence, equilibrium, integrity, and the interrelations of its component elements (40).

I use the term "structuralism" in Chapter IV to refer to objective theories of literary interpretation, including discussion of formalism and New Criticism. The basic tenets of objectivist theory posit that meaning lies within the text only, emphasizing the importance of close reading without relying upon prior knowledge. The reader should make inferences from the text only; literal comprehension of the words on the page constitutes the "right" or most accurate meaning. Consequently, the reader's personal experiences and associations are not the emphasis.

A Skills Approach to Reading

Drawing upon claims made by researchers like Marilyn Adams, Linnea Ehri, and Keith Stanovich, an objectivist approach to teaching reading is skills-based, emphasizing word-for-word reading and intensive phonics instruction. This approach includes teaching children to sound out words, seeking to measure the reader's "accuracy" and fluency in reading text. This measurement often includes assessments consisting of standardized and/or multiple choice tests in which students are limited by a specific length of time to finish the reading and answering questions. The skills approach is currently being touted by the Bush Administration, in the "No Child Left Behind" initiative. It is also the underlying method reflected in the initial 1997 draft of

The Reading Excellence Act (1998), in which reading is defined as “the ability to use phonics skills...to decode” words with fluency and accuracy (qtd. in Weaver 35). If this definition of reading is accepted, then reading requires nothing but decoding words; therefore, the words of a text construct meaning, not the reader of the text. This is similar to objectivist methods of teaching literature, in which the “correct” meaning is found in the words of the text only, without consideration for the cognitive processes orchestrated by the reader.

An Objectivist Approach to Literary Interpretation

In literature classrooms, objectivist methods are also text-based, focusing on close readings and textual meaning over reader-response or transactional methods. Teachers assuming an objectivist stance may focus on anthologized excerpts of literature, assessing student progress with literal end-of-chapter questions, text-based skill worksheets, and formulated essay topics. Standardized tests and college entrance exams support this kind of interpretation, leading many teachers to feel that teaching objectivist methods of interpretation are necessary for student success on these measurements tools. Kathleen McCormick refers to this as a “model of reading that regards reading simply as a skill or ...textbooks that seek to decontextualize texts from the particular conditions of their use” (McCormick 304). The teacher becomes, in effect, the “translator” of a text. When a teacher translates the text in this way, he/she must assume an authoritative role in directing student translation as the one who holds the key to meaning, and students may overly rely on the teacher for a “correct” textual interpretation. Consequently, students’ confidence in their ability to read for meaning is undermined, making it more difficult for them to identify their critical stance in approaching the text. If objectivist methods are over-emphasized, rather than engaging students and enabling them to become active in the meaning-making process, students

look to the teacher or the text without looking to their own interpretive strategies for help.

Objectivism in Perspective

It is important to note that objectivist methods, while limited in scope, can contribute to a well-rounded approach to teaching reading and literature. Explicitly teaching students structuralism, formalism or New Criticism as “approaches” to a reading situation can actually help to wean students off of the need to find the “right” meaning for written text. Objectivist interpretation used as scaffolding, as I explain in detail in Chapter IV, can provide students with the knowledge of literary convention without imposing a “correct” interpretation of text. Understanding the importance of irony, narrative structure, and metaphor can help students become more attuned to how a text elicits a certain response from them, allowing them more choices in approaching an interpretive task. Students who haven’t sufficiently reflected on their own reading processes previously can find specific guidance on recognizing reading/interpretive strategies through the concrete nature of textual interpretation. Then they can “become aware of and alert to their behaviors to be in control of them. Becoming aware of reading processes creates the possibility of changing and improving one’s use of these strategic processes” (Wilhelm 85). Discussing with students specific theories of reading and literary interpretation can help them evaluate *how* they are constructing meaning by reacting to a text.

Constructivism in Reading and Literary Theory

Constructivist methods, as defined by the National Council of Teachers of English, are derived “from research in cognitive psychology, [which] asserts that human beings develop concepts through their own intellectual interactions with and actions

upon their world. Learners and learning are not passive, but active” (“Facts on the Nature of Whole Language Education”). References to schema theory are primarily found in discussion of teaching reading, references to reader-response in discussion of teaching literature. Both are constructivist theories which, according to Kathleen McCormick, “emphasize the richness and uniqueness of students’ backgrounds and encourage them to develop their own ‘individual’ and ‘authentic’ responses to texts” (299). A teacher recognizing the analysis of reading by both Goodman and Eagleton would logically encourage students to become aware of the series of recursive and intertextual strategies they already use to construct meaning from text.

Psycholinguistic and Transactional Views of Reading

These views of teaching reading differ from objectivist views by shifting the focus from the word on the page to the mind of the reader. Edmund Burke Huey established the tradition of psycholinguistic theory when he first published *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in 1908. In this book, he argued that “what the reader understands from what he has read is the result of a construction he makes and not the result of a simple transmission of the graphic symbols to his mind” (xvii). His research paved the way for reading theorists like Frank Smith, Kenneth Goodman, and Constance Weaver. Frank Smith is noted for pulling together research on psycholinguistic processes of word perception, arguing in *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read* (1982) that children learn to read by reading, and that an emphasis on teaching reading as decoding can actually impede or even prevent comprehension of text. Kenneth Goodman’s research into readers’ miscues, or deviations from the actual text in oral reading, indicated that readers were “operating as experienced users of language...[and] that *mistakes are a part of the process of making sense of print*” (5; emphasis in original). These deviations from

the text are not weaknesses, but strategies for constructing meaning in which the reader draws from his/her schema. Constance Weaver is noted for synthesizing these views on reading, bringing them together to inform psycholinguistic, transactional teaching practices. Weaver incorporates the research of noted reading theorists M. J. Adams (1979) and R. C. Anderson (1994) into a clear definition of a reader's schema, calling it "an organized chunk of knowledge or experience, often accompanied by feelings" (17). A reader "is influenced by [his/her] own schemas—the person's knowledge and experience and feelings" (22). Because the reader draws upon his/her schema to construct meaning from the text, reading can be understood as "a process, a transaction between reader and text in a given situational context, an even during which meaning evolves" (24). It is the notion of "transaction" between reader and text that is the point of intersection between schema theory in reading and reader-response literary theory.

Reader-Response Approach to Literary Interpretation

Jane Tompkins defines reader-response as "a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words *reader*, *the reading process* and *response* to mark out an area for investigation" (ix, emphasis in original), explored in detail in Chapter II. Constructivist methods emphasize a reader's response to literature, or transaction with the text, as an interpretive method, thereby extending the psycholinguistic, transactional view of reading into the realm of literary theory. Reader-response theorists argue that the reader experiences the text using "common patterns and...frameworks of ideas," according to leading theorist Louise Rosenblatt, and "this framework of knowledge, this set of guiding principles...is never irrelevant to the experience derived from either life or art" (Rosenblatt *Literature as Exploration* 131).

A knowledge of response-theory can help students continue developing the repertoire of meaning construction strategies they learned in elementary school, not only

to improve their efficiency in constructing meaning, but to heighten their awareness of the forces at work within the text that elicit their response. In order for students to sort through the ideas, emotions and schema which they bring to the text as part of the transaction, they must become cognizant of the ways they transact with the text. This means teaching them to examine their own reading process more carefully. Teaching students to use literary theory as a strategy to test and/or compare their individual responses encourages “literate behaviors [that] are only engendered in situations that move beyond skill-building to provide opportunities to make and judge meanings” (Wilhelm 153).

Pedagogical Theory: Scaffolding and Modeling

One important component of constructivist pedagogy is “scaffolding”. Scaffolding describes the social interaction between teacher and student as well as students in cooperative and collaborative groups. This aspect of constructivist pedagogy encourages students to be active in constructing and testing meaning as they support one another through small group discussion and inquiry. In this way, students are not necessarily “taught” reading or interpretation, but instead are engaged in meaning-making strategies: activating schema, predicting, analyzing and synthesizing textual material. Scaffolding enables students to engage in authentic reading situations, and facilitates student response through creative projects and presentations in addition to traditional pieces of writing.

If reading strategies are defined as “intentional plans that enable readers to construct meaning” (Tovani 107), then theory used as scaffolding for literature instruction adequately functions as a method for encouraging students to continue recognizing strategies for comprehending text. In this way, the high school English teacher is also teaching reading; even the most advanced high school students are still

honing their literacy skills. Helping students examine their own manipulation of textual material by using theory as a reading strategy helps them to understand the workings of a text within their own consciousness. This is the basis of my research: to show how incorporating literary theory into teaching practice can highlight the complex process of constructing meaning and help students become aware of the strategies available to them.

Teacher modeling of interpretive strategies effectively scaffolds a learning situation as well. Modeling is a teaching practice in which the teacher demonstrates the thinking process for students by thinking aloud or engaging in group writing activities. A teacher may use an overhead to record observations during a reading task, or encourage students to “write” an organized response with him/her as the teacher records their observations. Modeling does not mean that a teacher dictates how students will interpret a given text; rather, the teacher serves to generate ideas for discussion and illustrate meaning-making strategies for students.

My research reflects the constructivist model in which literary theory provides the scaffolding for student collaboration in analyzing, synthesizing, and discussing literature. I encouraged my students to support one another in the interpretive process by teaching specific interpretive strategies in a collaborative environment. Knowing about theory gave students a purpose as they approached a reading task, helping them to make and test predictions as they read, providing a framework for student response and for metacognitive awareness of their stance in approaching a text. I, therefore, assume a constructivist stance both in my discussion of reading and literary theory, and in arguing for the importance of including literary theory into the curricula of secondary English programs. Teaching within a framework of literary theory can help students see how they have unconsciously created an intellectual text and already developed a method for constructing meaning through the very act of reading. Kathleen McCormick asserts that

“for such pedagogies to impact upon the way reading is defined and taught, however, they need to be seen...as part of what it is to read a text from any kind of critical perspective” (308).

The key pedagogical question, then, is not distinguishing reading interpretation, but determining when and how readers become *critical* thinkers about the text they are processing. Criticism is defined by Raymond Williams as “a form of social development of personal impressions and responses, to the point where they could be represented as STANDARDS of *judgment*...the assumption of ‘authoritative judgment’” (85-6). This can be understood as the culmination of the reading and interpretive process. Helen Vendler indicates that a reader’s degree of cognitive awareness of his/her critical strategies differentiates the “the state of reading” from “criticism” in her article “What We Have Loved, Others Will Love” (2000): “Though the state of reading...is one of intense attention, it is not one of scholarly or critical reflection....In that state, scholarship, criticism, and theory are suspended, though, paradoxically, *everything we know and are is unreflexively brought to bear*” (Vendler 32; emphasis added). Vender makes no clear distinction between reading and interpretation; rather she distinguishes between reading and criticism. Instead, like Goodman and Eagleton, her implication is that reading requires the use of prior knowledge (or schema), but the uncritical reader is simply not aware that he/she is doing so.

Introducing theory into the literature classroom encourages students to *consciously* use everything they know to construct meaning from a text. Becoming a “critical reader” also means becoming aware of the ways in which one ‘judges’ a text. This is possible when the reader is metacognitively aware of his/her schemas, the stance he/she assumes in approaching a text, and the underlying assumptions and values explicit to the text and in developing his/her reading of it. In this way, “criticism begins

in the experience of literature and in personal response to it. But it does not end there. It continues with study that aims to unify and integrate all of the students' literary experiences" (Sloan 45). When students become cognizant of the strategies they use for constructing meaning from text, they can begin to question the cultural and ideological influences at work in a text, as well as the influence of their own values and beliefs in the transaction that produces meaning. Teaching theory extends methods of reading and literature instruction to the level of criticism by further expanding students' repertoire of strategies for analyzing meaning.

Literary Theory as Reading Strategy

Theory is present in an English Language Arts classroom whether or not a teacher acknowledges his/her theoretical perspective. Gerald Graff has asserted that "teachers cannot avoid translating the literature they teach into some critical language or other, [and] neither can students, for criticism is the language students are expected to speak and are punished for not speaking well" (Richter *Falling into Theory* 47). But making literary theory an explicit part of instruction enables students to take part in the critical conversation. Instead of translating the text, a teacher can model ways of reading a text, unveiling the mysteries of literary interpretation.

It is certainly more instructive to our students to find teachers coming at literature from many vantage points than to be subjected to a single vision; and the most useful critical truth a student can learn is that a piece of literature yields different insights depending on the questions put to it (Vendler 36).

Students can make a conscious choice in assuming their stance, or vantage point, asking questions of the text and finding a voice with which to answer those questions. McCormick clearly makes this point, arguing that "if students are to become active makers of meaning of texts, they must also be given access to discourses that can help them experience their own readings of texts" (305). In other words, theory

provides structure to help students conceive of and articulate a response to a text. The role of theory should not remain just an intellectual point of reference for the experienced reader to use, and in itself a subject of study, but become a method for encouraging reading, inquiry, and engagement with text for students of literature.

Theory serves as an impetus and structure for discussion as well, an important aspect in constructing meaning. For many students, determining which elements of their construction of meaning stem from personal background knowledge and which are the result of textual constraints is difficult; trying to discuss them in class without an interpretive framework is intimidating. They often don't understand what a teacher is asking for when he/she directs them to infer, interpret, or respond to literature. Gerald Graff describes his early experiences with literature as "being alone with texts...bored and helpless, since I had no language with which to make them mine. On the one hand, I was being asked to speak a foreign language—literary criticism—while on the other hand, I was being protected from that language, presumably for my own safety....our ability to read well depends more than we think on our ability to *talk well* about what we read" (Richter *Falling into Theory* 45). Indeed, discussion can test individual interpretations, but theory structures discussion by requiring students to support or refute various interpretations.

Discussion, then, clarifies ideas; a student must articulate his/her views and interpretations in order to debate them with someone else. In fact, learning how to effectively argue for a particular interpretation is ideally suited for adolescent learners, whose behavior is often oppositional anyway. Thomas Phillion discusses how the age-appropriate need to test limits and explore boundaries can be met within the context of classroom literary discussion: "Adolescent oppositionality...ought to be a starting point for critical reading and reflection" (55) Phillion further refers to ideas presented in Ross Chambers' book *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*

(1991), emphasizing that “the changes in thinking that people often attribute to the act of reading are a direct function of the capacity of oppositional practices...to seduce readers into a consideration of perspectives and practices from which they are, by definition, excluded”. This is “more than simply a good reading strategy—it is also an essential survival tactic for overcoming the adversities that adolescents place before secondary teachers through their oppositional language and behavior” (Phillion 56). In this way, individual constructions of meaning continue to develop through theoretical and critical discussion, allowing students to practice combining background knowledge and specific textual references into a logical argument.

Teachers, then, should help students understand *what they are doing* when they read and respond to a text, encouraging metacognition of their reading strategies. If the goal for teachers is to have their students think about *how* they are thinking, *how* they are creating a relationship with and eliciting meaning from the text, and *how* the text can support differing interpretations, then students should be taught to develop the skills that enable them to recognize the signals communicated by the text. They discover how they, as readers, are interpreting those signals, something they do whenever they read even though they may not be aware of doing it. Aesthetic reading, as defined by Louise Rosenblatt, occurs when “the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (Rosenblatt *Reader, Text, Poem* 25), and this first experiential meaning constructed from the text is crucial. It leads students toward an awareness of meaning-making strategies that either they already employ or can learn to employ for improved comprehension and appreciation of text.

Teaching with theory builds on constructivist literacy models, extending to the secondary schools psycholinguistic teaching philosophies like those practiced successfully by many of our elementary colleagues who teach reading, and furthering

the ideal that creation of meaning from text is accomplished through many cognitive strategies, not simply recognizing the various syllables and words strung together. Just as the elementary or Language Arts teacher has a tremendous impact on how a child will view reading in the early grades, the literature teacher's approach to literature greatly influences the older child's concept about what literature is and means. This is important not only in understanding literary and reading theory, but in processing many of the "texts" thrown at them by the world at large. Students can question *why* a magazine advertisement or television commercial elicits an emotional response from them. They can scrutinize that response, and the ideological criteria they have unconsciously established to evaluate such advertisements positively or negatively. Understanding basic theoretical approaches to text, then, helps students become more effective readers in any reading situation.

Review of Research: Literary Theory and Language Arts

While serious scholarly work examining the role of teaching cognitive strategies in secondary English and Language Arts programs has begun, such research has not been as extensive as that of beginning literacy in the elementary classroom. Indeed, connections between literary theory and the elementary reading curriculum were investigated at the same time as many schools of literary theory were developing in the mid-1970's. Beginning with the publication of research such as *The Child as Critic* by Glenna Davis Sloan (1975), and essays from the Children's Literature Association's "Symposium on Teaching Literary Criticism in the Elementary Grades," edited by Jon Stott (1981). Both Sloan and Stott developed Northrop Frye's concepts of structure and myth into teaching methods for their reading lessons in elementary classrooms. Sloan worked with Frye himself as she incorporated the study of narrative structure into her curricular goals, and found that her students readily and willingly engaged in reading

tasks with archetypes as a central theme of study. Similarly, Stott, along with fourth grade teacher Ann Moss, introduced students to structural linguistic patterns in mythology, extending this concept to stories and poems. They also found that students readily internalized such reading strategies, and became more critical readers when they knew applied these theories. In 1987, Richard Van Dongen published "Non-fiction, History, and Literary Criticism in the Fifth Grade" in the *New Advocate*, detailing his success with using historical theory to encourage engaged reading strategies in his classroom.

Other teachers and researchers have continued to research and suggest incorporating elements of literary theory and criticism into the practice of teaching reading in elementary classrooms. Perry Nodelman provides an extensive bibliography of scholarly research into the use of literary theory with children's literature in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (1992), including ideological theory, feminist theory as well as review of Northrop Frye and structuralist theory.

More recently, the implications of both incorporating both reading and literary theory have begun to be addressed by secondary English teachers and researchers. Studies of teaching reading strategies in secondary English classrooms have greatly influenced my interpretation of the classroom data I collected as I introduced theory to my World Literature students. Cris Tovani's in *I Read It, But I Don't Get It* (2000) and Jeffrey Wilhelm's *You Gotta BE the Book* (1997) both emphasize the importance of teaching reading strategies to secondary English students, and influenced my interpretation of the classroom data I collected as I experimented with theory.

Tovani specifically taught cognitive reading strategies to high school students in a remedial reading program. Her emphasis on metacognitive awareness led me to recognize the crucial role that theory plays in helping students to become cognizant of the strategies they use to construct meaning from text. She suggests a four-step method

for helping students to identify and improve upon their reading strategies:

First I help them recognize what the strategy is. Second, I create situations in which they have an opportunity to experience what it is like to use the strategy correctly. Third, I support their attempts to implement the strategy on their own. Fourth, I give them time to practice using the strategy on ever more difficult material (102).

I found that I used a similar sequence when I introduced a specific method of literary theory as a strategy for approaching a text. First, I discussed with students the particulars of the approach itself, then we practiced it in class by reading a short story or poem, then students worked collaboratively with a critical method in class, and finally, they read on their own, using the approach to construct meaning with an unfamiliar text. These methods are outlined in detail throughout the ensuing chapters of this dissertation, but it is important to clearly state the relationship between methods for teaching cognitive strategies and methods for teaching literary theory as well as the ways in which Tovani's work influenced my interpretation of data.

Wilhelm also chronicles his experience teaching specific strategies for engaging high school English students in the reading process. His use of reader's theatre and creative arts to help students achieve more aesthetic reading experiences, leads to some of the same conclusions as my use of such creative ways of helping students construct meaning from text. Wilhelm emphasizes a primarily response-based theory in his approach without delving into the specific theoretical details of constructing meaning from text, while my focus leans more heavily on the knowledge and application of theory in developing creative projects. However, both in his research and mine, incorporating dramatizations, presentations, and creative arts encourages student's metacognitive awareness of interpretative strategies. I found these methods were a crucial component to the overall benefit of including theory in the literature classroom.

John Noelle Moore explores having middle school students apply theoretical perspectives to young adult novels in *Interpreting Young Adult Literature: Literary*

Theory in the Secondary Classroom (1997). Moore applies formalism, archetypal theory, feminist theory, deconstruction and reader-response, among others to young adult novels including *The Moves Make the Man* by Bruce Brooks, *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry, and *Jacob Have I Loved*, by Katherine Paterson. His book provides a rationale for developing and adapting theory to works that fall outside of the literary canon. I consider our work similar, in that we are both exploring the ways in which students comprehend and apply various methods of literary theory, and complimentary in that I worked with the more traditional literature from the World Literature curriculum but included multi-cultural novels in guiding student application of theory.

Allen Carey-Webb writes of his experiences teaching high school students using a cultural studies approach informed by a range of theoretical perspectives. his text combines classroom narratives with themes of homelessness, race, and politics combined with introductions to various modes of theory including, among others, postmodern, Marxist, and reader-response approaches. His book is useful as a resource for background information on various schools of literary theory, but also pointedly explores issues of race, gay and lesbian, and cultural studies in relation to theory in the secondary English classroom; whereas, in this thesis, the emphasis is more focused on the implications of teaching specific theories as cognitive strategies, rather than a full blown cultural studies approach (though I do address ideological criticism in Chapter VI).

Both Deborah Appleman and Anna O. Souter explore the results of teaching literary theory in the secondary English classroom. Appleman, in *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (2000), worked with a high school English teacher in an Advanced Placement English class to expand students' critical repertoires and encourage them to assume multiple perspectives in constructing meaning from texts. She emphasized ideological and modern theories of

literary interpretation to prepare students for taking the Advanced Placement exam and ready students for college. In contrast, my students were general English students and I emphasized theory as a cognitive strategy. My approach to teaching theory was also more student-driven and, in the end, encouraged students became independent, in part because I did not have the responsibility of exam preparation. Although the research emphasis and student populations of these projects were somewhat different, there were some similarities in student response to theory. For example, student responses to feminist theory are of significant interest in both situations; in both cases students were surprisingly resistant to this approach. I detail their responses in Chapter VI, but it is worthy of comparison here as well. Appleman notes a certain “edge in the air” (81) during class discussions of feminist theory, citing the young men’s reluctance to accept feminist readings; my experience with feminist theory in World Literature class was quite similar. This is an area that warrants further study.

Souter, in *Young Adult Literature and the New Literary Theories* (1999) emphasizes modern and postmodern approaches in teaching middle school English, including feminist, New Historicist, deconstruction and cultural theories. Her approach, like that of Moore, again emphasizes the role theory can and should play throughout the secondary English curriculum. While my project included more emphasis on the historical development of theoretical ideas, and delved more directly into theory than Souter’s, both projects point to the insight that students intellectually may be ready for certain kinds of theoretical investigations by the time they reach the middle school grades. These studies and my own research indicate that theory should not be reserved for the college-bound, Advanced Placement students only.

Another interesting study of theory in the classroom is Joyce Bainbridge and Sylvia Pantaleo’s “Filling in Gaps in Text: Picture Book Reading in the Middle Years” published in the *New Advocate* (2001). The authors address the implications of

incorporating the response-based theories of Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser into the middle school curriculum, emphasizing the reader's active role in meaning-making. This comes very close to my research into using Iser's theory in the literature classroom. . Bainbridge and Pantaleo, however, include extensive discussion of the value of picture books, providing excellent rationale and methods for doing so. Their article is limited to exploring reader-response theory, while, although not detailed in this dissertation, I also used picture books to introduce and discuss many theoretical approaches in the classroom.

The emerging interest in reading and literary theory in the secondary school in recent years, as illustrated by these studies, suggests incorporating theory into literature teaching strategies can contribute to a comprehensive approach to literacy. In addition, as the subject of teaching reading continues to receive extensive political and media attention, teaching reading in secondary English classrooms has become of interest to many teachers and researchers. My research specifically addresses how the combination of reading and literary theory can provide the framework for encouraging students of all skill levels to become metacognitively aware of how they construct meaning from text. Because my classroom was a diverse mix of students in regards to skill levels and literary experience, I could quickly see the benefits of reading and literary theory for both advanced and remedial English curricula. this review of the literature suggests that the issue is not *if* theory should be taught, but *how* it can be taught in the English Language Arts classroom.

My Research

My research began when I was assigned to teach the one World Literature class being offered by the English Department at a suburban high school in Michigan. The

class was a “catch-all” for students who weren’t, as one said, “into reading or writing”. I was going to be the clean-up crew for seniors who needed that last English credit to graduate, juniors who didn’t want to take British Literature or any other student who may have had an eleventh hour wake-up call about college requirements in English. This meant that I couldn’t take anything for granted; some students had previously taken American and British Literature courses, others had barely completed a basic English class. I had a World Literature textbook, limited set of classroom novels, and “suggested” curricular guidelines from the English Department. There were no specific prerequisite requirements for students taking the class. I looked over the sets of novels and realized that some students in this class had already read many of them, and some students had never had that opportunity. I was going to have to meet the needs and reading levels of a very diverse group of learners. World Literature, with reading material and thematic units spanning the history of literature itself, was a complicated class to teach anyway. How could I best address the vast topic of World Literature and differentiate instruction to all of these students? How could I help these students learn to construct meaning from the wide variety of texts we would cover? How could I encourage them to become engaged, inquisitive readers? I felt overwhelmed. I knew I needed some kind of focus, but wasn’t excited about the usual thematic or chronological approaches. I wanted to do more to help the students in this World Literature class to discover meanings for themselves.

I stepped into the role of teacher-researcher when I decided to see what would happen if I used literary theory to organize the way I taught literature. I wanted to use literary theory to structure units, differentiate instruction and bring intellectually engaging approaches to the high school classroom literary experience. My investigation would center on gathering student responses and transcribing classroom discussion as I

methodically introduced various literary theories. Not only did I want to discover how students would respond to theory and if using theory did encourage metacognitive awareness of how they constructed meaning from text, but also how theory is best introduced as pedagogy in a high school English classroom. Could students successfully learn theoretical approaches to articulate a variety of responses to literature and uncover their reading strategies?

I unearthed my copy of M.H. Abrams *Literary Terms* and divided literary theory into several basic approaches: archetypal, structural, sociological (which includes feminist/Marxist approaches), biographical, and philosophical. I devised literal, taxonomic “worksheets” that provided background to different theoretical approaches, and brainstormed theoretical heuristics to encourage student inquiry and application of theory to text. Then I sat down with the textbook and curricular guide, matching up poetry, short stories and novels with specific theoretical approaches. I found I could still work within a basic chronological framework, but at the same time organize the World Literature course through critical theory. Criticism supplied the “missing link” for setting specific goals and maintaining a sense of continuity for the different thematic or geographical areas we covered. My intention was to use literary theory to scaffold student response; in essence, to give students a language for expressing their responses to literature and encourage them to become aware of their intellectual reading and interpretive strategies. The specific literary works included throughout this study are those I actually taught to address the curricular goals of my particular English Department and they made sense for the specific approaches we studied. There are, of course, countless other works that could be used in place of my examples and, to truly engage in the critical process, students should eventually be able to use a given approach with any piece of literature to focus and clarify meaning. In addition, for several

projects throughout the course, students chose their own reading material (novels, poetry, short stories, expository essays, and others).

It made perfect sense and seemed so obvious after I had gotten started. Most students had already engaged in some theoretical methods of constructing meaning for a long time without consciously identifying the approach with specific labels. How many times in the past had their English teachers covered basic plot structures of exposition, complication, climax, falling action, resolution? Teachers had helped students build an interpretation based on how the story is effectively put together; how the exposition functions to first grab, then hold onto their interest; how the climax is intensely moving; how the resolution satisfies by tying up loose ends. Now they would discover they had been approaching a story with a structural emphasis. In American Literature, when they studied the Colonial Period, reading Thomas Paine or Benjamin Franklin, why shouldn't they have consciously used a socio-historic or biographical approach? In General Literature, when students read *The Bomb* by Theodore Taylor, and discussed his actual role in the Bikini Atoll bombing, they should have known they were using a biographical approach. Providing labels for these methods would allow them to be privy to this "insider" information and to recognize the way they were learning as *an approach*; one of many that might be used and one that could be debated as the best or most appropriate. I was able to fit classroom projects, presentations, book talks, essays, research reports, drama and everything else I normally did in literature classes easily into the framework provided by a curriculum organized around theoretical approaches. Students could discuss in Literature Circles organized by theoretical approach and stage debates between one theoretical interpretation of a work over another

Choosing Theory, Designing Practice

Because my goals involved introducing the general frameworks of literary theory to elicit student response, not necessarily to explore theory itself, I simplified otherwise complex theories of literary meaning to help students begin to understand different perspectives. I wanted to introduce these ideas carefully and methodically so I wouldn't overwhelm students but help them grasp the basics of each approach. I chose to develop first an historic knowledge of a specific theoretical background, then develop heuristics for encouraging student inquiry into meaning-making, and finally activities to encourage critical reading and argument. Deeper study and understanding could come later in the academic career of those students who chose to pursue it. Advanced students could spend additional time with specifics in literary theory and application while I spent additional time with those who struggled. I devised introductory guidelines for each of the approaches I had chosen, outlined the basic premises, listed the works that we would read to practice using the approach and brainstormed activities for application and assessment. I chose the particular theoretical approaches based on the World Literature curriculum I had inherited, not because they were in any way more important or "easier" than any others.

With the explosion in literary theory and application in the past years, more schools of thought have sprung up than I could possibly address in one class. My research goals were straightforward: I wanted to see if teaching with theory would serve as a successful reading and interpretative pedagogy, and I wanted to experiment with various methods of presenting theoretical ideas. I did not assign the students to read theory itself, either in primary or secondary forms, because I did not want to complicate theory so much that students became overwhelmed with the amount of text or interpretive theory they were being asked to comprehend. Instead, I wanted to see what they

would do with the basic ideas that theory presented. I will offer some suggestions for additional theoretical views in the conclusion to this dissertation.

Details in the chapters that follow will clarify the theories I chose to employ, the methods I devised to introduce them to students, and the results I obtained from student writing, discussion and various creative projects. Literary theory is, by nature, recursive, resulting in “a kind of cannibalization going on among Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism, and so on....The offshoot is a magma of interpretive discourses” (Iser, *Range of Interpretation*, 3). Theories of reading and interpretation tend to incorporate some of the same interpretive positions and processes.

Consequently, there is a somewhat recursive nature to my presentation of teaching with theory as I find it useful within certain chapters to make reference to specifics in other chapters of this text. I have also chosen to organize each chapter by theoretical approach in combination with additional issue relating to teaching theory or literacy skills. I address the issue of reader-response theory in Chapter II as an extension of the opening discussion of reading theory; I have put it in the second chapter because material presented in this chapter will directly and logically follow my discussion in this chapter of the relation between reading and theory.

I chose to begin our study of World Literature with Archetypal or Jungian theory because the class began with world mythology, and it made sense to introduce both concepts together. Besides, students were somewhat familiar with the conventions of mythology already, so adding the cognitive leap to theory at this time would not seem as intimidating. I will include a discussion of historic/taxonomic and heuristic methods for presenting theory in that chapter, and will detail the efficacy of those methods and the classroom results. Biographical theory seemed appropriate, because students were familiar with “author background” research and pre-reading; I was merely taking the concept a step further. This approach is detailed in Chapter IV, along with discussion of

incorporating practices to encourage media literacy which lends itself beautifully to teaching with theory. I chose to introduce reader-response theory because I was interested in helping these students to become better, or at least more careful and self-conscious, readers, and to understand the reading strategies they unconsciously employed whenever they read any text. Chapter V will describe my approach to Structuralism, which was appropriate not only because it seemed strangely familiar to students who had been taught to read via phonics-based instruction, or that we could also find something familiar about our past literary experiences in a discussion of the New Critical focus on textuality, but also because I knew I would already spend time on the structure of drama when we read *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. In Chapter VI I use the term “thematic criticism” to address broad issues of sociological, ideological, and philosophical theory. Sociological theory came right out of the introductory material in the textbook, which described in excruciating detail the social and historic context of each unit presented in the anthology. I included discussion of ideology, emphasizing both feminist and Marxist approaches, to help students recognize the economic and cultural conditions surrounding the production of literature, and that these conditions have suppressed the voices of groups of people without power in society. Chapter VI also includes discussion of how various schools of philosophy can be used to develop an interpretive stance in approaching a text. Students pursued research of subject matter that varied from Confucius, Albert Camus and Paul Sartre, Anna Akhmatova, and the Russian formalists to those of Indian Sufi theology, Brazilian feminism, Apartheid, and the genocide of the Holocaust. The students in World Literature devised the inquiry into those complex issues independently, in an increasingly self-directed search to construct meaning from text.

After students got over their initial suspicion that I wanted them to do the impossible and their trepidation at what might turn out to be hard work, they were as

ready as they would ever be to begin exploring theory. Even though these high school students began perhaps only reluctantly as literary scholars, I did find that they not only appreciated knowing different literary approaches, but became dramatically better readers and interpreters of literature. They enjoyed experimenting with and puzzling through theory, and found themselves discussing literature with an understanding they hadn't experienced before. But most importantly, because theory gave them a clearer sense of purpose in their reading, they found new reasons to look closely at any given work and added incentive to read. They assumed more responsibility for interpreting literature; I didn't have to scrounge for quiz questions or essay topics which would only challenge their (and my) short term memories. Instead, we could focus on the bigger picture of meaning and perspective. And they loved, *loved*, arguing with me, and each other, about the merits of one approach over the other. By the end of the year, it was apparent that teaching and applying specific critical approaches had succeeded beyond my most optimistic expectations.

Methodology

In the following chapters I will use a variety of methods highlighted in *Methods of Literacy Research*, edited by Michael L. Kamil, *et als*, (2002) and "Toward a Theory of Genre in Teacher Research: Contributions from a Reflective Practitioner" by Patricia Lambert Stock (2001) for presenting those results. These methods will include narratives of classroom inquiries and presentations, illustrative transcripts of student discussion and interviews, student-generated artifacts of written pieces and artistic renderings, and research vignettes or metaphors to highlight key points and ideas (Kamil 11). My reflections on teaching, research and constructing literary meaning serve to elucidate incidents and ideas that were instructive and meaningful to me and to

my students, and I take my place in a strong and continuing tradition of reflective practitioners and teacher researchers.

My research combines elements of literary research in the background and theoretical discussion of criticism and literary theory with methods of teacher research befitting my role as a reflective practitioner. I have been, like Stock,

conducting research in a genre that allowed me to bring the professional tools I had learned in my interdisciplinary education to bear on my professional work...to collect 'empirical' phenomena about teaching and learning for study...to interpret and re-interpret those phenomena...to develop effective instructional materials and practices (104).

This unique combination lends an authenticity to my presentation of the classroom situations and the theory that informed my practice, blurring the lines between what Stock calls "the classical distinction between propositional knowledge (knowing-that) and procedural knowledge (knowing-how)". The results of my research into methods of literary theory provide the propositional knowledge and the results of testing the application of those theories in the English classroom provide the procedural knowledge. In both ways, my research has provided tremendous insight into developing literacy curricula.

My research is, in part, an ethnography, or the study of the classroom culture and the different ways in which students behave and make sense of text, both verbal and written. The classroom culture is particularly important throughout this study, and I will often address issues of socially constructed meaning and include narratives and writing excerpts that reflect that influence. I have sifted through data and experience to identify features of the students' experiences that produce "educationally productive dialogue" but not a specific "recipe or set of rules...to match one person's behavior to another's" that other teachers can readily use. My experiences with students in the

classroom is unique, as is every teacher's, because of the culture of a given classroom is always unique. No two groupings of students is ever the same, the social and cultural combination of students will always contribute to an interpretive community that is different from any other. Therefore, I view my research is part of an on-going dialogue within the community of educational researchers and reflective practitioners investigating ways of helping students develop an awareness and proficiency in the field of literacy. I was a participant in my research as well, interacting with students "to construct ways of behaving and making sense together" (Kamil 83). Being "present" in the research situation and participating in the learning process provided additional insight into how students were engaging in the methods I tested throughout the study.

The student artifacts I use throughout this research are the results of my classroom practice and are systematically filed and stored. I have used pseudonyms for all students throughout, both for written and verbal communications and transcriptions, and have signed consent forms from each participant giving me permission to include the work. To help ensure anonymity for the students I've included throughout this study, I do not include the name of the high school in which I worked or the names of any faculty or staff member who may have been involved in any part of my research.

Classroom transcripts, anecdotes, and narratives record specific incidents in which circumstances of a teaching situation surprised or challenged me. I use these incidents to exemplify the processes in which my students engaged to construct meaning from text and the world around them. I also use narratives and anecdotes to illustrate times that my approaches and/or methods did not produce the results I had hoped for. Including these glimpses into the culture of my classroom and the various interactions between individual students, between groups of students, and between students and myself are essential in this study. The narrative and anecdotal evidence is

crucial in capturing the essence of the interaction and significance of student inquiry and their written responses.

At times, narratives are taken from memory or vignettes are representations of several incidents which I have combined for efficiency or represent the general response I had observed repeatedly over the course of my research. But they are always the words of my students, delivered occasionally through the filter of time and reflection. “There is both system and purpose in reflective practitioners’ shaping and sharing of anecdotes” (Stock 103). Kamil *et als.* have identified teacher-research data and reports as a “new genre” with “distinctive features” (17), emphasizing that

teacher-researchers are first and foremost teachers, who are responsible for the learning and well-being of the students assigned to them...a teacher researcher not only lives in the community but works in and has responsibility for it...The insider role of teacher researcher brings with it a unique combination: the power associated with first-person insight, the limitation of participant perspective, and perhaps a bit of tension involved with trying to simultaneously teach and study one’s teaching environment. It is this unique combination of qualities...that gives teacher research its individuality...teachers are in the best position to explore their own practice and make sense of the classroom worlds.... (18).

I believe these insights and tensions are apparent in the methods I employ to share my research findings, and I know the inclusion of my students’ voices is a large part of their power and significance. This “new genre” is an ideal vehicle for encouraging teachers to develop and share new practices.

CHAPTER II:

READER-RESPONSE THEORY

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the background of response theory, some of its important proponents, and how I systematically taught it in the classroom. My purpose here is to begin my discussion of the reciprocal nature of literary theory in general. I found response theory as the heart of teaching theory; asking students to construct meaning from text in any form is asking them to generate and articulate a response. In the ensuing chapters I discuss my findings on the use of literary theory as scaffolding for response. In this way, response becomes a method to encourage metacognitive awareness of how meaning is constructed from text, and in my discussion of it in this chapter it also serves as an extension of reading theory. I will also discuss how pervasive response theory has become as an underlying assumption for many teaching practices; consequently, I include less exploration of specific classroom assignments in this chapter but instead explore the nature of response theory as underlying the practices I detail in Chapters III-VI. It is important, however, to clarify exactly what response theory is, and how it becomes a basis for introducing or reviewing other theoretical approaches to literature.

The Development of Response Theory

Definition

Reader/response theorists assume a text cannot be understood apart from the results it elicits from the reader. In other words, the text's effects on the reader are

essential to any accurate interpretation, because it is the emotional and intellectual response of the reader that gives the text meaning and significance. Response theory calls attention to how we read and what influences our reading; and seeks both to define the act of reading itself, and to identify the processes a reader must go through to construct a meaning from a given text. Consequently, a literary work is not defined by the words on the page, but by the transaction between text and reader as he/she processes those words. The reader becomes engaged with a work when he/she makes a personal connection with the events, characters, theme, and/or setting. This connection can come from personal experience, cultural associations, or previous literary experience. Focusing on textual structure, the background of the author or the historical relevance of the setting may initially provide specific interpretive resources for both teacher and student; but, according to response theorists, serves as a supplement to the prior knowledge or experiential background that informs reading a text.

Reader-response theorists are sometimes faced with charges of relativism by those theorists who lean more towards more objective approaches to literary interpretation. Objective theorists point to authorial, text-based or historical approaches as ways to determine the true, or at least most competent, meaning of a text. They consider relativism is the term for the belief that there are as many ways of constructing a meaning of any text as there are individuals who read it; no reader's interpretation can ever be "wrong". This approach to interpretation, critics argue, actually undermines the value of literature, and English studies in general, because if any kind of writing or communication means whatever someone wants it to mean, the craft of writing and skill in argument is irrelevant. In reality, however, reader-response theory is neither relative nor objective, but instead incorporates ideas from both theoretical camps. Stanley Fish, a noted response theorist, refuted the charge of relativism by arguing that "while

relativism is a position one can entertain, it is not a position that one can occupy. No one can *be* a relativist....” (“Is There a Text?” 53, emphasis in original) since there is really not a “position” to be taken, per se. Because response-theorists, like Fish, argue that the “ability to interpret is not acquired; it is constitutive of being human” (Fish, “Variorum” 2088), indicating that the reader’s initial response is the most natural construction of meaning. But response theory really isn’t about just accepting the first, or most natural, reading of a text. But Fish, in his very next sentence, qualifies this notion: “What is acquired are ways of interpreting...”.

Reader-response theory supports the concept that a reader orchestrates interpretive strategies, or using everything he/she knows, to construct meaning from text. Response theorists, like reading theorists, seek to clarify the strategies a reader uses to construct meaning and isolate specific elements of this process to explore the basic question of how a reader constructs meaning from a text. Teaching reader-response theory systematically as theory is therefore instructive; not only does it serve as a method to draw students’ attention to their use of reading and interpretive strategies, but also as a way to introduce students to a theory of literary interpretation that transformed critical approaches to literature through the last decades of the 20th Century and into the 21st. In this way, teaching reader-response theory is useful as an introduction to contemporary theory itself, or a review of other theoretical approaches to literary interpretation.

Development of Response Theory: Rosenblatt, Iser and Fish

The theories of Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish help to specifically identify for students the processes of response interpretation, and to recognize and justify the importance of individual responses in a methodical and evaluative way. These scholars have been influential in establishing and continuing

research in the field of reader-response pedagogy through their perspectives on how a reader's response informs a construction of meaning. In addition, these individuals in particular have inspired countless educators to continue developing student-centered teaching practices.

Louise Rosenblatt first wrote on the subject in 1937 and is the forerunner in the reader/response field, even though her work wasn't generally accepted until the 1970's. She labeled her method of determining meaning by taking the reader's intellectual construct of textual material into consideration as "transactional". Rosenblatt further argues that the "text" exists as a transaction somewhere between the work and the reader. She writes:

it is hard to liberate ourselves from the notion that the poem is something either entirely mental or entirely external to readers. 'The poem' cannot be equated solely with *either* the text *or* the experience of a reader.... 'poem' is understood to refer to the relationship between a reader and a text (Rosenblatt *Reader, Text, Poem* 105).

Each reading of a text is an "event" that will never be exactly the same again, even if the same reader reads the same text. She further argued that

...the priority of the lived-through relationship with the text should be maintained. Anything, any know-ledge, that may help us to such participation is to be valued. With that clearly in mind, we can welcome any 'background knowledge' that may enhance our ability to validly organize the experience generated by the text...Anything else can be valued as biography, as literary history, as social documentation; but these will not be confused with or substituted for the literary experience (Rosenblatt, *Reader, Text, Poem* 125).

By using the term "validly" to describe the interpretative process, Rosenblatt emphasizes that not just any personal associations or interpretations are acceptable, but there must be some validity to those associations. At the same time, however, she discounts the importance of using other interpretive methods (biography, history, society) as the sole basis for interpretation.

Rosenblatt argues that when a reader interacts with a text, he/she comes to an

understanding of his/her *experienced meaning* of it. This is, in other words, a meaning the reader constructs based on associations and experiences he/she has had with elements of the text: a meaning based on experiences. “This can spark a sense of engaging, in no matter how amateur a fashion, in the same kind of creative enterprise as the expert, the critic” (Rosenblatt, *Reader, Text, Poem* 143). Talking through experienced meaning helps students to articulate how they managed to create that meaning from the text and helps to avoid the passive experience for students.

When a reader evaluates a work based on his/her experienced meaning, he or she has essentially developed *criteria of validity*, and begins entering the realm of criticism. That is, the reader incorporates his/her prior knowledge of literary form or convention to validate meaning from the events, characters, settings, and situations. “From this standpoint, the reader can think realistically about the strengths and weaknesses he brings to that particular text”. Then the reader must determine whether or not this meaning is acceptable, constituting a “validity of interpretation [or] faithfulness to the text” (Rosenblatt, *Reader, Text, Poem* 143-54). Every time we read anything, a friend’s note or a classic novel, we are establishing criteria of validity that enables us to decide whether or not we can accept our interpretation of the text. Students can understand criteria of validity as guidelines they follow, consciously or unconsciously, as they read to measure the worth or merit of their experienced meaning, and therefore of the work itself as they see it. Other approaches to literary theory can provide guidelines as well. For example, students may have enough personal knowledge of the structure of a plot to recognize a relevant order of events; they have established criteria for a “good” and engaging plot. But knowing about structuralism or New Critical theory can give them additional guidelines for establishing a criteria of validity, and they can begin to judge the merits of the plot: a leap into the realm of criticism.

When an individual brings his/her criteria of validity and experienced meaning to a group discussion, Rosenblatt argued, it is for *critical validation*. Discussion tests individual interpretation, as students support or refute other experienced meaning, clarifying ideas in the process. It helps a student to fully articulate his/her views and interpretations if he or she has to argue them with someone else. A community of readers serves as a sounding board for ideas and interpretations inspired by a work. If an understanding between disagreeing students cannot be reached, students can agree to disagree without discrediting anyone's interpretation provided the reader's evaluative criteria are clearly stated and acceptable within the context of the work, a concept Rosenblatt calls the *criteria of adequacy*.

The concept of adequacy of reading (or interpretation) is not rejected when we recognize that there may be diverse or alternative sets of criteria of adequacy. Nothing prevents our evaluating the adequacy of any particular reading of a particular text...If what one reader has made of a text is being compared with another's reading of it, the standards of adequacy by which they are being compared can be and should be made explicit (Rosenblatt, *Reader, Text, Poem* 124).

They can decide to accept a reading different from their own when the reader's experience and cultural values are taken into consideration. Both students recognize that if they disagree on details, at least they can admit that their adversary's criteria are adequate, if not as valid as his/hers. Students, according to Rosenblatt's argument, can only experience first an engagement with and then a critical interpretation of a text if they take part in establishing the criteria of constructing meaning.

German critic Wolfgang Iser first posited his theory of "phenomenology" during the 1960's to clarify the notion of "text" and the reader's creation of meaning from that text. He argues that the act of reading and comprehending is so complex that it is a phenomenon that we can do it at all, and he bases his theories of reading on the processes inherent in reading itself. He explained the act of reading as "a product arising out of the interaction between text and reader;" an interaction between the

structure of the text and its recipient. However, Iser placed an emphasis on “gaps” in the text, describing them as “the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to communication in the reading process” (Keesey 149). The text as it stands on the page is incomplete, it is simply a set of instructions for creating an imaginative work within the mind of the reader. This indeterminacy, however,

stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said...it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader’s imagination, so the said ‘expands’ to take on greater significance...what is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed (Keesey 149).

“Whatever is present is marked by an absence...the task of interpretation is thus dual in nature...the absent and the present are made continually to point at each other” (Iser, *Range of Interpretation* 72). Therefore, like Rosenblatt, he argued that the “real” text was an imaginative, fluid entity existing somewhere between the reader’s expectations and the words on the page, although those words provide guidelines for a reader’s interpretation. “Hence interpretation in itself is not limited; rather it is the parameters chosen [by the reader] that impose restrictions...interpretation is an undertaking that has to produce its own frameworks in order to assess what it intends to elucidate” (Iser, *Range of Interpretation* 11). Again, the reference to “frameworks” indicates that there are textual constraints and that teacher scaffolding for student interpretation is necessary.

Iser’s theory of “segments and blanks” can help students identify their interpretive strategies by identifying the various experiences and associations that influence the way they are reading. Iser believed we construct the text out of a series of *segments*; that is, given “instructions” regarding setting, character, plot, etc. that the reader uses to construct a framework of meaning. Yet between each segment is a *gap* or *blank* that induces the reader to perform different operations, filling them in with

whatever experience he or she has. First the reader must sort through the meaning of a given segment, then he or she must fill the gap between segments with personal feelings, associations and/or experiences to make sense of the previous segment. Finally, the reader must find a logical, thematic connection from one segment to the next by using those associations or experiences as a bridge to link them together. All of this is accomplished in the split second it takes a reader to rake his/her eyes across the page. Students can comprehend segments as paragraphs, sentences, images, syntactical units or individual words depending upon the level of analysis the teacher demands or the intellectual capabilities of the student.

Other influences outside of the reader's individual engagement with text influence interpretation as well, according to Stanley Fish. Despite the uniqueness of individuals, cultural and social values strongly influence individual readings; readers who have cultural similarities will produce comparable readings because their life experiences have been, in part, a result of their cultural affiliations. Fish explored the influence of the suggestion and common ideas in a classroom culture and the nature of a *social* response to the text. "Meanings are the property ...of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of a reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce" (Fish, "How to Recognize a Poem" 268). Terry Eagleton explains it this way: "[according to Fish] the true writer is the reader: dissatisfied with mere Iserian co-partnership in the literary enterprise, the readers have now overthrown the bosses and installed themselves in power. For Fish, reading is not a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it *does* to you" (Eagleton 74). Looking through the classroom lens, members of the same interpretive community will share the same interpretive strategies and produce similar readings, limiting the responses a teacher can expect.

To test this theory, Fish presented his students with his now infamous list of

names, telling them it was a poem and asking them to interpret it. When they managed to interpret a relatively random list of names as poem imbued with poetic meaning, he determined that

it is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that paying of a *certain kind of attention* results in the emergence of poetic qualities. As soon as my students were aware that it was poetry they were seeing, they began to look with poetry-seeing eyes, that is, with eyes that saw everything in relation to the properties they know poems to possess....Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there, but if the example of my students can be generalized, it is a matter of knowing how to produce what can thereafter be said to be there. Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them (Fish, "How to Recognize a Poem," 270-1, emphasis added).

Furthermore, it is the interpretive community, in this case the classroom, that provides the framework for constructing meaning, whether those frameworks are consciously identified and explored or not. In the interpretive community, "meanings are not extracted but made and made not by encoding forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being" (Fish, "Variorum," 2088). If a text, as Iser argued, consists of a set of directions or segments, Fish argues that "they will only *be* directions to those who have the interpretive strategies in the first place" (Fish, "Variorum," 2089; emphasis in original). In the same vein as reading theorists, then, Fish sees the strategies as necessary for constructing meaning from text, which serves to again emphasize the importance for a reader to be cognizant of these strategies. The ideas of each community, shared through discussion, common experience and expectations, will influence a group of students to make common associations with the work.

In addition, this explains how one class can come to one determination of meaning from a work, while a classroom full of different students can come to a different interpretation of the same text. A class of students discussing literary meaning examines a text from the standpoint of that particular social environment and, by testing

interpretation through discussion, constructs a text that is validated within the culture of the classroom population. The learning community determines relevant criteria for evaluation and then responds according to that particular community's shared expectations for a literary work in general and for the details of a particular text. A group discussion requires that participants share various conceptions of experienced meaning, thereby influencing the group's meaning construction. Each individual interpretation shared by a student in a classroom discussion influences previous interpretations held by individual students. The text is further processed by this discussion, which allows the reader to clarify and organize his/her interpretation by providing continued and varied exposure to the information given by the work. Obviously, this emphasizes the essential nature of classroom discussion; but this also explains how and offers justification for classes that will arrive at different interpretations of the same work.

On the other hand, however, if a teacher finds that using response methods still leads all of his/her classes to the same interpretation of a work, the teacher may be using too much of his/her personal experienced meaning for a work, using the classroom for critical validation only. How much does a teacher's pedagogy influence the class's interpretation? To what extent does his/her presentation of the interpretive situation influence student construction of meaning? The teacher often serves as a likely source of interpretation for students by helping them fill the gaps, but must be careful to avoid filling them in too completely with his/her own experience. This kind of modeling may make interpretation easier for them, but it becomes too easy for them passively to experience the work through the teacher's lens. This "passive experience" clearly indicates the power of the teacher in the field of literary study, and emphasizes the importance of student experimentation with different literary theories. Another problem for the teacher is to differentiate between valid reasoning and "off the wall"

interpretations. After all, what is easy about understanding the workings of the teenage mind and the emotional responses that drive it? To have students learn to analyze their own responses by consciously exploring reader-response theory puts the responsibility for valid interpretation where it belongs: right on the student's shoulders.

Response Theory as Pedagogy

Research Goals

If an emotional or intellectual response is the most important tool in literary interpretation, then how can a teacher conclude that a student's response is invalid? How can he/she steer students toward a clear set of criteria for literary evaluation, holding students accountable for understanding the methods of critical readings? How could I encourage "responsible" associations without accepting almost anything they chose to blurt out during discussion? Because response theory is often considered "natural" interpretation, could it be systematically taught? Would teaching response theory be pedagogically useful? I wanted students to understand how and why a work evokes an emotional response from the reader, how the work is shaped by interaction between the reader and the text, and how the reader must employ a framework of interpretive strategies to construct meaning. I wanted to help students come to an understanding of *what they are doing* when they read and respond to a text and their accountability for their interpretations.

Introducing Response Theory

I began by giving a general overview of response theory, using a handout to guide discussion (Figure1). I asked students to respond by writing about the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach to interpretation and was surprised at how closely

their thoughts reflected the specific arguments of response theorists, and before we even discussed them. One student's response was typical of the weaknesses they perceived: "It's so abstract. No two people will ever have the same reaction. It's hard because there are no set rules". This echoes the charges of relativism that I discussed earlier. "So how can we answer a question right?" another student wondered. "When teachers ask us questions, aren't we just getting their interpretation? If our experiences are different, why are they right and we're wrong?" This question echoes the concerns I raised earlier about the teacher's influence on student interpretation. I was reminded of how often the teacher establishes evaluative criteria or identifies gaps with chapter questions, essay topics, and specific "background" to help students recognize the implications of those gaps and evaluate the text accordingly. Because they are so often prompted or led, students do not always know why or how they have decided to like or dislike a work and feel lost the first time they are asked to carefully construct and argue for textual meaning based on an emotional, or experiential response.

READER/RESPONSE THEORY

This method of literary criticism concentrates on the reader's interaction with the text, and how each reader's individual experience with and response to situations, characters and events in a work can influence his/her interpretation. Emphasis here is on the act of reading itself, and the process of creating meaning from a jumble of letters and words on a page. Because this method focuses on the reader's response, it is possible for readers with different life experiences and expectations for a work to interpret that work differently.

As we read, we "plug in" our associations with the characters and situations in a work through our experience in life and previous experience with literature we create a "text" or version of the story in our minds. In other words, we manipulate the text by injecting experience, turning the words on the page into mental images. It is this intellectual text that concerns the response critic.

Response theory differs from other methods because it is the mental construct of the text that is the main focus. This makes exact meaning virtually impossible to ascertain; if the real meaning resides in the reader's mind, how can two interpretations be exactly the same? Should they be?

Thinking about Response Theory:

1. Think back to a memorable experience that you had that involved several other people. When you tell about the experience, do you tell the story the same as the other people who were with you? How are they similar? How are they different? Why do you think there are any differences?
2. Think back to a favorite story, movie, T.V. show from your childhood. Watch the movie or show, or read the book again. How is it different to you now? Is your imaginative creation different than it was before? Do you know more about the circumstances or catch more of the jokes now? How do you explain this?

Figure 1. Response Theory Handout.

I realized then that setting down some "rules," by presenting specifics of response theory may help them to evaluate those ideas and interpretations. Knowing about Rosenblatt, Iser and Fish might help them understand why they have come to a particular understanding of a work. After all, what is the value of literature if anyone can be right no matter what they feel or say? So I decided to share specific ideas from response theorists about response theory. I started with Iser, and we looked up the term

“phenomenon” in class, arriving at the definition “an observable and significant event of sensory experience,” and explored the wonder of our ability to construct meaning from the black squiggles and lines on a white page that constitute letters, then words, then sentences, and finally works of literature. How did these markings make sense to us? I introduced Iser’s concept of gaps and segments, then gave them the “Givens and Omissions Record” (Figure 2) to elucidate Iser’s theory. I called them “givens” and “omissions” because I was concerned that students would find the terms “segments” and “gaps” unfamiliar in the context of reading. I found, during our study of response theory, that I had underestimated them; they were quite comfortable with Iser’s terms, and it wasn’t necessary to change them. But I include the terms “given” and “omission” here because that is what I actually used in class. While the terms were no problem, however, students did have some difficulty identifying how they are influenced by what is *not* there (“If it’s not there, how can I find it?”). This is the crux of the Given/Omission Record. The assignment asks them to identify information that they are given and record any questions this information may raise. When students articulate the questions they have about the segments, they have effectively identified gaps in the text. They can become aware of the experiences they are plugging into the text through the questioning that carries them forward.

Givens/Omissions Worksheet (a.k.a. Segments/Gaps Record)

Response critics are interested in the mental picture or intellectual recreation of the text that each reader constructs as he/she reads. The text (story, poem or novel) gives the reader "instructions" on creating that mental picture by describing the character and setting, presenting a series of events, maintaining point of view, etc. Wolfgang Iser, a German literary critic, called those instructions **segments**. The segments are the concrete descriptions and details that are consistent; they are specifically **given** to the reader.

If a character in a work is described as mean and nasty, or brilliant and charming, the reader accepts these given instructions on creating the character accurately in his/her mind. But if the story only describes the characters actions and appearance instead of giving clear instructions, there is a **gap** the reader must fill to create the mental construct of the character. Iser believed readers make sense of the gap, or **omission** of detail, by filling them in with their own experiences they associate with the information given.

So, if a character is described as nosy and talkative, some readers can interpret the character as annoying because they have a nosy and talkative little sister who can drive them crazy. Another reader may interpret this character as endearing because he/she enjoys babysitting for a funny and adorable boy who is nosy and talkative. The readers have come to different interpretation of character because they have different experiences and associations with talkative people. They have filled in the gap with their experience. How will the two agree on the initial determination of character? Should they have to? Often, the reader is given further instruction on character interpretation as the story progresses, but that first impression is an important one.

This mental construct is known as **experienced meaning**. That is, readers fill in gaps throughout the work to come to a determination of the meaning of the story, poem or novel. They have plugged many of their own experiences in; hence the term "experienced meaning."

To practice with identifying segments and gaps, it is helpful to record the givens and omissions from a story as you read it. If it is difficult for you to record omissions, try listing the questions you have about details in the story. If you have a question about something, that means that there is a gap in the instructions you have been given. Questions can also clarify the segments and help you to verbalize the missing information; answers you formulate to your questions can help you identify the experiences you are plugging into the gaps.

Fill in the column to record Givens/Segments as you read with details and instructions from the story. Record any questions you have about those segments in the Questions column. The questions can help you identify instructions or information that seem to be missing. Fill in the column for Omissions/Gaps with either your answers to your own questions, or the information you feel is missing. Pay careful attention to *how* you are answering those questions. After you have finished, respond to the following questions:

Figure 2. Givens and Omissions Record.

Given/Omission Response Questions:

1. How did the givens, or segments, help you to create a mental construct of the text?
2. What was given in the title? Why is this an important segment? What questions did you have about the story after you had read the title? What gaps does the title open for you?
3. Did the "omissions," or gaps make it more difficult or easier for you to create a mental construct? Explain both how the gaps could help a reader create meaning and how they could make this process more difficult.
4. List some examples of experiences or associations you plugged into the text to come to an experienced meaning of the story. Where did you find you relied more on your own experiences to create this meaning, and where did you rely more on the instructions you were given?
5. Was your experienced meaning similar to the rest of your classmates, or was it very different? How do you decide who is more accurate?
6. Did you learn anything about your own values or beliefs as you read and discussed this story? How do we learn more about ourselves as we focus on a reader/response approach?

GIVENS/SEGMENTS

QUESTIONS

OMISSIONS/GAPS

1.

1.

1.

2.

2.

2.

3.

3.

3.

Applying Reader-Response Theory

I used the short story “The Lottery,” by Shirley Jackson, to test theories on constructing meaning and investigate whether students would become metacognitive about the reader-response strategies as they read. I distributed copies of the first half of “The Lottery” as homework (I didn’t assign the whole story because I wanted them to discuss their predictions and impressions before we read the ending) and asked them use the Given/Omission Record to note, as they read, when the text provided specific information, and when they found they had questions about significant omission of information. I employed the concepts of Rosenblatt, Iser and Fish, previously discussed in this chapter, with interesting results. I will present those results by sharing the highlights of a conversation that took place between two of my students in small group discussions. In between these highlights, I will interject an analysis of the strategies for response interpretation exemplified in this discussion.

Before we discussed the first half of “The Lottery” in small group discussion the next day, I distributed and briefly explained concept maps of Rosenblatt’s response theory (Figure 3) to guide discussion. I was concerned that students would be confused by having essentially two sets of response guidelines (the concept map and Given Omissions Log), but most students said they were comfortable with both. They didn’t have to use Rosenblatt’s specific terminology in their discussions, of course, but I hoped they would recognize how each student’s interpretation contributes to, and is modified by, discussion of the story. My questions about using these guidelines were:

- 1) How would they construct meaning from a narrative that requires the reader to fill in many blanks in the text?
- 2) How much would they rely on my interpretation of the events in the story to help them construct meaning from it?
- 3) Is it still student response when they are guided so specifically with “worksheets”?

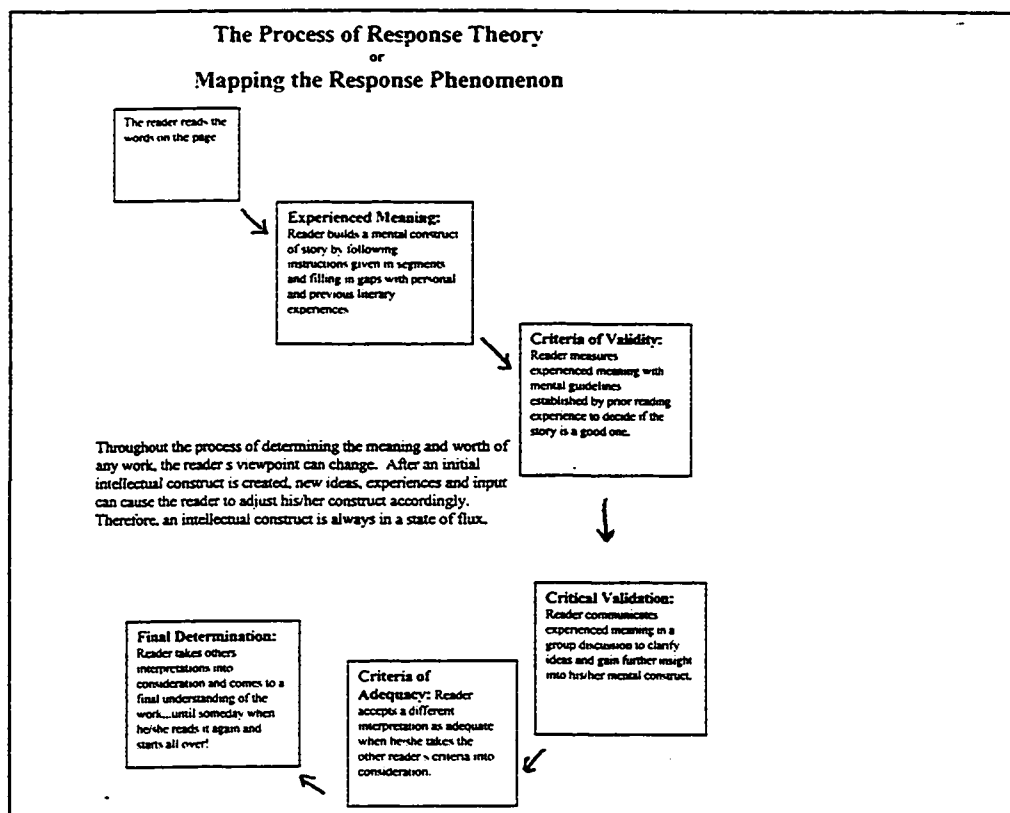


Figure 3. Rosenblatt's Response Theory.

The following discussion, which I recorded in a journal entry after class, illustrates the practical use of response theory and the critical thinking that can result.

Mary and Chad: Response and Discussion

After students shared some of their "givens" and questions from the "Givens/Omissions Log" in literature circle groups the next day, I asked them to brainstorm answers to the questions they have recorded, and to talk about how they came up with the answers. I hoped that, through discussion, students would recognize their construction of experienced meaning of the story so far. At first they didn't quite see this, however, and protested, "How can we answer them if we don't know the whole story?"

“Do the best you can.” I said “Think about the most logical answers.” This wasn’t a very satisfying answer, but I didn’t want to influence their readings in any way. Several students, including Mary and Chad, who were participating in the same literature circle group, had picked up on the “givens” of the lottery and the stones and recorded versions of the questions “Why is the lottery important?” and “What will the boys do with the stones?”

Mary begins the discussion: “Lotteries are stupid, just a waste of time and money. Nobody really wins anything; people who play in lotteries are pretty dumb. I don’t know anyone who has ever won something like that.” Chad disagrees: “But *somebody* always has to win a lottery. It depends on how big it is and how many people are involved. We sell raffle tickets at church and somebody always wins the prize.” Mary snorts, “Yeah, the only real winners are the people who make money selling lotteries!”

Unfortunately, at this point I did intervene in the discussion to keep it moving; as I reflect on this now, I wish I hadn’t: “So when you think about the title of this story, Mary, why do you think it’s important, based on your experiences with lotteries?” Mary thinks about this, “I guess I just think these people are going to be stupid or just losers. There are always more losers in a lottery than winners.” She takes her experiences one step further: “Besides, this is a small hick town. That means these people really don’t have anything to win in a raffle. They probably get to win a cake or a cow.” Chad argues: “I think somebody will win something. It’s probably money, maybe half the money of the raffle. It’s the beginning of summer, so they are probably going to celebrate with a picnic or something.”

The first segment of a work is the title, which is the initial “instruction” for the reader, and already he/she has made some associations with the story. In our culture,

lotteries can elicit positive connotations involving the chance to win money or prizes. But individual experience may cause a more dubious reader to associate the notion of waste and false hopes with the title. When Mary and Chad share individual experiences with lotteries, they are sharing their particular experienced meaning; which, for these students, is very different. Next they must decide if or how they can each validate this constructed meaning. How do they know if their experiences have helped them to logically predict anything about the story from the title? I ask them each what guidelines they have used to test the validity of their initial response to the text. Mary says "What I just told you. Lotteries are dumb; I just understand that these people are dumb." Ryan says "I think they are just following their tradition..." "Which is dumb!" Mary interrupts.

The next segment (or segments) of meaning, presented in the first sentence, provide instructions for establishing the setting of the story: "The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green". These details emphasize positive associations; experience with beautiful summer days evokes calming emotions and could modify the meaning a reader has already constructed from the title. But what does the beautiful day have to do with a lottery? The reader must fill the gap between the title and the first sentence to move onto the next segment or suspend further questioning by trusting that there will be a logical organization to the story. The reader's previous experience with literary conventions and expectation that additional information is on the way spurs him/her to continue reading.

The good feelings from the first sentence affect the reader's experience of the next segment. Yet the questions a reader has about the blanks also affect the reading. Each successive segment is also followed by a gap that the reader must fill for that

segment to make sense and connect to the next, a process that continues throughout the reader's engagement with a work. The reader must internalize each theme from a segment to understand the next segment; this creates a continual construct of meaning.

Mary and Chad move on to their next question: What will the boys do with the stones? "Those boys are gonna whip those stones" says Mary. "Nothing good ever comes out of boys with piles of stones! I don't know, but I think something bad is going to happen." She describes an uneasy "feeling" she has: "Lots of times in stories you just know there will be some surprise at the end". Her past experiences with literature help her to validate her uneasiness with lotteries, stones and the people involved. Chad thinks the boys "just collect stones. Maybe they just don't want their friends to have more than they do. They all know each other pretty well and it seems like they do this thing every year". Two very different readings so far: Mary associates negative experiences with lotteries and stones, while Chad looks on the bright side. Many other students talk about memories of the exquisite joy of anticipated summer days stretching endlessly before them, experiences they view through the cultural lens of American summertime holidays and picnics. It seems like many students knew a kid named Bobby like the one in the story (these may or may not be pleasant associations) and packs of young boys tumbling about on warm sunny days.

But why are they gathering stones? How does the reader connect the segments of the stones to the segments describing children in the summer? Boys collect rocks, boys throw stones. Everyone knows that. But at what or whom do these boys plan to throw the stones? Why are they hoarding them and keeping them from each other? The blanks' existence demands that the reader work to join the segments together; it becomes possible to organize them through our mental and emotional interaction with the text.

The blanks also give rise to the tension and suspense in a work as the reader determines how the segments fit together. Questions about the gaps and the anticipation of upcoming segments to answer those questions draw the reader onward. The differences in answers mark the differences in the texts the readers' are constructing. One reader, like Mary, may sense impending disaster (Boys...with rocks!!) while another, like Chad, may associate rocks with innocent collecting or building a fort. Somehow, the reader must inject his/her experience with summertime, boys and rocks to link segments together and drive the narrative forward.

Not only does creating the links between segments drive the reader, but it also conditions the reader's view of previous segments as he/she anticipates and predicts events in the upcoming segments. This emphasizes the recursive, or circular, nature of reading discussed in Chapter I. The reader has continually modified his or her viewpoint, becoming enraptured with the development and fluidity of his/her mental construct of the text. As "The Lottery" continues, the reader begins to pick up on the uneasiness of the townspeople while they gather in the town square, information which can modify his/her earlier interpretation. Yet the relationship between this uneasiness, the summertime, the rocks and town tradition is still unclear. It is therefore the *implications* and not the *statements* in a given work that draw the reader onward; this again illustrates that we read not only because of what the work gives, but also by what is withheld.

The next day, Chad admits that he is horrified by the ending; Mary says "See, I told you they were hicks from a small town and pretty stupid. Why else would they do such a crazy thing?" Mary had arrived at the conclusion that such things may happen in small backward towns where tradition and ritual can lead people to do very senseless things; she thought the story was meaningful and thought-provoking. Chad was using

the same givens (or segments) but with much different results. He was given the lottery which he associated with luck and winning, the stones and little boys meant summer fun and games, tradition brought the experience of comfort and connection to family and history, small town inspired visions of friendship and cooperation. To him, the ending was difficult to accept: why would townspeople want brutally to kill a productive and loved member of their society? He can't quite see the point and decides he does not like the story.

Both students have set up some criteria for judging the events of the story and ascribing meaning to them. Whose experience is the "correct" one? When the group discusses further, listening to one another's experienced meaning, they agree to disagree, even if each has valid points to make in his/her interpretation. Chad begins to understand that sometimes tradition and ritual can seem senseless when participants lose sight of why they are engaging in the traditional act, so the ending begins to make more sense to him. His construct of the text has been altered through discussion, but he has also influenced Mary to find the good in tradition as well. "Don't forget" he says "summer vacation is a tradition!" The discussion turns to the usefulness of tradition as well; Mary concedes that ritual does have an important place in our lives but we should try to remember why we take part in traditional activities ("Why don't we go to school in the summer, anyway?" she wonders). Her construct of the text has also changed somewhat through discussion. Both students have clarified their own ideas and validated the other interpretation, and have just experienced an interpretive community.

If this type of an understanding between disagreeing students cannot be reached, students can agree to disagree, a compromise Rosenblatt called *criteria of adequacy*. This is when one reader accepts another interpretation of a text as adequate—that is, close to being valid within an interpretive framework or the constraints of the text, but

still open for some dispute. They can decide to accept a reading different from their own when the reader's experience and cultural values are taken into consideration. This is where some critics of response theory locate aspects of relativism. Mary could have concluded that Chad would never understand because of he was missing the point of the title of "The Lottery" drew too much on the important roles tradition and ritual play in his life. Chad could have decided that poor Mary would never understand the meaning of the story because she had led a life devoid of the comforts of ritual and drew too much on her individual cynicism. But, through discussion, these two students can recognize that if they disagree on details, at least they can sigh that their adversary's criteria are adequate, if not as valid as theirs.

The reader must identify values and beliefs to fill the gaps in the text to comprehend the text, and unfamiliar information provided by segments demands even more careful scrutiny. In this way, Eagleton argues that, according to the tenets of response theory, the most effective literary work "is one which forces the reader into new critical awareness of his or her customary codes and expectations. The work interrogates and transforms the implicit beliefs we bring to it, 'disconfirms' our routine habits of perception and so forces us to acknowledge them for the first for what they really are....in the act of reading, our conventional assumptions are 'defamiliarized', objectified to the point where we can criticize and so revise them" (68). Consequently, the reader looks more closely at himself and learns about his world view. This is an important element of growth, and understanding the cognitive process of literary interpretation can clarify for the reader a sense of individual consciousness; a very powerful method of self-examination. This is the phenomenon of reading according to response theorists: we come to know ourselves through a story, novel or poem because we must delve deep within to pull out the stuff to fill the gaps. If students are provided

with specific information about reader-response theory, they can begin to recognize this as they closely examine the experience they draw upon as they read a text.

Yet, by continuing to examine response theory, I hoped they would examine their own manipulation of textual material and better understand the workings of a text within their own consciousness. They were already unconsciously creating an intellectual text and assigning some kind of evaluative criteria through the very act of reading; if a reader can't establish some logical criteria for judging a work, it simply would not make any sense. Scholes argues that this is when students make the intellectual leap from his notion of "reading" to the higher intellectual activity of "interpretation": "The further estranged the reader is from the writer (by time, space, language, or temperament) the more interpretation must be called upon to prove a conscious construction of unavailable or faded codes and paradigms" (*Textual Power*, 48). For works with unusual, or even outlandish, circumstances like Franz Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" or "The Very Old Man With Enormous Wings" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the reader must put even more of him/herself into a construction of meaning and rely heavily on past literary experience to chain segments together. Readings become more variant as more of individual reader's experience guides his/her particular construct, making a final determination of meaning even more complicated. Terry Eagleton recognizes that Iser's emphasis on the absence in a text particularly lends itself to an appreciation of "modernist, multiple works partly because they make us more self-conscious about the labour of interpreting them...the reader comes to construct a working hypothesis...[and] is engaged in fighting the text as much as interpreting it". (Eagleton 70-1) But it is the idea of "fighting the text" that puts many students off; if meaning isn't clear and readily constructed, they will pronounce the work "stupid" and disregard it. I found, however, that when students *knew* they were

filling in gaps even unfamiliar circumstances and difficult texts not as frustrating for them because they had purpose for “fighting the text”. Again, the importance of this for students is understanding how they formulate an interpretation that creates for them a notion of the “real” meaning of the text. Expanding their understanding of the literary experience and interpretive repertoire is precisely the goal of the literature classroom.

Response Theory and *Hamlet*

I further tested students’ understanding, application, and evaluation of response theory by making it explicit in our study of Hamlet. I learned just how pervasive response theory has become in so doing, because I found I really didn’t have to significantly change my teaching practice. I was already using response methods, the only significant difference was that I was now sharing the underlying theory for using these methods with students. Emphasizing response is suitable in teaching *Hamlet* because students become quite fascinated by literature’s most famous dysfunctional family. In our age of divorce and remarriage, family counseling and blended families, there are few students who do not have some experience with “unique” family relationships. Hamlet’s friendship with Horatio, his confusion about his own feelings for Ophelia, his complex relationship with his mother, and his competitive and resentful feelings for Claudius all strike familiar chords for young adults yet today. Drawing upon associations, experiences and interpretive criteria can help students engage with the play in a way that is meaningful to them on a personal level. But this doesn’t mean that structural or linguistic study of the play should be entirely superceded by this personal prior knowledge; in fact, quite the opposite occurred as we discussed their experienced meanings. Ironically, because they were consciously filling in gaps, students were aware of segments, or language, that give the play texture and structure.

It is important, however, that students have had some experience with response theory already through smaller, less challenging works. Initially, students were sometimes confused and intimidated by Shakespearean language and conventions; it was difficult to keep from establishing my own experienced meaning of the first beginning scenes for them to relieve their fears. But because my goal was for them to use the response method we had been studying in class, and because they knew this was my goal, I could avoid translating the text for them and students didn't become overly frustrated. I allowed students to "buddy up" and work through the text in pairs. Each student was still responsible for his/her own Response Log (Figure 4) and experienced meaning, but they could gain some confidence by working through the language and develop a criteria of validity together. I have found that, as students begin to relate Hamlet and his circumstances to their own experiences and lives, the "buddies" still arrived at individual interpretations. In fact, they often argue most vehemently with one another because they knew I didn't consider myself the repository of "meaning" for the play.

Hamlet Response Log

Emotional response as a method of interpretation requires carefully identifying your response and how the text has elicited that response. Keep a log recording specific lines, general events and character actions that particularly impress you, confuse you, or otherwise draw an emotional response. What **segments** (given “instructions”) are impressive or outstanding? What **gaps** (omissions in those instructions) leave you wondering? What questions are you left with? How do you make sense of those gaps by injecting your own experiences and associations? Keeping track of this information will help you to understand how you are creating an individual relationship with and interpretation of the text.

Quotation, situation, Event	Act, scene, line number	Importance of segment, questions about gaps	Your response to segment, answer to question

Figure 4. Student Response Log.

Working with a specific literary theory also helped students keep the larger goals for reading a long play like Hamlet clearly in mind. Focusing on one theoretical approach gave them a purpose for reading; response theory was appropriate because when they understood how they were creating their own text of the play, and they didn't get “lost” or become less engaged while they were studying it. Students could first construct their individual relationships with the characters and events in the play, then share them with others in class. They were no longer learning about the play simply

because someone, somewhere had labeled it as “great literature,” but also to examine their reading and interpretive processes. I gave each student multiple copies of the Response Log to identify the information they are given by the dialogue of the play, and to begin to question and fill in gaps. It was more meaningful that they answer their own questions than to answer teacher or textbook generated questions.

Throughout the play, many of their questions centered on the characters and their relationships with one another, so we focused on that aspect of their experience by doing some “Persona Writing” (Figure 5). This gave students the chance to articulate and “flesh out” their conception of the character. I gave them a list of ideas as suggestions, but I encouraged them to improvise and create a response from a character as they interpreted him/her. For example, Gertrude may write a letter to Claudius (or to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) that indicates she did know of King Hamlet’s murder and even had a hand in it. Or Hamlet may write to Ophelia that he is adopting his “antic disposition” so Ophelia becomes part of his plan. One student wrote a letter in which Ophelia indicated she would fake madness as well, to divert attention from Hamlet’s mission. Another wrote a letter from Ophelia to Hamlet in which she told him she was pregnant. Writing these letters required students to carefully analyze the segments and gaps associated with the character, how they’ve filled the gaps, and the criteria they use to interpret the character. In other words, they must work through the process of reader/response criticism, I merely asked them to become cognizant of doing it.

Creating a Character: Persona Writing in *Hamlet*

The term “persona” literally refers to the mask a character wears in a literary work, or the ways in which the character presents him or herself through dialogue, action and reaction. For this assignment, it is your job to assume the persona of a character from *Hamlet* to make some judgments about what is going on behind the character’s mask. What is his/her true motivation? Is he/she to be trusted?

Choose a character and situation from the list below. Consider the events from the play so far and assume the character’s persona as you complete the writing assignment.

Write a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia explaining his actions so far

- Write a letter from Gertrude to Claudius concerning Hamlet and the state of the country
- Write a letter from Gertrude and/or Claudius to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern summoning them to Denmark
- Write a letter from Horatio to either Gertrude or Ophelia regarding Hamlet’s behavior
- Write a letter from Polonius to Laertes regarding Ophelia or Hamlet.
- Propose your own persona letter.

Be sure you use language appropriate for your character. The content of the letter should reflect your interpretation of the character and his/her relationships and knowledge of the intrigues of the Danish court.

Response Questions:

1. What determinations about the character’s personality and motives have you made? How have you made these assumptions?
2. What *segments* from the play or the character’s words have you drawn upon?
3. What *gaps* did you have to fill? How did you fill those gaps to flesh out your character?
4. What assumptions have you made about the character and the situations in which he/she is involved? How have you determined the *criteria* that allows you to make such assumptions? In other words, what prior experience with characters, literature, drama, and life have you used to determine the validity of your interpretation of character?

Figure 5. Persona Writing.

The letter from Ophelia to Hamlet led to one of those serendipitous teaching opportunities presented itself during the course of our experiments with response theory. Quite by accident, I discovered an interesting way to test whether students are

beginning to understand *how* they are using the social response and influences of the classroom culture to construct meaning, as well as the importance of the teacher's influence on that construction. One day, a couple of students from a different English class (Advanced Placement, to be precise) stopped in to hang out for a few minutes. They were stunned at the various character interpretations students in World Literature were discussing, particularly the one student who had wondered if it was possible that Ophelia was pregnant. "No way!" one said. "She just goes mad because her father was killed. That's what the play says!" But what about what the play doesn't say? "If it doesn't say it, then it isn't there." The students in that particular class had approached the play from an objective, text-based perspective; the play had been translated for them by the particular anthology they used. We hadn't been using an anthology, because our textbook included *The Tempest* rather than *Hamlet*. And, because we had been working with response-based theory, I had not emphasized a text-based approach. My curriculum was not constrained by the AP test preparation, so we had more freedom to open up discussion of variant readings. Consequently, these visiting students believed they had learned the "real" meaning of the play. Students debated reasons for Ophelia's madness for a short while before the visitors left.

The important point of this exchange is not the debate itself, nor the subject of the debate; it is the variance in meaning construction that results from what Fish has defined as "the interpretive community". Because the interpretive community in World Literature was different than the interpretive community of Advanced Placement, the construction of meaning was different. We briefly discussed the influence of the classroom culture and teacher guidance on their interpretations before the bell rang and students moved on to their next class.

But I was left mulling over what had just happened. I had not really taken advantage of what could have been a great teaching situation, and, in retrospect, wish I could have set up another component to the study of response theory. It would be interesting to partner with another teacher and have a group representing each class visit the other while they were studying the same text. How did the class become an interpretive community? Students could observe a community develop through sharing experiences, perspectives on issues presented in the text, and previous interactions with literature to create a meaningful text from a jumble of words and images on a page? In what ways is one interpretive community different from another? Are the individual experiences that led to the interpretation similar? How much experienced meaning have the teachers injected? This exercise could emphasize the importance of understanding the criteria for interpretation each classroom established for the work in question. To understand another class's interpretation of a work, and to effectively argue their own, students could recognize that through their interpreted meaning, and the process of critical validation, they have developed a set of criteria for evaluating the literature. Next, students could even explore how the two classes have become a larger, and different, interpretive community through this interaction.

Dramatization projects and activities help students to further explore the text and clearly construct an interpretation to present to an audience; in doing so they are engaging in the processes inherent in response theory. I have included the Dramatization Project (Figure 6) that I used as a final "wrap-up" for our study of *Hamlet*.

**Hamlet Essay:
Sketching a Character**

Sketching a character in an essay is much like drawing a sketch of a character: you must give your reader a picture of your interpretation of the character by discussing his/her characteristics and actions, and defend the validity of your construct of the character. For this essay, choose a character that interests you from the play. You will highlight the segments from the play that help you create the character, but argue for your method of filling the gaps in character development.

Outline your experienced meaning and the criteria that helped you to create that meaning in the following manner:

Begin with a description of your construct of the character. What are his/her defining features? What actions and dialogue can you point to as segments that gave you instructions on creating this character? What gaps did you have fill, and how did you fill them?

Describe the criteria you developed to judge your mental construct of the character. Is he/she a good guy or a bad guy? What measures did you use from your experience with people, with literature, with Shakespeare to help you decide on the validity of your construct?

Argue for the validity of your criteria. Why is it an appropriate judgment of character? Why is your construct valid?

Predict the course of the play for your character. Will things work out for him/her?

Explain how the construct of character you've created will either persevere or fail in the end. Why is this an appropriate resolution, based on what you know so far?

Your essay should be double-spaced and include specific references to the play to lend authenticity to your interpretation of character. Documentation of references should follow MLA format.

Figure 6. Dramatization Project.

Dramatic presentation emphasizes the importance of character interpretation, further encouraging students to explore their conceptions of and responses to individual characters. Of course the group members will have different ideas about the character persona, but after working consciously with response theory, they are able to recognize

the adequacy of an interpretation that is different than their own. To review the concept of interpretive communities, students could visit different classes to experience even more variation of interpretation. Students can ponder the criteria of validity the group established and to decide if it is adequate, even if it's different than theirs.

Conclusions on Teaching with Reader-response Theory

Challenges Resulting from Teaching with Response Theory

The danger in using a response approach without introducing students to basic theoretical concepts and frameworks for constructing meaning, is in accepting superficial responses from students who respond without really thinking, and students who figure out quickly that they can do a fast reading to gauge an emotional response to satisfy a teacher. Response as an interpretive literary approach should not legitimize a random flow of reader's affective experiences and notions and call those ideas literary interpretation. Those affective experiences are an essential first contact with a work and can help students process through the initial reading of a text; an emotional response can therefore *lead* to a critical understanding of the work. If student response is encouraged without a clear framework for constructing meaning, a teacher must be prepared for the occasional danger of finding out too much about a particular student. Rosenblatt refers to this as "bibliotherapy, the use of literary texts by trained people in psychological counseling" and advises that "it should be clearly differentiated from literary interpretation" (Rosenblatt 152). When an English teacher feels like a guidance counselor, however, he or she knows that a work of literature has exacted a profound response from the students reading it. The emotional response, however, is not, by itself, constitutive of the *meaning* of the work. If students can begin to identify how the work elicits their response, and how they develop the criteria to judge the validity of that

response within a critical framework, then they are critically evaluating the work. For these reasons, I found that teaching response theory emphasizes the need for scaffolding which I will show in the ensuing chapters.

The Rewards of Teaching with Response Theory

Having students discuss literature openly and thoughtfully. Scaffolding of literary theory to elicit response, students were much more open to learning or discussion other theories of constructing meaning. Students developed a metacognitive awareness of how they constructed meaning from text. "We can use our own interpretations" one student wrote. "Each of us picks up on different things in the [work]. If we all thought the same way, it would be pretty boring and no one would learn very much or be open to new ideas." Once students begin to understand the concepts of segments, blanks and criteria, they become more comfortable determining why their individual responses are probably very similar and "feel right" even if the "official" textbook interpretation seems difficult for them to understand. Instead of guessing at which response I'm expecting from them in classroom discussion, they have a handle on interpreting their own associations with language in the poem. They can learn to explore their initial "gut reaction" to a work to further understand how it is they develop this reaction into a meaning construction. This is an important skill not only in understanding literary theory, but in processing many of the "texts" thrown at them by the world at large. Imagine having students question *why* a magazine advertisement or television commercial elicits an emotional response from them. Imagine if they question that response, or the criteria for validity they have unconsciously established to evaluate such advertisements positively or negatively. The implications of understanding response theory in today's teenage world are profound.

CHAPTER III

ARCHETYPAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which archetypal theory served to introduce students to the concept of literary theory in general and to the process of assuming a particular stance in approaching a text. Learning about the archetypal theories of Carl Jung helped students conceive of a concept of “self” in the process of constructing meaning from text, which, in this context, serves as an extension of response theory. I will also define and discuss the implications of using historic, heuristic and radical or critical methods for teaching with theory, with student writing samples to illustrate the results of each method. I will begin these discussions by situating my position as a researcher and teacher within the theoretical stance. I will call “archetypal” an approach which also includes elements of Jungian, myth, psychoanalytic and structural theory. In Chapter II, I examined the ways to understand *how* readers respond to text; in this chapter, the question essentially becomes understanding *why* readers respond to text. The end goal of this discussion is again one of metacognitive awareness, both of textual constraints or information and of the strategies a reader unconsciously uses to construct meaning and engage with a text.

Defining the “Archetypal” Approach: Carl Jung and the Self

Northrop Frye, a literary critic noted for his fascination with myth and archetypes, once wrote that in order to fully understand and interpret any text, the reader

must crack the symbolic code embedded within. Students are used to this notion already in various areas of their lives. To understand a sporting event, the crowd must crack the code of rules, behavior and referee signals and penalties. Understanding the coach's signals in baseball or playing a strict round of golf require knowledge of elaborate symbolic codes. So does passing chemistry and algebra, attending a church service, or driving a car. Approaching a written work archetypically not only requires cracking a symbolic literary code, but also determining how that code creates meaning, stirring our deepest aesthetic appreciation for the work itself. An archetypal approach provides both teacher and students with methods for recognizing the symbolic code and a common language with which to talk about its meaning.

Early Twentieth Century psychologist Carl Jung coined the term "archetype" from the Greek word *archetypon*, meaning "beginning pattern". He described as "'identical psychic structures common to all' (CW V, para. 224), which together constitute 'the archaic heritage of humanity' (CW V, para. 259)". According to Jung, these structures reside in every individual's psyche, regardless of race, nationality or literary experience, controlling behavior and giving rise to similar thoughts, feelings and images (Stevens 32-3). The exploration and evaluation of archetypes as a critical tool in literature is part of a much larger field of study led by Jung, who began his career as a disciple of Sigmund Freud. While the two psychologists agreed on the idea of the unconscious as a powerful force within the human mind, they disagreed on the role the unconscious mind played in the human psyche of man. Freud understood the unconscious as a reservoir of repressed memories, desires and fears, but Jung conceived of the unconscious as a deeper realm of being, which communicates with consciousness in certain universally characteristic ways. In other words, Jung believed that within our subconscious mind we harbor our "entire archetypal endowment" in a collective

unconscious. The collective unconscious is a universal, shared consciousness that connects all human beings through inherent impulses, drives, and values, a “psychic system of a collective, universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals....[that] does not develop individually but is inherited” (Stevens 33). This realm of the unconscious is inaccessible to the conscious mind; we cannot recall the experiences that reside there because, individually, we did not experience them. They are the experiences, or ideals, of the species that have piled up over the generations and are “stored” in the collective unconscious. That we possess this inherent knowledge but cannot access it at will is an unconscious frustration of being human. The only aspect of consciousness that we can discover is the “power center” of the collective unconscious: the Self.

The Self represents the whole personality of an individual. According to Jung, the self is the whole of consciousness, or psyche, of an individual. The self includes three primary aspects: the ego, shadow and anima or animus. The ego represents that small portion of the mind that humans recognize as conscious thought, maturity and reason. In the realm of the ego, we identify who we are, what we think and believe about the world and our place in it. The shadow is the dark side of the self, the hiding place for repressed desires, instinctive drives and negative emotions; the “inferior side of the personality”. The anima or animus is the part of the self that harbors characteristics of the opposite sex, female and male respectively; a man has an anima and a woman an animus lurking in the depths of his/her self. Jung argued that the goal of the individual is to reach a balance or recognition of the different aspects of self; he called the process of understanding the self “individuation” or “self-actualization”. To reach individuation, an individual must recognize, confront and assimilate the ego, anima (us) and shadow into the larger realm of the self, achieving a new level of consciousness. Instead of being aware of only the ego personality, an individual becomes conscious of

the vast reaches of the self. "The meaning of 'whole' or 'wholeness' is to make holy or to heal....It is the way to the total being, to the treasure which suffering mankind is forever seeking"(Jung *Symbolic Life* 123). Glenna Davis Sloan, in *The Child as Critic*, indicates that "literature is a continuous quest to rediscover a lost perfection, a truly human identity" (80). This "lost perfection" is understood as the archetype of the pre-lapsarian perfection of man and woman, the Garden of Eden, and the search for a return to the mythic time when 'truth' could be known. The archetypes of Self represent concepts that we, as individuals, cannot easily comprehend; we realize the experience of wholeness repeatedly only through metaphor. Consequently, for most of us, self-actualization comes only in epiphanic flashes of insight or self-knowledge. These instances, however fleeting, can be intensely meaningful and transforming.

According to Jung, the individual's desire to know the Self and reach into the depths of consciousness is the basis for all storytelling; we instinctively try to understand this deeper nature through metaphor. Common metaphors that communicate our unconscious knowledge are repeated throughout mythology and literature as archetypes that appeal to the very basic nature of our human consciousness. Through continual storytelling, each generation expands upon the thoughts and knowledge of the preceding ones, but the core symbolic terms representing concepts that cannot be defined or fully comprehended remain much unchanged; they are produced by the human psyche unconsciously and spontaneously. Therefore, we instinctively respond to these images when we see or hear them in a story. Terry Eagleton emphasizes this concept in his discussion of archetypal theory: "when we evaluate [literature] we are speaking of ourselves....The modes and myths of literature are transhistorical, collapsing history to sameness or a set of variations on the same themes...an expression of those fundamental human desires which have given rise to civilization itself. [Meaning] is not to be seen as the self-expression of individual

authors, who are no more than functions of this universal system: it springs from the collective subject of the human race itself, which is how it comes to embody ‘archetypes’ or figures of universal significance” (80-1).

Obviously an archetypal approach incorporates elements of other theoretical approaches to literature, such as structuralist, psychoanalytic, and anthropological theory. The psychoanalytic elements are, of course, outlined above, and Frye acknowledges that “the search for archetypes is a kind of literary anthropology, concerned with the way that literature is informed by the pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth, and folktale” (“Archetypes of Literature” 1450). In addition, the search for and recognition of archetypal narrative and imagistic patterns is a part of the larger theoretical school of structuralism, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter IV. I did not purposefully delve into issues within the archetypal unit, but they did come up in discussion, as will become apparent in the rest of this chapter, and would also be interesting to investigate as part of an archetypal approach. When we applied theory to mythology and explore our own consciousness and sense of self in connection with construction meaning from text, we were certainly assuming a psychoanalytical stance. And discussion of cultural implications of mythology approximated an anthropological stance. I felt, however, that keeping our focus on archetypes and consciousness was enough for experimentation.

The Self in Reader-Response Theory

If, when one is assuming an archetypal stance, the archetypes in literature speak to the deepest notion of “self” in the reader, then the reader can be understood to be unconsciously using elements of his/her “self” to fill gaps in the text. Locating and understanding the implications of archetypes in a text is one way of conceiving of the constraints, or instructions, a text provides. “Patterns of imagery...derive from the

epiphanic moment, the flash on instantaneous comprehension” (Frye “Archetypes of Literature” 1452) that occurs when the reader orchestrates meaning-making strategies resulting in a defensible and coherent construction of meaning of the text. Because the reader must transact with the text in order to do so, archetypal theory can be considered as response-based. This aspect of archetypal theory is indicated by Northrop Frye, who understood an archetype to be “a typical or recurring image...[which] thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary *experience*” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 99; emphasis added). While the reader uses what he/she already knows about him/her self to construct meaning, literature also helps the reader move toward further self-knowledge, emphasizing the reciprocity between reader and text. The reader’s conceptions of individual self and universal self in constructing meaning create tension, consequently “the self is always presented as divided, as the site of contesting forces...the result is a relationship of homology between the inner and outer landscapes, both of which contain a core element of truth and knowledge” (Fish *Reader* 121). Knowing about Jung’s contributions to archetypal theory helps students to understand this divided nature of the self. They recognize how archetypes in literature appeal to a reader by providing the means to unify the self.

Heroic Narratives and the Hero’s Journey

The heroic epic clearly illustrates the representation of these psychological archetypes in a literary context. Jung argued that the unconscious mind recognizes archetypes as manifestations of the Self, and that we enjoy hero stories because they represent the path to self-actualization.

In Jungian criticism, a hero must realize his shadow exists so he can draw strength from it and utilize its positive energy to achieve individuation, while simultaneously overcoming its negative powers. Carl Jung explains: “In the struggle to

simultaneously overcoming its negative powers. Carl Jung explains: “In the struggle to achieve consciousness, this conflict is expressed by the contest between the archetypal hero and the cosmic powers of evil personified by dragons and other monsters” (*Man and Symbols* 118). Before the ego can triumph, it must master and assimilate the shadow. In the epic poem Beowulf, for example, Beowulf must overpower and dismember Grendel and the dragon to further his quest for self-actualization.

Grendel’s mother, however, represents the archetypal anima. The anima(us) usually presents him/herself symbolically as a figure to be overcome or revered, a perplexity or temptation for the hero. This aspect of the self may be more difficult to recognize than the shadow, for both the hero and the reader. For example, Beowulf must dive into the murky water of a black mere to reach Grendel’s mother, whereas Grendel just walked in the front door ready to fight. Since water represents the unconscious mind, Beowulf as ego descends deep within his consciousness to wrestle with and assimilate the female aspect of his psyche.

Once the hero completes the tasks of assimilation, he/she moves on to another level of existence or knowledge. He/she undergoes an enormous transformation by either dying, returning back to where he/she started as a much wiser person in order to tell his/her story, ascending to heaven, achieving enlightenment, etc. These events are metaphors for the ultimate psychic event of individuation, or complete self-knowledge. These metaphors represent our “conception of an ideal experience...which in one way or another seems to be the real goal of life” (Campbell *Hero* 245).

Teaching Strategies and Methods

The Historic, Heuristic, and “Radical” or Critical Approaches

It has long been my belief that it is impossible to “teach” either reading or

interpretation, that a teacher instead sets the occasion for learning reading and interpretive strategies. Frye supports this when he argues that it is “impossible to ‘learn literature’: one learns about it in a certain way, but what one learns, transitively, is the criticism of literature.” Similarly, Frye points out that the difficulty often felt in “teaching literature” arises from the fact that it cannot be done: “the criticism of literature is all that can be directly taught” (“Archetypes of Literature” 1446). It is the practice of teaching literary interpretation, and specific strategies for doing so, that is at the heart of the discussion about teaching literature in general, and incorporating literary theory into these practices is usually reserved for college-level literature classes.

In the following sections, I will define and briefly discuss an historic, or taxonomic, approach, an heuristic or “discovery” approach, and a “radical” or critical approach for teaching literary theory. I am using these terms as presented by D. G. Myers in “On the Teaching of Theory” (1994) because this article succinctly presents each approach. I include them here as an explanation for the kinds of instructional practices I followed throughout my research. Literary theorists, like Myers, Fish, and Eagleton, for example, are dubious about taxonomical or heuristic methods for teaching theory, arguing that they are overly reductionist. My argument is, however, that such methods constitute good teaching practice and each method contributes to a comprehensive and balanced literature curriculum. “Every organized body of knowledge can be learned progressively; and experience shows that there is also something progressive about the learning of literature” (Frye “Archetypes of Literature” 1445).

The historical survey approach to teaching theory presents each theory as a unique set of established facts; including, for example, specific background information regarding the historical time period, biographies of the leading theorists, and the

educational/literary climate of the time during which the theorist(s) proposed this theory. This approach is beneficial because it is convenient for organizing a syllabus or teaching unit, because many textbooks present theoretical material in this way, and because it reveals the evolution of thought and puts theory in a broader historical context. The “facts” of theory constitute a knowledge base that can be memorized, objectively assessed or tested, and used to readily translate texts according to the doctrines of the theory being studied. This method gives students something specific to look for in a text and helps them to construct meaning, even if at first this meaning may not be the students’ comprehension of the text, but an “authoritative” one. But students can begin to develop some confidence in their ability to “theorize” and move on to more complex activities.

If an historic approach is used in isolation, however, and emphasized by a reliance on anthologized simplifications, the teacher remains the authority on interpretation. Theory, compartmentalized in this way, becomes doctrine, discouraging authentic discussion and discovery by limiting students to a set interpretive criteria. Simple explanations or definitions of key words will not, in and of themselves, encourage comprehension or bring students closer to metacognition of interpretive strategies. As Myers puts it, such representations of theory “belong not to players...but to spectators and cheerleaders” (326).

An heuristic approach to teaching theory can be defined as “the use of theory to produce readings” (Myers 327), or the use of theory as an exploratory, problem-solving strategy for unlocking the meaning of a text. Stanley Fish advises “employing a set of heuristic questions, or a thematics...in such a way to produce a new or at least novel description of familiar material. Much of what is done in literary studies...conforms to this pattern” (Fish *Reader* 97). Heuristically teaching with theory allows teachers and students to use a particular theoretical approach as a way *in*

to the text, and theory becomes a way of reading or interpreting. Teaching theory in this way can help students recognize how they construct meaning by giving them a framework for understanding both the text itself and their interpretive process, allowing them to discover codes and structures that may have previously been “hidden” from them, enabling them to fill in gaps with information provided by theory as a “tool”. There is some risk of reductionism, or imposing authoritative readings on students if the heuristic practice is presented as *the* interpretive strategy to be used, not as one of many.

A “radical” or critical approach to teaching theory, on the other hand, does not seek to provide students with answers, but to empower them as it “reattaches the knowledge of how to *do* theory to knowledge that theory is *about* something in particular” (Myers 330; emphasis in original). Theoretical perspectives, then, are not separate and recognizable strategies, but ideologically based arguments for the various meanings readers construct from text. In teaching theory this way, the values and beliefs of a theoretical approach come under scrutiny; students can decide whether or not they “buy” a certain set of theoretical principles and ideals regarding the meaning of a text, giving theory a political position in the world of literature and education in general. Students explore who is privileged when a certain stance is assumed in constructing meaning from a text. A radical or critical approach can also be recognized as a cultural approach, calling into question traditional representations of cultural norms and ways of knowing. Theory then becomes an argument, a “reflective struggle” in which the readers “demand for proof and further defense...[introducing] students to the rough-and-tumble of critical argument, the open-endedness of genuine inquiry” (Myers 332). This is similar to Scholes’ idea of “criticism” as opposed to reading and interpretation, in which criticism “is a differentiation of the subjectivity of the critic [or reader] from that of the author, an assertion of another textual power against that of the

primary text” (40); this power can only come from a sense of confidence and experience in the realm of literature, not just the use of a certain strategy. Instead of ‘giving’ students a meaning, theory creates the possibilities of multiple meanings; students learn ways of *arguing* interpretation and empowering them to take on the challenge of doing so.

But this kind of teaching can lead to troubles of its own. Scholes acknowledges that “it may easily drift into the ridiculous pose of an indoctrination in freedom, an attempt to ‘program’ or condition people to behave independently” (41), a rather frightening thought for proponents of standardized testing. By its very nature, a radical or critical method for teaching theory refuses to force students into accepting a prescribed, or authoritative, stance in approaching a text. The problem with this, however, is that students are not given a theoretical model of something to look for in, or language to use for, constructing meaning from text. The result can be that students either devalue literature by formulating superficial interpretations, or they are puzzled about how anyone determines the meaning of text. It is ironic, because these are the very problems that theory as pedagogy intends to remedy.

To label methods in such a way is not so far removed from the labels traditionally applied to good teaching for most K-12 education professionals. I used a combination of the historic, heuristic and critical methods in structuring my lesson plans, but I was also following the hierarchy of learning model developed by Benjamin S. Bloom as a systematic, progressive approach to teaching theory. Bloom’s taxonomy begins with the literal knowledge of memorizing and recognizing, then moves through levels of comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and, finally the highest cognitive level, evaluation, in which students make “value decisions about issues, resolving controversies or differences of opinion” (Orlich 97). I sequentially designed

the archetypal unit to introduce students to archetypal theory, and also to situate them in the realm of theory in general. My hope was that once students had engaged in one school of theory they could generalize the concrete steps of theoretical reasoning and apply them to the subsequent schools of theory we studied. Understanding the methods I describe in this chapter as historic, heuristic and critical is instructive for examining the role of theory in the English classroom and the most expeditious ways of teaching it.

Teaching Archetypal Theory Historically

I first introduced archetypal theory to students with study guides that were clearly historic, factual and full of literal information. One of the study guides was an article from *Agora* magazine, detailing Jung's life, defining the term "archetype" and listing various archetypes and their respective "meanings". I provided literal reading questions to ensure that students would focus on what I deemed the most important bits of information in the article. The second study guide consisted of a brief definition of archetypal theory, with a list of images, character types, and plot structures for them to match to the corresponding "categories" of archetypes that I had defined (Figure 7). While I didn't insist that students group the archetypes exactly as I did, by emphasizing the acquisition of literal background I was assuming the responsibility for establishing prior knowledge of both literary convention and archetypal interpretation. I certainly assumed the role of authority on the archetypal significance of each image. The exercise was successful in that it helped students conceive of the patterns of archetypes and enabled them to practice identifying and interpreting them. I required students to keep the study guide as a reference throughout the unit as a reference; it became a useful source and we used it often. If they ran into trouble identifying archetypes in a literary work later, they could refer to this study guide for clues. In doing so, I was maintaining

control over their meaning-making strategies and they weren't yet making the leap into arguing a position they had assumed independently. This was fitting for the *beginning* of theoretical learning; I was providing the background, or prior knowledge, necessary for constructing meaning in this way, modeling the approach while students followed my lead, but my ultimate goal was for them to reach the level of independent interpretation.

ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM

This method of literary criticism (also known as Jungian Criticism) identifies common patterns in literature that appeal to the reader's subconscious drives and uses them as a basis for discussion and interpretation of the meaning of a literary work. The term *archetype*, coined by noted psychologist Carl Jung, literally means ancient/primitive pattern. A writer, poet or artist serves as a kind of spokesman for the rest of us, recognizing our need to understand who we are, where we come from and where we are going, and what is important to us. The writer, consciously or unconsciously, uses archetypes to help us relate to a story or character and therefore to understand ourselves.

Some common archetypes are:

objects or images
character types
patterns of events or plot designs

These are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature as well as myths, dreams, and even social behavior and rituals in which we take part. When these patterns are successfully used in a work of literature, the archetypal critic says, they evoke a profound response from the reader: he/she finds meaning in and enjoys the book, story or poem.

Identification Exercise: From the following list of common archetypes, decide which is an *object or image*, a *character type*, or a *pattern of events*. Write them under the appropriate heading above.

- | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Death and rebirth | 8. Good vs. Evil | 15. Tree |
| 2. Trickster | 9. Descent into abyss | 16. Birds |
| 3. the heroic quest | 10. Water | 17. Gardens |
| 4. Earth mother | 11. Forest | 18. Ritual Bathing |
| 5. Mountains | 12. Creation | 19. Changing Clothes |
| 6. Rivers | 13. Hero (protagonist) | 20. The journey or quest |
| 7. Fatal woman | 14. Anti-hero (antagonist) | |

Thinking About Archetypes:

1. Choose two of the archetypes from the preceding list. Cite a time in your life or in your reading when you have experienced this event, character or image. Describe the experience and explain how it was significant either in your life or in the story you were reading.
2. List some rituals of social behavior you have experienced or will experience. Why do we engage in these rituals? What significance do they have on our lives? Are these archetypal behaviors or patterns of behavior that help us to define ourselves? How are they defining?

Figure 7. Categories of Archetypes.

My next step in helping students understand the concepts of archetypal theory was to connect the various archetypal images listed in the study guides to Jung's conception of the self: the ego, the shadow and the anima or animus. These general or primary archetypes are manifested as the many different symbols and patterns, which we had already identified and discussed in the first two study guides, or, within the psyche as well as in a literary work. I called these *secondary* archetypes to help students understand that these images and narrative patterns represented the psychic processes of the primary Jungian self. For example, the primary archetype of the ego can manifest itself as the secondary archetype of hero or protagonist, the anima as a

beautiful maiden or horrifying monster, the shadow as nameless evil or close friend and the self as a god or being who offers assistance and/or direction to the hero. Myths, stories and other literary works from around the world depict the individual's yearning for self-actualization as a hero/heroine who encounters obstacles and conflict. These basic characters and elements of plot then serve as expressions of how we experience the different aspects of our psyche. It is the representation of these archetypes, and their role in the continuing search for self-knowledge involving both author and reader, that interest the Jungian or archetypal critic. When students understand the concept of primary self archetypes, they can recognize the underlying meaning of secondary archetypes and what they represent. Then they are well on their way to cracking the symbolic code Frye referred to earlier.

I helped students comprehend all of this by using a concept map (Figure 8).

THE JUNGIAN CONCEPT OF SELF: Archetypes of Consciousness

The **secondary** archetypes you previously identified symbolize different aspects of the reader's *psyche*, or conscious and unconscious mind. The following terms are the **primary** archetypes of consciousness. Just as all colors of the rainbow stem from the three basic primary colors, so do secondary archetypes of image, character, and plot stem from the primary elements of the reader's interaction with the story. These patterns are instinctively interpreted by the reader: he/she has an emotional response and finds meaning in the story.

1. **Self:** The entire (conscious and unconscious) being of an individual including the collective unconscious.
2. **Collective Unconscious:** resides deep within the unconscious mind; to recognize this is to achieve the ultimate experience (enlightenment, nirvana, etc.), to become self-actualized.
3. **Ego:** The conscious mind; who we believe we are
4. **Anima:** Feminine impulses within the male subconscious
5. **Animus:** Male impulses with the female subconscious
6. **Shadow:** the opposite of the Ego; the negative or dark side
7. **Individuation:** the final goal of complete self-knowledge

The following diagram represents an individual's psyche. The primary archetypes are indicated in bold; how many secondary archetypes (listed on the "Archetypal Criticism" worksheet) can you place with the appropriate primary archetype? The numbers in each area provide you with clues to how many secondary archetypes should be matched with each primary one

JUNGIAN "SELF" DIAGRAM (answer key)

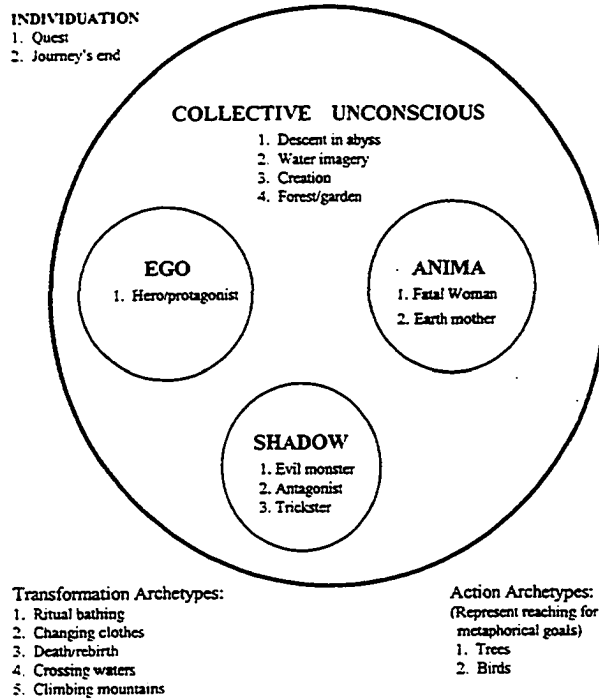


Figure 8: Jungian "Primary" and "Secondary" Archetypes of Self.

Students began by taking out the list of secondary archetypes from the "Archetypal Criticism" study guide we had completed earlier and referred to the "Jungian Concept of Self" diagram and vocabulary (included here with the answers filled in, but I gave students a blank one) as a visual representation of the "layers" of archetypes. Using both of these guides, I instructed students to fill in the blanks on the Self worksheet, connecting the secondary archetypes to the primary archetypes from the psyche at the "core" of the metaphorical code. The "Self" diagram has the correct number of blank spaces for corresponding images to guide students as they began classification. For example, the Shadow has three blanks, one for antagonist, one for trickster, and one for

evil monster. The Ego has only one blank: for the hero. Students simply match the archetypes listed to the psychological aspect they best represent. Again, my goal was to establish literal knowledge for students; I still maintained control of interpretation and the role of authority. Of course, it could be argued that some of these images could fit with various psychological aspects; the trickster could, in fact, be the ego in some narrative structures. But this particular assignment was enormously useful in that it helped students understand basically and specifically the archetypal system of literary theory. When we had filled in the blanks, students had a concept map to help them visualize this metaphorical code and develop the skills to crack it. Argument over the finer points of classification made for great discussion later, as students began to practice archetypal criticism in earnest. This study guide also became a vital source of information as we continued exploring archetypal interpretation as students learned to identify critical metaphors and see the underlying logic in interpreting them. Again, as a first step this literal, historic approach to teaching theory proved to be useful.

I introduced the concept of the heroic narrative structure by asking students to brainstorm heroic characteristics, then note the archetypal patterns in most heroic tales and analyze their response to them. Then students traced these patterns back to the Jungian idea of self. Did the evil character fit the shadow archetypal pattern? Did the hero overcome evil obstacles? Students recognized the hero genre readily, and had no trouble brainstorming different heroes from current movies and other stories they have read. They were quick to understand these characters and events as secondary archetypes, but the stretch to primary archetypes still required some guidance. I also recognized that students needed the opportunity to internalize aspects of the heroic by working through their own ideas, not just those that I had given them. We started with a small and familiar project: they created their own heroes. Using colored paper, markers, scissors, glue, magazines and the other basic tools of the trade, we took a day in class to

design a perfect hero. Students worked in small groups; each group gave their hero a name, told a brief tale about his/her exploits and explained his/her heroic qualities.

The heroes developed predictably, often with cartoonish emphasis. They ranged from superhero types with muscles like rocks protruding absurdly from their bodies to an ordinary “nerd” with extraordinary (and secret) powers with a brain so large it needed to be supported with special prosthetic. One group presented a hero that resembles a pro wrestler, complete with face paint and bravado, while another designed a quiet network engineer who can solve anything using a computer and the Internet.

“How can these heroes, all so different, still be a ‘perfect’ hero?” I ask them. “What do they have in common?”

Several students volunteer answers: “they’re really strong or really smart”; “they’re brave”; “they win fights”; “they solve problems”; “They beat the bad guy”.

“Then why are they all so different?”

“Because we’re all different.” says Tim.

“Some of your heroes have powers that humans don’t have, like superheroes. What is the difference between a superhero and a hero?”

“A superhero isn’t real. I know that I can’t do any of the things a superhero can.” says another Susan. “They don’t really exist. There are heroes who are more like people who really lived.”

“Which heroes were more inspiring to you?”

“The ones who are more like real people, who really did something. Like I wish I could be.”

“No way!” says Marcus. “I want to be superman! I want to have lasers come out of my fingers and zap the school!”

Once students had worked through this study guide, they were ready for the

crux of the unit: understanding the connection between the archetype of the collective unconscious and the archetype as an interpretive tool for the study of literature. I tested their views about the nature of heroes, identifying archetypal patterns and constructing meaning from text, using them as an interpretive tool by assigning some heroic folk tales from different cultures. We read our anthologized versions of the Egyptian tale of “Osiris and Isis,” the Japanese folk tale “Green Willow”, the German folk tale “The White Snake” (Albert 35-51). I also wanted to encourage students to talk about the archetypes, so students read all three tales within small groups. Each group was to informally discuss the secondary archetypes they identified and trace them back to the primary archetypes, thinking about what they might mean on a deeper level. They recognized and isolated specific images and discussed their significance in a group setting and enjoyed doing so, feeling that they had something to say about these tales.

I assigned a five-paragraph essay. Students identified archetypal characters and events, trying to trace these archetypes back to the archetypes of the psyche. Their writing was focused and precise, indicating they had derived meaning from each story. They had discovered bits of interpretive language with which to write about their responses, and the writing samples included here illustrate that students understood the basic concepts of archetypes. However, they stayed squarely within the safety of the story without delving into how those images and patterns elicited a response from them, and their writing was tentative. These excerpts are typical of the student essays:

the image of the tree and marriage are repeated throughout and provide vital insights into the characters lives. The tree symbolizes the growth of the characters throughout the myth and the marriage is part of that growth.... The tree is a symbol of growth, fertility, creativity and regeneration. In each myth the tree symbolizes the love between the characters, it grows and the life of the tree follows the patterns of life for the characters. The marriage symbolizes the end of the search for each characters soulmate. Jackie — 11th grade

As seen in Osiris and Isis, Green Willow, and The White Snake,

the ego, shadow and anima are all tied together to form a myth. Each archetype, or pattern, is brought out in a story. If one archetype were to be missing, the story would be left incomplete. The main character, the ego, creates a quest giving him/herself a goal to achieve. The shadow puts up obstacles creating challenges and barriers for the ego to break down. The anima balances the story by filling a void in the ego's life, giving him/her a reason to fight, a reason to fulfill their quest. They all need each other. Matt

The archetype of the forest is important because it is not only the drop-off point at which the heroes...begin their quest, but it also changes their lives and helps them to grow and achieve a personal paradise that all people subconsciously strive for. Sara

Students had identified archetypes and made a connection to Jung's theories, even if their writing lacked a certain depth, enthusiasm, and authenticity of voice. Even though their writing read like book reports and lacked a sense of personal engagement with the tales, they were practicing archetypal theory, talking about the folktales in this theoretical language, and constructing meaning from the text. Upon reflection now, I find it interesting that I relied both on my literature anthology and the traditionally structured five-paragraph essay when I introduced theory through historical methods, maintaining control over student learning and transaction with textual material. It was my first time teaching theory, and the safety of teaching it in such a structured environment was reassuring. I found that using an historical or literal approach essentially reproduced itself in student's response: they responded literally and historically, but developed a certain confidence and the prior knowledge necessary to move on to the next step.

Heuristically Teaching Archetypal Theory

While the historic or taxonomic methods I had been using did serve to extend students' prior knowledge, the heuristic methods I will describe here helped students find the means to say something more significant about the myths and stories we read and

challenged them to become more cognitive of using an interpretive method. The archetypal approach made sense and enhanced our study of mythology by giving it a higher purpose (no pun intended). At times students took a discussion of literature into the realm of the radical on their own, which indicates that heuristics provided them with the framework to engage in theoretical interpretation at a higher cognitive level.

Creation and origin mythology was an appropriate starting point, providing the means to further examine archetypes quickly because the myths are short and narrative patterns are more obvious than in longer, more complex texts. In addition, the archetypal patterns inherent in creation and origin mythology were readily adaptable into heuristic activities requiring higher level thinking skills, allowing students to engage in more of their own discovery, rather than relying on me to provide the more rigid structure of historic facts. Our study of the heroic journey was modeled after Joseph Campbell, a noted comparative mythologist and Jungian scholar, and his analysis of the narrative structure of heroic epics in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* (1968). His theories and diagrams provided a useful entry into an archetypal approach to the epic of *Gilgamesh*. While I had maintained control and authority in our study of archetypes so far, we had reached the point at which it was time for me to allow students to discover their own ways of constructing meaning.

Creation and Origin Mythology

The first heuristic I developed used archetypes of creation and origin inherent in cultural creation and origin mythology as an interpretive approach. Creation mythology, of course, describes the genesis of the earth and the life forms that exist on it. Origin mythology consists of stories about how things came to be, the introduction of evil into, and the subsequent destruction of, the newly created world. While details in such myths vary according to cultural and environmental factors, the basic archetypes of creation,

origin, and destruction are remarkably similar. These creation patterns, also called cosmogonic elements, are the essential archetypes of origin mythology from all world cultures. I used the cosmogonic elements as an heuristic, first asking students to read several creation myths from various cultures and list the similarities they found. After they had discussed their lists in small groups, I brought them back together and they brainstormed similarities as a class while I recorded their observations on the chalkboard. Then we categorized them into the big six: the (1) Beginning-less God who broods over the (2) Void and creates or discovers (3) Water and utters the (4) Sacred Sound, or word, over the (5) Cosmic Egg to create life with a (6) Body Part. I provided the six categories, while students decided which characteristic of the myths went in each one. The cosmogonic elements served as an heuristic, allowing *students* to discover these similarities as archetypes; I did not provide a list in the same way as I had provided a list of archetypal patterns and images. But having the six cosmogonic categories helped students organize these archetypes into a basic pattern. Students learned to identify common archetypal patterns in creation and origin myths, and eventually recognized archetypes as metaphors for something difficult to comprehend: the origin of life and therefore of human consciousness.

I assigned “Creating Creation: Writing Your Own Myth” (Figure 9), requiring students to write their own creation myths and experiment with myth as metaphor.

Creating Creation: Writing Your Own Myth

For this assignment, you'll write your own creations myth and present the story to the class. Model your creation on the myths we've read already, making sure you include all six of the cosmogonic elements we identified.

You will be graded on the following criteria:

- six elements included
- creativity of your myth
- an explanation of the culture you've created
- visual aids for storytelling
- written version to turn in

You will have 10 minutes to present your myth in class. Your visual aid should enhance the telling of your tale.

Figure 9. Creating Creation: Writing Your Own Myth.

They would have 10 minutes to tell their story of creation to the rest of the class, using visual aids to enhance their storytelling. I required them to include the six cosmogonic elements, an explanation of the culture they had created, and a written discussion of the archetypal relevance of the cosmogonic elements. I assessed them primarily on level of creativity and demonstrated knowledge of the archetypal elements of their myths.

When the time came to present their stories, students clearly exhibited that they had extended their knowledge of archetypal theory into their created worlds. This was memorably evident when one group of three boys presented their myth. They took center stage in the front of the classroom after hurriedly preparing a large poster, white ceramic bowl, and a pitcher of water as visuals for their presentation. They seemed a bit nervous, but I didn't miss their sly glances at the audience just before they began. The

narrator started: "Before there was time, before there was motion, before there was food, there was the Big One. He felt a strange sensation within himself as he gazed at the pure white nothingness around him, with only the sound of water in his ears." One boy swished the water around in the pitcher for sound effect. "He was moved to create new sterile white walls around the water which he called the Big Bowl." Another boy ceremoniously presented the empty bowl. "He saw that the Big Bowl was filled with water, and it was good." They paused dramatically after pouring the water into the bowl. Giggles broke out across the class as the metaphor for creation began to take shape: They had created their new world in a toilet bowl.

They watched me cringe as they described the sacred sound and told of the creation of the "cosmic egg" as it dropped into the bowl. "This is our start for archetypal criticism?!" I thought. "How will we make it through discussions of Joseph Campbell?" I wondered for a brief moment if perhaps I hadn't given them a bit too much wiggle room in the assignment; should I stand up and be outraged? But I was also having trouble keeping a straight face. I had to admire their creativity and, yes, their sense of fun and play with archetypes; only teenage boys could have come up with this idea. After all, that they had "creatively" met the requirements of the assignment and taken the prior knowledge of archetypes I had so carefully prepared for them and made it their own. We had a good laugh while the next group prepared to present. This group had created a string of interconnected Crayola markers to illustrate the genesis of their society (der and wolley joined together create egnaro, and so on). Using the cosmogonic elements as an heuristic clearly inspired students to think creatively. I also had more flexibility in instructional methods, of course, and less control over the results.

After the last group had presented, I asked students to comment on what they had seen. They laughed about the funny ones and marveled at the different life forms that made it into our class. I assigned a group response question: Did the myth

create your culture or did your culture create the myth? They were stumped for a minute, but started thinking about how they actually came up with their stories. Some groups had to envision a culture before they could construct a myth they thought would be appropriate for that culture's genesis, while other groups quickly had their myth written and envisioned the culture that would spring from such a genesis. The discussion of their individual myth genesis turned to the origins of mythology. Did different societies or cultures create their myths in an attempt to impose order on the world, or did the ancient stories spawn societies in their individual images? What is a myth really? This is the point at which students can begin to explore archetypes in myths as metaphors for universal events or beings that we cannot comprehend or explain.

We did get into some murky areas during the discussion of these questions, and it was here that we first began to critically discuss theory. I carefully defined the term "myth" as "a story that gives people a code to live by," rather than a story that wasn't true, at the beginning of this activity. Because we were talking about issues of genesis, and we did read the biblical story of genesis as part of this unit, I was wary of offending religious sensibilities. It is very true that cultural myths help us to identify who we are and where we came from, and the individual and cultural sense of self or identity is tangled up in cultural mythology. Some students feel strongly about their religious background and have difficulty accepting the validity of the different cultural mythologies we read. But as I taught the archetypal method and its application to creation mythology, only one student openly voiced her religious objections, essentially wanting to reduce the whole concept to a discussion about Creation vs. Evolution. I pointed out that this was a theoretical approach to the text, not an ideological argument for one theory of man's genesis over another. To argue that reading myths from an archetypal perspective is irreligious or in some way blasphemy is to entirely miss the

point of recognizing theory at all. Moreover, focusing on the archetype of creation itself has little to do with evolution. Fish says “a theory is a special achievement of consciousness...something you can have—you can wield them and hold them at a distance” (Fish *Reader* 98). In other words, aspects of the reader’s sense of self and cultural identity are crucial elements in constructing meaning from text, as discussed in the last chapter. But assuming an archetypal stance in approaching the textual situations described here requires the readers to “hold them at a distance,” or to be metacognitively aware of how they are constructing meaning from the text, not dictating what that meaning should be; it is cultural or personal ideology that leads to religious belief, not just literature. I decided I would not raise the argument that literature and theory have come to replace religion, as argued by modern literary theorists.

But the incident raised a good point about using literary criticism as a central theme; I never emphasized a *final* reading, nor did I accept just any interpretation. If a student disagreed with an interpretation, in reality he/she only disagreed with the *approach*, not necessarily with the work, me, or other members of the class. The archetypes of creation mythology certainly did give us ways of reading and the impetus for discussion. This is the effect of moving from historic to heuristic study; when I relaxed my control on interpretation of the text, I also gave up being the authority, an entirely logical and beneficial result. As soon as I made that move, students began to take more responsibility for their readings and their inquiry moved discussion to a more radical level. Scholes recognized this movement when he described how “Interpretation, when it looks toward reading [is in] the mode of listening and obedience; when it looks toward criticism...is in the negative mode, the mode of suspicion and rigor” (48). Students haven’t yet learned to distance themselves in a critical discussion of interpretation, wielding theory; interpreting the myths is either knowing the truth or it’s not. How could we ever come to a consensus on the subject of the creation or evolution of

humanity? The student who objected that year came to the conclusion that the similarities in the creation stories proved the Genesis account of creation must be true and the biblical story was the basis for all other mythology. Other students protested, wanting to continue the argument; I hesitated for a moment, ready to continue, but looked at the clock, my calendar and my contract, said “lovely!” with a sigh of relief and moved on.

After mastering the concept of the archetypal creation, students move on to the archetypal entrance of evil and destruction in mythology, also known as “origin myths.” Origin myths continue or complete the creation of the world, describing how the world was changed as new things came into existence (like fire, plants, mountains, etc.), enhanced or destroyed. I patterned activities after the creation myth project; students read several origin myths, listed and responded to similarities, brainstormed in class and organized them into the four categories: the great flood, the god’s disgust with earthly beings, the paradise/hades system of opposition (good vs. evil), and the character of the trickster.

I assigned the Destruction Myth Project (Figure 10) telling students they had to destroy their creation and then tell the story of that destruction.

Destruction Myth (Origin Myth)

After you have carefully created your society you must destroy it.

- include four origin archetypes
- explain the introduction of evil
- explain how your culture is changed and enhanced by the experience
- present a brief (5 minute) presentation to tell your destruction story to the class.

Response:

Why are destruction myths also called origin myths? What does that say about the nature of destruction? Did your myth end on a negative or positive note?

Figure 10. Destruction Myth.

In the process, they had to extend the metaphors they created. I assessed them on inclusion of the origin archetypes, the introduction of evil into the world, and a written explanation of how their culture was changed and enhanced by the experience. But I did not tell them they had to leave the door open for the reconstruction of a good and complete society, but interestingly, most of the stories they presented ended on a hopeful note. Destruction came in as many shapes and forms as creation, but by and large students would end their myth with a sense of hope. The boys with the toilet world flushed, and a new germ-free environment was created with the help of the Great One: Lysol. The Crayola group destroyed the world with a monster hurricane and flood, then ended with all the colors of the rainbow. It seemed to be almost instinctive for them that, as the new world is created, the possibility of a better life for the inhabitants exists. I emphasized this, laying the groundwork for discussing archetypes of transformation and renewal that would come later in the unit.

These myth projects opened for discussion the significance of archetypal patterns and what they mean to us, raising some profound questions. Did the student myths also communicate universal truths? What did their metaphors represent? How were they similar to the myths we read? The symbiotic relationship between destruction and creation provided fodder for discussion. Why must evil exist in every society's origin myth? How do we recognize goodness if there is no evil present in the world? Creation must occur for destruction to be possible, destruction must occur for the possibility of creating a better world. Students were engaged, and the transition into deeper theoretical ideas seemed less of a stretch.

Sometimes I assigned a short story or poem for analysis to assess student competency in archetypal theories. One story that works well is Gabriela Mistral's "Why Reeds Are Hollow". This story is very short, so one class period allows enough time for reading and interpretation; we returned to this story several times over the course of the year to apply and compare different theoretical approaches. It contains both obvious and subtle archetypes so students of various levels can feel challenged and successful. The object was for students to locate, examine, and interpret archetypal characters and/or events in the story during one class period. The prompt for the piece didn't need to be long or elaborate at this point; students were simply instructed to interpret the story/poem from an archetypal perspective. Because students were becoming more aware of their interpretive processes, they wrote in their own voices and responses became more authentic as students became more engaged with their reading. I knew we were accomplishing something when I received responses like David's:

From an archetypal approach, this is a story of death and rebirth. In the beginning, everything is alive, but soon things die because the reeds are greedy and want to be equally as tall as the trees. After six months, however, the land is reborn "Nature—generous always—repaired the damage in six months." At the time, the new order is established by "the River God [who] appeared after a long absence and, rejoicing, sang of a new era." The river is an archetype because it represents the

transitional phases of life and the flowing of time into eternity. There was a transitional phase of life when things died and came back. Nature is supposed to be forever like the irreversible passage of time.

The Heroic Journey

The next heuristic I introduced was Joseph Campbell's heroic cycle. First, I showed The Power of Myth: Episode I "The Hero's Journey" with Campbell and T.V. reporter Bill Moyers (Mystic Fire Productions, 1988). In the video, Campbell discusses all the major archetypes and uses them to interpret many different myths and folktales. The discussion provides several great examples of archetypal interpretation. The video appeals to students because it includes some great storytelling, clips from Star Wars, recent historical events, and lots of music. Students responded enthusiastically when Campbell encouraged all of us to "Follow your bliss!"

I capitalized on their enthusiasm for Joseph Campbell and the idea of following their bliss. So we examined the heroic journey of our own lives before focusing on heroes far removed from our place and time. I asked them to think about the school year as a journey. What tasks and/or obstacles did they have to overcome? What rites of passage? How did they change or transform? I directed them to free-write on either the journey of a year, a journey of a day or even the entire four year journey of high school.

Students volunteer all kinds of heroic acts they survive in high school. "Eating the lunches!" says one. Others chime in. "Getting through [football, soccer, track] season", "passing Calculus", "learning to drive", "going on your first date", "surviving a fight", "walking into the cafeteria all alone", "writing the research paper".

“Take out your lists of heroic traits and find a partner. Compare the heroic traits listed on your study guide with your partner’s list of school-year tasks. List the traits that you see him/her demonstrating as he/she gets through a year or a day of school. For example, if Joe has to pass Calculus successfully, that requires heroic stamina and brain power. Keep going from there.”

They get it , and begin comparing each other’s lists. “You’re a hero, man!” says Betsy to her partner. “You can do all these things!”

“How have these obstacles changed you?” I ask.

“I haven’t changed at all” shrugs Tim. “I just get through it.” His neighbor, Sarah, retorts “Then you need more obstacles!”

I asked them to identify their partner’s heroic stature rather than their own at first for objectivity’s sake. Many students had difficulty identifying themselves as heroes, while others wanted to exaggerate their heroic exploits. Once they compared their own and their partners heroic traits required to make it through the journey of school, reluctant students could concede heroic stature and the more self-assured could justifiably proclaim it to the world. When they had compared notes, I asked them to respond to their heroics. Did they feel like heroes? How would they continue on their journeys? How were their own heroic traits similar to those of the hero they created? What “dragons” had they slain already? What dragons were looming in the near future? I hoped students would recognize aspects of themselves within the heroes they often admire and could use that self-knowledge when they read our next work: the heroic epic. Maybe they would identify with the hero in a fundamental way, now that they saw themselves as somewhat heroic, too. When we talked about a hero’s perseverance in overcoming obstacles and subsequent transformation, I encouraged students to internalize this ideal into their own heroic selves. Besides, this also emphasized the Jungian theory that the archetypes of heroes appealed to all of us; we

love heroes because in reality we are all engaged in the heroic struggle of life. I showed students Campbell's diagram of the heroic cycle (Hero 135), and we talked about the heroes they had listed earlier. Would they designate various heroes as spiritual, reluctant or physical? Could they trace this heroic journey to see if they fit with Campbell's ideas?

Studying *Gilgamesh* encouraged students to look more closely at specific archetypes in the hero motif. It is important to note it is not essential that *Gilgamesh* is used here as the epic text, actually any of the heroic epics will work. Methods outlined here are appropriate and easily adaptable to various world epics outlined in any curriculum. This way, students identify secondary archetypes on their own, and classroom discussion and activities emphasize connections to primary archetypes. *Gilgamesh*, is a rich tale full of adventure, imagery, and; therefore, archetypes, making it an excellent vehicle for accessible archetypal evaluation.

The story of *Gilgamesh* is an heroic epic from ancient Mesopotamia and involves a cast of gods, goddesses, men, monsters, and animals. Found in most World Literature anthologies, extensive myth and legend anthologies, or hero anthologies, the epic has been widely translated in forms varying from simplified prose narratives to highly complex analyses of poetry and variants. I used a combination of the excerpts in the Holt, Rinehart and Winston *World Mythology* text and supplemental passages from both David Ferry's (1992) and John Gardner's (1984) translations. The textbook's prose translation is easy to read, Ferry's is accessible poetry and Gardner's is very detailed with many critical sources that a teacher might find useful.

We started with the "Heroic Quest: Diagramming the Hero's Journey" (Figure 11), a study guide to help them clarify ideas as we read *Gilgamesh*. The guide is versatile enough to work with any epic text; we used it for *Siddhartha* later in the unit. Following the guide helped students to focus their reading, but wasn't as restrictive in

its scope as the historic study guides had been. Instead, this is an heuristic to help guide their response, not dictate it. I required students to keep a log of archetypal events in the epic they considered important to the development of character and narrative structure. Using these events, students created a diagram of the heroic quest, modeled somewhat on Campbell's heroic cycle. I encouraged them to visualize Gilgamesh's heroic path, designing its structural representation as they imagined it should look. Creating a diagram for Gilgamesh's heroic cycle was a creative way for students to understand the patterns of the epic, and is useful for comparisons later with *Star Wars* and *Siddhartha*. We worked in small groups, sharing various diagrams in class, but this could easily be accomplished as an individual project. Most groups began with circular diagrams (it is the heroic cycle, after all!), but soon began to branch out into angles and arcs as Gilgamesh continued on his quest.

HEROIC QUEST ARCHETYPES:
Diagram the hero's journey

Mythologists have noted that most heroic quests contain some very similar archetypal plot characteristics and events, many of which are outlined in Joseph Campbell's books and comments. Archetypal Criticism invites comparison of heroic quest to find the deeper significance of the hero to the reader.

Part I: Archetype Log

Your assignment now is to keep a log of archetypal events in which the hero is involved as you are reading/viewing the hero tale. The following archetypal events should be noted as you critically follow the quest:

- The call to adventure: is this a reluctant, physical or spiritual hero? What event(s) starts the adventure?
- Threshold of adventure: when does the hero jump off into the unknown? Where is the point of no return?
- Descent into the abyss: when does hero find himself at his lowest point? Is it a physical or spiritual abyss?
- Slaying monsters/dragons: how many obstacles lie in the hero's path? How does he meet these obstacles?
- Transformations: how many times does the hero undergo a change? Are they physical or spiritual changes?
- Look for change of clothes, ritual bathing, crossing of rivers or mountains, etc...
- The return: does the hero return to the point from which he started? How is he different at the end?

Character types are also important to the archetypal pattern of a story. In addition to plot design, record different characters and the primary archetypes they represent as you experience the story. You should note the following archetypes:

- ego: usually the main character, the hero
- shadow: the adversary of the hero
- anima/us: the character of the opposite sex that is somehow involved with the hero

Part II: Diagram the Quest

Once you have noted the archetypal events and characters listed above, you are ready to begin to construct your diagram of this specific heroic quest and its archetypal significance. Your diagram may be in any shape or form, but it must be logical for your hero's journey. Be sure you include the archetypes you have noted and clearly label them. You may construct this diagram as a model, poster, drawing, etc... But the end result should reflect careful thought, creativity and neatness.

Response:
How does this hero tale compare to others you have read/viewed? Could you use the model you've created to

Figure 11. Diagramming the Hero.

The first step in understanding an epic archetypically is to establish the cast of characters. The secondary archetypes of the hero, the sidekick, the helpful god or goddess, the villains or monsters, and the love interest are all symbolic of the primary archetypes of the unconscious mind. In this case, obviously Gilgamesh, the two parts man and one part god king of Uruk, is the hero. He was created by the gods to be perfect: he is beautiful, strong, brave, and intelligent, but unfortunately a very arrogant and crass ruler. Because of his arrogance, his people ask the gods to humble him by sending a stronger man to challenge his authority. The gods comply by creating

Enkidu, a wild man from the woods, out of their saliva and some dirt and pine needles. Enkidu comes out of the woods to challenge Gilgamesh to a wrestling match, which Gilgamesh wins. The god, Shamash, is Gilgamesh's guiding force and helps him in times of trouble. Students who have had some experience with archetypes already begin to notice evident patterns. Enkidu, wild, dirty, and aggressive and therefore an easily recognizable shadow, comes from the forest, an archetype symbolizing the unconscious mind. Because Gilgamesh wins the wrestling match, he has essentially overpowered his shadow and assimilated him into the conscious area of his self, his first step towards individuation or self-knowledge. After he is beaten in the wrestling match, Enkidu complements Gilgamesh's persona. Consequently, Gilgamesh is a more fair and just ruler because Enkidu becomes his loyal and trusted sidekick and helps him to see both sides of any issue. This is Gilgamesh's first transformation, or his first step on the road to individuation or self-knowledge.

Because Gilgamesh recognizes Enkidu as his shadow or alter-ego, he is devastated when Enkidu dies. In essence, a part of his consciousness has been taken from him. The death of Enkidu provides Gilgamesh with his quest for immortality because he is afraid to die; Enkidu glimpsed the underworld in a dream and found it to be a desolate place. Students should recognize several archetypal patterns in this section of the epic. First, Enkidu's dream is the archetypal descent into the underworld or the descent deep into the subconscious to confront one of mankind's deepest fears: the unknown transformation of death, a pattern all heroes in mythology undergo. Second, just as his fear of the unknown was exemplified in the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh still greatly fears the unknown in the world of death, an indication to the reader that he is not fully self-actualized and still much to overcome.

The final section of the epic completes the heroic cycle as Gilgamesh finds Utnapishtim, the only human who has been granted immortality, and returns to Uruk as

a wiser man to write down his story. Students recognized the archetypes of the flood, river, the flower, ritual bathing and changing of clothes, and Gilgamesh's deep descent into unconsciousness as he dives into the river to retrieve the magic plant. It is not insignificant that a serpent steals the plant; snakes are archetypal tricksters, and it is the snake who sheds his skin in continual transformation to become "new" again.

During the reading of this rich tale of adventure, the logic of archetypal evaluation truly dawned on students. I love the time we spend on Gilgamesh because students truly begin to apply archetypal images and events to their own lives. Take the day Sherri bounced into class with the movie *Hook*, starring Robin Williams, as an example:

"I watched this with the kids I babysat last night. I can't believe how many archetypes are in this movie!" she gushed, breathlessly. "At the beginning, Peter doesn't even know who he is, and he doesn't really believe what everyone says until he gets hit in the head with a baseball. Then he descends into the cave under the tree, looks into the water and bam! suddenly knows who he is! That's just like the other heroes; he has to look into his unconscious mind and he can't do it all by himself. This is so cool. I was jumping up and down, the kids thought I was nuts!"

Sheri's friend Melissa attests to her enthusiasm. "Yeah, she called me then. She kept saying 'Archetypes, archetypes!' It was so funny!"

"Can we watch the part? I have the tape set in the right place. It will only take a few minutes. Please?" The class clamors for the movie. So we pop it in the VCR and go. She was right. The heroic descent into the abyss was perfectly illustrated. I just sat quietly as the class discussed Peter's epiphany and sudden actualization. "He's changed forever." says Mike. "I've seen this before; he throws away his cell phone and turns into a great dad." I'm reminded of Betsy, the student who came to class one day after seeing *The Fugitive*. "I see these things everywhere!" she had sighed. This

is a crucial insight; students were generalizing the tenets of archetypal theory into other texts and areas of their lives. Moreover, they were cognitively *theorizing*, so when we moved on to different schools of literary theory they would already have a knowledge base from which to work. This was evident in another brief classroom exchange:

“You know, lots of the stories I read when I was kid had these things in them.” muses Angie. “Think of *Alice in Wonderland*, or *The Wizard of Oz*. Alice and Dorothy go through the same things.”

“Why do these stories appeal to us?” I ask.

“Because we all go through the same thing! We are always trying to figure out who we are and what we want.”

“And all of the people in these stories get to figure it out by the end.”

When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, he is also a changed man. He is no longer a crass young ruler, but a wise and gracious king who spends his last years writing his story to enlighten future generations. This is the archetypal return; the hero comes back to the place he began as a self-actualized and mature individual. This raises the question: Did Gilgamesh complete his quest? Taken literally, no he didn't. He did not bring back the secret of immortality. But he did overcome his fears, mature into a wise and fair ruler, and understand who and what he really is. Some students argued that he did find the ultimate secret to immortality: he wrote down his story and we were still talking about and learning from him, therefore he was immortal. It made for an interesting class discussion and indicated that students were understanding the heroic cycle as a metaphor for our own journey through life. Just as the creation myths presented the “unknowable” through metaphor, so does the heroic epic. Why must we be born only to grow old and die? What are we put on this earth to accomplish? Why does the human race seem to make many of the same mistakes over and over again? We pulled out the personal hero responses again. How is the journey through the

school year similar to Gilgamesh's journey? How is each student the same or different at the end of the year? What does this mean about the importance of the journey?

Another epic tale that clearly illustrates epic and archetypal pattern is, of course, the *Star Wars* trilogy. Watching *Star Wars* turned out to be a great way to capitalize on student interest in archetypes. The first *Star Wars* movie is the most basic representation of the heroic quest, but in the *Return of the Jedi*, Luke actually achieves individuation. I didn't expect the response I received when we first talked about watching excerpts of the movie. I had planned to use one class period to show significant clips, but the class had other ideas. But we were riding on the wave of excitement generated by *Hook*. First they just wanted to watch the entire *Star Wars* movie, but then.... "Can we watch more than just the first movie? Please?"

"What?! We don't have time to watch TWO movies in a row! Plus we'd get bored. Rent them and watch them at home."

"We want to watch it together, here. How can we talk about the hero cycle when we don't see the end of it? We need to at least see *Return of the Jedi*."

"How could we ever find the time to do that? You'd have to complete your entire myth projects on your own time. I've only scheduled three days for class work on that. You'd use them all up with another movie."

They considered this, and a small debate erupted. I listened, incredulous. But overwhelmingly, the class wanted to watch the extra movie. I couldn't believe they were serious. Was this just a ploy to use up class time? I didn't allow students to work on homework or other assignments in my class unless the time is reserved for that. I also didn't like sacrificing too much time to show many movies, but instead showed excerpts. I carefully watched the kids who usually want to get right to work and avoid homework as much as possible. They were just as enthusiastic.

"Why?" I asked. "You've already seen these movies a hundred times, and

the special effects aren't even all that great anymore."

"We love those movies!"

"Why?" I asked again. I was intrigued. Maybe there was a lesson in the appeal of the heroic to our subconscious here.

"Because they're awesome! I love all of the creatures and planets." said Matt. "I like the light sabers!" said Laura. They sense my interest, press for an advantage.

"I don't know why, I would just love to watch them here, so we can talk about stuff." said Ryan.

"After Joseph Campbell talked about them in the video, I really want to watch them again. I want to see if it really has all those archetypes." said Matt.

"I'll have to think about it." I said, lamely, trying to move on to something else.

"We'll work hard for the rest of the year!" But I was impressed by their vehemence, and their organization. Why did these movies have such appeal?

Suddenly I found myself wanting to watch the movies with them, to continue sharing the experience of the heroic archetypes. "Well, you'll have to diagram the journey." I warned, to justify the use of time, certain that the reality of the extra homework will deter them. It doesn't work.

"We will!" they whooped, almost in unison.

As we settled in to watch the movies, I sighed. "Is this best practice?"

But watching both movies was great. We truly became a community of learners, experiencing the movies together, discussing the archetypes of the hero tale as something "craved" by the collective unconscious, and our instinctive response to them. They even asked to stop the movie at times to point out archetypal events (I did that all the time when we watched parts of a movie; they usually find it annoying). They understood the movie in an entirely new way. There were very few absences during the week we watched movies, and the days following it, even though students could rent and

watch these movies at any time and many had seen them over and over again.

Throughout this part of the archetypal unit, it became increasingly obvious to me that teaching heuristically as a means of guiding students through discovery was quite successful. With the structure of the cosmogonic, origin myth, and heroic cycle archetypes, students had the scaffolding they needed to read with a purpose and find something to say in discussion, thereby significantly increasing student engagement with many different textual experiences. Ironically, though, the scaffolding that heuristics can provide, might also leave little room for disagreement. It was when students took that scaffolding and internalized it that critical argument erupted. What would happen if they didn't have such specific heuristics as scaffolding? What if they had to figure out how to use archetypal theory as framework on their own, without my specific direction?

Critically Teaching Archetypal Theory

Students clearly understood the concept of archetypes, and that the same patterns are found in all genres of storytelling, not just mythology. We wrapped up the unit by applying archetypal interpretation to a novel, and I did not give specific directions or heuristics, but wanted to see what students would do on their own. An archetypal/Jungian critic would argue, of course, that any novel is appropriate, but I used *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse, for many reasons, not the least of which was because there was an old classroom set in the English storage room. I also chose this novel because it built upon the mythic foundation that had been established throughout the unit, followed the heroic quest construct, illustrated the larger concept of an individual's quest for self knowledge, engaged student interest for a quick read and fit neatly into the World Literature curriculum. *Siddhartha* is the story of Siddhartha Gothama, also known as Buddha. It is a heroic adventure much like Luke Skywalker's and Gilgamesh's

adventures, but Siddhartha is a spiritual hero on a quest of the soul. Just as with the other heroes we studied, the psychological development of Siddhartha mirrors the psychological development of the individual. Students quickly recognized Siddhartha as a spiritual hero and drew on their experiences with *Gilgamesh* and *Star Wars* to identify his heroic transformations throughout his quest.

It became immediately apparent that students were engaging with this novel with much more enthusiasm than they had for myth comparison essay some weeks earlier. They were cognizant of how the novel touched their own ideas of self, and they were at a point in their lives when they were trying to determine just who they were anyway. Shortly after we began reading the novel, Sheri asks if she can buy her book. "I want to make notes in it. And I want to keep it." I didn't think I could be surprised by anything this class did anymore, but here I was again, staring.

"That's a great idea" said Mark. "We just won't turn them in at the end of the year." This desire to flaunt authority was certainly a radical notion, not necessarily the critical reading I had been hoping for. But still, they actually wanted to keep the book.

"How many of you would like to buy a copy?" I asked. Almost every hand went up. "Are you serious? Why do you want to keep it?"

"I don't know" said Tim. "I just want to." The class murmurs in agreement.

I stopped by the office after class to ask the secretary if they could just buy the books. She blanched and saying that it would be far too much paperwork at the end of the year to have to collect money for and reorder an entire classroom set of books. I relayed the message to the class the next day.

"Then let's order them. We can just do it ourselves. We'll buy new ones and keep these. How many people can bring in money? We can just order them from a bookstore." Sheri organizes a list and checks off names of students who want to buy the book. Sure enough, most of the students had brought in money by the end of the

week.

I called a local bookstore and ordered the copies, but students could not wait for a new copy and were satisfied with keeping the older ones as their own. When the new ones finally arrived, I just put them on my shelf. Students kept the copies of the novel they had been reading and making notes in; the main office was never the wiser. Almost every student in the class bought a copy. Many of these students hadn't read an entire book in a very long time, let alone bought one with their own money. Of course, these were inexpensive paperbacks, but the idea that they wanted the book that badly made quite an impression on me. And the story of Siddhartha's journey made an impression on them, which became apparent in their informal written responses.

Matt wrote "Siddhartha was the ego. He was on a quest 'to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure, and sorrow – to let the Self die'(14). The whole story revolved around him and 'the troubled course of the life cycle (15)." In other words, his quest is one of individuation. Zack decided that "[the] anima in the story of Siddhartha was Kamala.... she depended on him for caring and guidance in her life. He helped her become happy and knowledgeable". Indeed, Kamala seemed the picture of an anima, sitting temptingly in her garden and transforming Siddhartha with one kiss. But students puzzled over the shadow. Some pointed to Siddhartha's father or Vasudeva the river man. Amy, who referred to the shadow as "the insanity of one's being," identified the inner nature of Siddhartha's Self as the shadow in the novel. "His own evil was his mind. It was what he was constantly struggling with. He 'was afraid of [himself. He] was fleeing from [himself]. [He] was seeking Brahman, Atman, ...[he] wished to get away from [himself] in order to find in the unknown innermost, the nucleus of all things...his own self being' (38). He was battling the feelings and thoughts that gathered within himself. When he overcame his inner self he was able to let his outer self live".

This touched off a vehement debate on the subject. Some students pointed to Siddhartha's father as the shadow, others identified Vasudeva the river man. But there small Govinda contingent, arguing that Govinda was Siddhartha's opposite or, as one student put it, "Siddhartha's mirror reflection" and therefore his shadow. When Siddhartha decides not to follow Gotama, Govinda does the opposite of Siddhartha and stays with the Enlightened One; when Siddhartha is at his lowest ebb and contemplating suicide, he awakens to find Govinda calmly sitting by his side; when Siddhartha finds his salvation in the end of the novel, Govinda is still seeking and trying to understand, but Siddhartha becomes free of the worldly desires and one with the universe while Govinda is helplessly overcome. Here was a critical argument, in which students rationally presented and listened to each other's views; we never came to a full agreement, but the argument was satisfying.

Some students returned to the Heroic Quest guide to record patterns and images as they identified them. Using the same worksheet with *Siddhartha* as they did with *Gilgamesh* enabled them to comfortably find similarities and differences in the heroic quests and symbolism in each of the works. Some students wanted to create "sub-models" of the journey. Instead of one large diagram, they modeled only Siddhartha's father quest, assimilation of anima, assimilation of ego, experience with collective unconscious, or one of his many transformations. Others didn't use any of the guides at all; they just read and responded to the novel within the framework of archetypal theory.

Approaching *Siddhartha* archetypically helps students to see the "point" of the novel, something that may be initially lost on them otherwise. It also helped students to recognize elements of their own lives in Siddhartha's struggle to understand himself and the world around him. Siddhartha found enlightenment as he understood the difference between knowledge (or wisdom) and learning. Knowledge is found within an individual

and can be brought to the surface (to “educe” as in “educate” means to “bring out”) but learning is the process of making sense of the knowledge others offer to help an individual recognize his/her own wisdom. Siddhartha chose the path of knowledge, a difficult path to travel without learning the way from a guide or teacher. In the end he recognized the importance of learning from others. Katie, who had always experienced great difficulty in English classes before, was particularly struck by Siddhartha’s reflections on learning from his father. She wrote: “Siddhartha starts out by leaving his father to find out who he really is, why he is here. This is what starts the father quest or cycle of life. ‘...something in this reflection that reminded him of something he had forgotten and when he reflected on it, he remembered...His face...resembled the face of his father, the Brahmin’(131). Siddhartha is now realizing he has fulfilled the quest of the cycle of life. He now has a son that (sic) did the exact same thing he did to his dad when he was younger. He has reached that point and taken over a new role.”

Obviously students are much more engaged, reflective and cognitive of interpretive strategies by this time. By the time we finished *Siddhartha*, students had developed the sensitivity to archetypes that enabled them to use the method with any text. I learned a great deal from this unit about theory, teaching, and also about myself. I had left behind the anthology, the study guides, and let student inquiry guide interpretation of *Siddhartha*. Students could “wield the theory” not only as a reading strategy coming from an outside source (me), but also as a means for identifying and articulating their own response to the text. And I looked forward to my World Literature class every day.

Obviously, *Siddhartha* is only one of literally thousands of novels appropriate for archetypal interpretation. I was somewhat bound to the works included in this chapter by the World Literature curriculum. But opportunities for stretching the canon using an archetypal approach are limited only by time, money and curricular expectations.

Women as the heroic archetype abound in novels ranging from the classic (*Jane Eyre*,

Wuthering Heights, *Emma*) to the contemporary (*Annie John*) and emphasize the power of the female hero. If a Young Adult novel is more appropriate for the students' reading or interest level, the fantasy novels by Terry Brooks or Brian Jacques are perfect for archetypal work with middle school students or underclassmen in high school.

Jacob Have I Loved, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, and *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Phillip Pullman all have young women as the heroes struggling with archetypal forces and issues, overcoming obstacles to find the power of the Self within. The first volume of Pullman's trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, particularly appeals to all audiences through the basic hero motif embellished with mystery, intrigue and magic. Characters in the novels possess an animal sidekick of the opposite sex, called a "daemon" in the book, and are psychologically and spiritually so connected to the daemon that it can't travel very far away from them. Students easily identify this as a concrete representation of the Jungian anima or animus. And certainly the Harry Potter books can be read with an archetypal approach.

Conclusions

Northrop Frye asserts that "every organized body of knowledge can be learned progressively, and experience shows that there is also something progressive about the learning of literature" (Frye "Archetypes of Literature" 1445). My research into the use of historic, heuristic, and critical methods for teaching literary theory in high school support this claim. Combining these methods in a systematic way, contributes to a comprehensive, balanced literacy program by prior knowledge, practice and opportunities to experiment. My study of systematically using a combination of literal knowledge and activities encouraging evaluation of literature and theory not only address the question of how theory is best taught, but again emphasizes that students

benefit from knowing about theory by becoming better readers of literary works.

Focusing specifically on archetypal theory helps students understand why they respond to literature, why literature touches the deepest reaches of the reader's unconscious mind, and why the reader identifies so closely with the hero of a story. They readily make connection to texts outside the realm of literature, and they are suddenly standing back and "reading" the world critically as they notice and construct meaning from recurrent patterns of imagery. Archetypes also provide a basis for introducing the larger concept of literary theory. Frye says "An archetype should not be only a unifying category of criticism, but itself a part of the total form, and it leads us at once to the question of what sort of total form criticism can see in literature" ("Archetypes in Literature" 1450). Because archetypes themselves are imagistic and narrative structures, using them as a method of constructing meaning is a form of structuralism: and the theoretical approach to literature that will be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

STRUCTURAL THEORY

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss points of comparison between structuralism, formalism, and New Criticism; emphasizing the objectivist nature of these theories of literary interpretation. I did not differentiate specifically between these approaches in my high school classroom, but used ideas from each to present the basic arguments for text-based construction of meaning as opposed to the more affective methods we'd already practiced. In doing so, I will outline basic concepts presented by theorists ranging from Aristotle to Saussure to situate this critical approach and provide the theoretical background for my classroom practice. I will present these theories in greater detail than I presented them to my students, and use the terms "structuralism", "formalism", and "New Criticism" in reference to an objectivist stance in contrast to a constructivist stance. I will also discuss ways in which the archetypal patterns identified in Chapter III are different than structural linguistic elements presented by objective theorists. My purpose is to set up the argument that there is much to be valued in learning to do a close, textual reading of a literary work and that it should be a part of every student's repertoire of interpretive strategies, much like learning phonics is an important part of a comprehensive approach to teaching reading strategies. At the same time, however, such objectivist methods should not be relied upon as the primary basis for an intensive text-based strategy for teaching. I will illustrate how I concluded that teaching objective theory in relation to other methods gives students additional meaning-

making strategies and, in fact, when introduced as one way of reading among many can contribute to student constructed response.

Identifying and using linguistic systems and conventions to determine literary merit makes the study of literature uniform and scientific: an articulated goal of objectivist literary theory. The underlying structural system, or semiotics, which Jonathon Culler defines as the “general science of signs...to incorporate the scientific study of behavior and communication” (*Literary Theory* 121), in any work makes it possible for the reader to construct meaning from the words on the page. Structuralist theory focuses on individual signifiers without relying upon personal association with the signified. New Criticism treated poems as aesthetic objects and focused on conducting close readings of poetic language. Formalist theory examined the linguistic strategies that actually create the literary work. These theories of literary interpretation require an objective stance for determining meaning; a “tree” in this case is a large plant, not an archetypal symbol of life and certainly not an invitation for nostalgic reminiscences of childhood summertimes on the part of the reader. An objective critic never says “To me this means.....” The text is the thing; no personal experience, societal background, or author intentions are relevant. And the word means what it means, regardless of what the author *might have* intended or the reader *associates* with the word. The denotation of the word must lead to an understanding of the system at work in the piece; therefore, extraneous words and notions do not directly influence the system and actually weaken the structural unity of the text. In this way, poetry becomes the primary medium for structural analysis, because the language of a poem is reduced to eliminate any redundancies. Terry Eagleton emphasizes this aspect of objective theory, saying “Poetry activates the full body of the signifier, presses the word to work to its utmost under the intense pressure of surrounding words, and so to release its

richest potential” (89).

Objective theorists argue that a reading or interpretation of text should not simply draw on our previous life experiences and associations, because we would never learn from the work if we simply inject ourselves into it. “The poem...is not your experience or my experience; it is only a potential cause of experiences, and the adequacy of any subjective response must be tested against the ‘objective’ poem itself” (Kermode 77). According to the structuralist critic, to simply take words and arbitrarily assign meaning to them based on our personal cultural or sociological experience weakens any argument for meaning. Instead of focusing on what is happening in the reader’s mind as he/she constructs meaning, the structuralist examines how the language of the text constructs meaning. To probe and to test through the specifics of language, to challenge ourselves to new intellectual and artistic levels, lifts *us* to the level of the *work*, instead of bringing the *work* to *our* level. Eagleton call this “a calculated affront to our common sense. It refuses the ‘obvious’ meaning of the story and seeks instead to isolate ‘deep’ structures within it, which are not apparent on the surface” (83).

Differentiating between an archetypal pattern and a structural relationship between signifiers is the most difficult part of structuralist theory for students. Northrop Frye acknowledges, however, similarities between structuralism and archetypal theory: “While no one expects literature itself to behave like a science, there is certainly no reason why criticism, as a systematic and organized study, should not be, at least partly, a science” (Archetypes of Literature 1446). Archetypal theory is *inter-textual*, comparing texts and coming to an interpretation based on the larger body of existing literature, a notion Eagleton dismisses: “all the system ever does is reshuffle its symbolic units in relation to each other” (80), and emphasizing literature’s effect on

reader's psyche. Structural or formalist theory, on the other hand, examines the text as a self-enclosed object, basing interpretation only on what is present in the text at hand; therefore a hero can only be judged by his actions in this plot and not by comparison to the many heroes who came before him.

Reviewing students' prior knowledge of literary conventions can serve as a starting point for introducing this method. When I asked students, as a preliminary exercise, to outline the basic structure of a story, they were quick to point out the plot structure they've been learning for years (exposition or basic situation, complications or rising action, climax, falling action, resolution or denouement). "This is just like the plot structure diagram we always talk about," says one student. "Only I have to find the structure myself." What happens if an element of the plot structure is missing, or if the author switched them all around? What if the reader never really could figure out the basic situation, or there was no resolution in a work? Why is the basic structure of a work so important? Responses vary, but one thing is certain: They are relieved to discover that they already know something about structuralism.

Definitions: Saussurian Linguistics and Literary Theory

It's not just a coincidence that budding scientists find structuralism comfortably familiar. The method developed during the early 20th Century, a time when scientific knowledge was expanding to global proportions. In the early 1900's, French professor and lecturer Ferdinand de Saussure lectured and taught his theories on language and communication systems. After he died in 1913, his students collected and published his notes and materials, entitling this landmark work in the study of linguistics *A Course in General Linguistics*. His work fostered an objective and scientific perspective, ushering in a new era of literary criticism focusing on patterns and

systems created by the language of literary works. Saussure addressed the dual nature of language: the conscious use of everyday language, the act of talking and communicating, of choosing words and phrases, and the unconscious understanding of the complex system and infrastructure underlying communicated language that enables those words and phrases to make sense. He labeled these linguistic “layers” as *langue* and *parole*. “Langue,” the unconscious infrastructure or system of understanding, enables an individual to comprehend the “parole”, the conscious method of communication through word choice, gesture and facial expression. Understanding the linguistic duality of communication is the key to understanding structuralist criticism.

According to Saussure, the two levels of linguistic meaning (the *langue* and *parole*) inherent in any communication constitute a *signifying system*. The term “system” refers to the organization of basic laws, properties, and principles necessary for the construction of a poem or short story. A sound piece of literature must follow certain basic conventions both in the underlying structure (the *langue*) and the embellished language (the *parole*). Introduction of setting, character, conflict, and the basic situation; followed by plot sequences leading to a resolution of conflict, provide the underlying structure for a short story or a novel. Structures of irony, metaphor, symbolism, repetition and rhyme, to name a few, create and/or reinforce the higher layers of suspense and tension. The term “signifying system” also incorporates the structure of inter-relationships between words and the “things” the words represent. To a structuralist, a word is a *signifier* and the thing (whether a concrete item or an abstract emotion) the word represents is the *signified*. While words can have connotations that are appropriate for interpretation within the *context* of a work, the denotation of each word is essential in determining its particular role in the work itself.

Any determination of meaning must be acceptable within both systemic levels: the underlying structure and the higher level of language and denotation of the signified. For example, when students are explicating a poem, they need to use a dictionary to look up the meaning of unfamiliar words (signifiers). But when they look up the word, they see five different definitions (signifieds). Which do they use? They must consider the context, or underlying system of structure (langue) as they decide which specific meaning fits for a word to make sense in the parole of the poem. Students must consider both levels of language to accurately interpret specific words. This means individuals must understand the rules of communication and relationships between the signifier and the signified, between the langue and the parole, until following the rules of the system becomes an almost unconscious act. The structural critic, therefore, must identify these implicit rules as structures within a given text, forcing a close look at signifiers, their signifieds and the systems they create. Emphasis is on the reality of the words on the page and the complex system of meaning created by those words to ascertain the *linguistically correct meaning* of a literary work.

Because a reader must be able to comprehend the langue of a work to conceptualize the images created by the parole, identifying and evaluating structures within the text requires a certain amount of literary competence. Competence comes from the reader's prior knowledge of literary conventions; most students, whether they are avid readers or not, have an inherent notion of how a good story should be told. Comprehending systems and structures within the text is done unconsciously, but the understanding of specific figurative language through metaphor is much more refined and requires conscious effort to evaluate. Students should become aware of the dual nature of the language used in a work as the base for understanding the literature. To study the importance of individual words and patterns of words is to investigate the

hierarchy of levels of meaning for a work; each level of meaning creates more complex inter-relationships between words, systems and the interpretation of the work itself. It's like having several transparencies layered on top of one another representing different structures in the text. Lifting each layer individually leaves at the bottom the basic plot structure.

Aristotle to Eliot

Saussure's theories of the duality of language invite comparison to classic notions of literary interpretation. Tracing the historical development of literary theory and continually emphasizing the hierarchy of linguistic patterns also helps students to conceive of the structures in literature. A comparison to Aristotle's definition of dramatic structure in *Poetics* illustrates the underlying infrastructure of literary systems and the concept of *langue*, while Samuel Taylor Coleridge's study of poetic language in *Biographia Literaria* illustrates the importance of figurative language and the parole of poetry. Aristotle focused on the structure of the entire work; he identified the importance of unity and the weaknesses of excess words or actions detracting from a clean tight plot. He identified the structure of a solidly constructed drama and established for posterity the criteria for judging tragedy. Coleridge, however, specifically studied the elevated language of poetry and his idea of what constituted great literature. To Coleridge, the language of a work created ironic and metaphorical structures that went beyond the reader's everyday existence, creating "a freshness of sensation" with which to experience the world.

Modern structuralism as a specific method of literary criticism began as a Russian movement in the 1920's, touted primarily by the scholarship of Roman Jakobson, a Russian literary critic, who was influenced by Saussure's work. Jakobson

popularized the notion of signifying systems within the literary community. Uncovering the implicit infrastructure of convention and using only the denotation or contextual reality of words, dictates one specific literary meaning for a given work. Because the language and context is constant and unchanging within the work (the words are always the same words, cold will always be cold and hot will be hot), the formalist interpretation could be tested and justified in a more concrete way than a psychological or emotional interpretation. His contemporary, Todorov, recognized the structural approach as fitting with the 20th Century notions of scientific advancement. "The structural analysis of literature is nothing other than an attempt to transform literary studies into a scientific discipline...a coherent body of concepts and methods aiming at knowledge of underlying laws" (Young 3).

T.S.Eliot picked up on the notion of the text and, more specifically, the linguistic structures and patterns inherent in a great literary work, as the primary emphasis in interpreting and evaluating literature. He was very influential in perpetuating the scientific and objective nature and linguistic focus of modern criticism, called the "New Criticism" minimizing the emphasis on pure emotional response. He praised Aristotle for having a "scientific mind" and capturing the objective and scientific goal of text-based criticism but denounced "the pernicious effect of emotion" in Coleridge's work, asserting that "a literary critic should have no emotions except those immediately provoked by a work of art" (Kermode 56). Eliot's work impressed the French literary community during the mid 1950's, most notably Claude Levi-Strauss, and Riffaterre, who further developed the theories of structural or formalist criticism into a specific linguistic study of literature.

Formalism

A useful comparison can also be drawn between Aristotle and Coleridge to illustrate the differences between structural criticism and its offspring, formalist criticism. The basic difference between structuralism and formalism is the slight variation in the means each method uses to emphasize and interpret language. Structural critics note the linguistic systems creating meaning within a work and the inter-relationships of different levels of meaning. Formalist critics focus on the difference between the formal, figurative language used in literature and common daily language. The point of literature, according to formalist theory, is to reach toward the pinnacle of human thought and experience. To work through the form of a poem and its structure of metaphor and irony causes the reader to gain a new perspective on the subject matter of the work, “the ‘making strange’ of experience” (Culler 118) and experience Coleridge’s “freshness of sensation”. Again, this seems the opposite of transactional theory, which works on the premise that prior knowledge is necessary to construct meaning from text; here the text reconstructs the reader’s prior knowledge.

Using elevated language violates our ordinary expectations for language, thought and metaphor, forcing us to see the world in a new way. Bertolt Brecht called this the “estrangement effect;” in the final chapter I will discuss the way in which one inquiry group further investigated this notion. In daily communication, tone of voice, facial expression, and current “faddish” connotations of words (a person can be “cool” and “hot” at the same time!) contribute to communication. But in the written language of literature and poetry each word is essential in communicating an idea or creating an image remaining constant through space and time without the “luxury” of non-verbal embellishment. Metaphor and irony provoke thought; one must carefully examine the figurative language to understand the message of the poem or story. One aspect of

structural criticism that students do appreciate right away is the formalist notion of the *intentional fallacy*. This is the notion that the author's intent is irrelevant when interpreting literature, because the work may not have developed as the author had planned and may not resemble the author's original vision at all. The infamous story (paraphrased here) of Robert Frost illustrates the intentional fallacy: When a student asked what the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" meant, he toed the formalist line and said "It means exactly what it says." The text even has precedence over the individual who wrote it, and stands alone for scrutiny. J.R.R. Tolkien may have professed to modeling *The Hobbit* after *Beowulf*, and discussing and comparing the two hero stories in class is interesting, but the resulting novel is far different than the *Beowulf* story and, of course, much more accessible to many students. Students quickly picked up on what they perceived as the primary import of the intentional fallacy. "Great! No author background sheets!"

I used elements of each of these objective approaches, structuralism, formalism and New Criticism, to help student conceptualize text-based theories of interpretation. I will emphasize again that I did not intend to indoctrinate students with any theoretical approach, nor overwhelm them with exhaustive theoretical detail. I simply wanted to see if they could grasp the concept of objective theory, recognize its role in constructing meaning from text as one way of reading among many.

Teaching Strategies and Methods

The first thing I learned was that the skeptics among my students loved objective theory. It was appealing to students looking for the "one real meaning" of a story or poem, and comforting for future mathematicians and scientists looking for absolutes. Students who have been confounded by the emotional and psychological aspects of

determining literary meaning and merit, sifting through affective associations with metaphor and connotation (“How can this mean different things to different people? What is the REAL meaning? How can you prove it?”) welcomed an approach advocating scientific and objective evaluation. For others, focusing on the actual meaning or denotation of the words in a story or poem and how those words produce the language of the particular piece seemed intrusive and limited their engagement with the text. In presenting structural and objective approaches to text, I followed an instructional pattern similar to the one I discussed in the archetypal chapter; I began by situating students to theory with historic background, moved to heuristic methods to encourage students to use structuralist methods as a way of constructing meaning as they read *The Hobbit*, then stepped back and let them critically formulate arguments for objective readings of *Oedipus Rex*. Throughout our experimentation with structuralist theory, we compared and contrasted it with archetypal theory, and how both theories impact their responses to the text at hand.

To ensure that students would not have difficulty conceiving of the basic laws and principles of the structuralist concept of literary “structure” or “system”, we brainstormed some analogies using other familiar structures. For example, students cited similarities in the way the basic skeletal structure of the human body is brought to life by a circulatory, nervous and gastrointestinal system, and the way a literary work is grounded in the basic plot structure brought to life by systems of irony and metaphor, rhyme and repetition. These systems rely on one another to allow the larger structure of the body to exist, much like a literary work relies on the systems to hold up the basic plot. Even a small blood or brain cell contributes specifically to a body’s systems; similarly, specific words in a literary work contribute to the larger systems. Just as the systems of nature and of the body are not always apparent to the naked eye, the systems

of convention in language and literature are not always readily apparent. Students thought of other analogies comparing architecture, chemistry, and mathematics to structuralist literary theory. When we really began to parse terms like “systems” and “structure”, I knew students were ready to practice objective theory. I began with historic methods similar to those in the archetypal unit, with a study guide outlining the basic objective nature of structuralist theory (Figure 12).

STRUCTURAL/FORMALIST CRITICISM

“Structures” in literature are just like concrete structures in the world around you: they are built of different pieces and materials. The materials used to build structures in literature are words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, themes, symbols, and different elements of the plot. The goal of structural criticism is objectivity. By forcing the reader to accept only those meanings **denoted** by words, phrases, and sentences this theory de-emphasizes any **connotations** the reader gathers individually. This limits interpretation to only what the structure relates and not to any reality existing outside of the text itself. The reader is limited to the text only, and cannot utilize personal experience or associations and literary interpretation and evaluation.

Structuralist criticism is a method that utilizes specific structures or systems from the text to judge literary merit. To a structuralist, the text must use language and plot in a logical and efficient way to form a “tight” plot in which every element can be identified and analyzed. This method of literary criticism is intended to make the study of literature more scientific and uniform. As opposed to archetypes that interrelate, most structuralist critics concern themselves with single works of literature.

A Model of Structural Analysis

This diagram represents the basic layers of literary meaning. The bottom layer is the essential, but often invisible, defining structure of a work. The top layer is the essential and often studied language that enables the structure of literary convention to work. For a work to be satisfying, thrilling, suspenseful, funny, or cathartic, the layers of meaning must compliment one another. The basic structure leads the language, while the language embellishes the basic structure. When the layers are well constructed, we enjoy the work and hardly even notice their existence as we skim along!

Top Layers of Meaning (there can be many of these) –

Formal language: metaphor, irony, description, etc... This is the parole, embellishing and enhancing basic structure, used with any narrative form. Coleridge emphasized this level of meaning.

Bottom Layer of Meaning (there can be only one of these) –

Underlying structural layer of literary convention: defines work as poem (with stanzas), short story or novel (with narrative forms like *in medias res*, flashback or flashforward, and other elements of the basic plot structure), or drama (with Acts and scenes). Aristotle emphasized this layer. This is the langue that enables the parole to have meaning.

Remember, the text is the thing. Denotations (also known as dictionary definitions) of words are important, therefore the dictionary should not be far from your side as you read. The denotation of any word is a part of the parole, or the embellishing language. You must determine which meaning denoted by the dictionary is most appropriate within the context of the langue, or underlying structure of the work. Structuralism says connotations you personally associate with a word are not appropriate!

Figure 12. Basic Objective Nature of Structuralist Theory.

I used William Stafford’s “Fifteen” (Appendix A) as a first step because it is short and students could recognize the obvious systems of repetition and metaphor to

reach some conclusions about the meaning of the text. In the following section, I will outline the steps in conducting a close reading of the poem as we discussed them in class. As in the archetypal unit, initially I assumed the role of authority on both the theoretical approach and the interpretation of the poem; my purpose was to model this particular way of reading for students before turning them loose to practice it on their own. We followed the structural model presented in the introductory structural study guide, and I gave them some thought questions to help guide their reading of the poem itself. I wanted to help students understand how to *use* these linguistic systems to determine the meaning of a work so they could understand structuralist theory as another way of comprehending text.

“Fifteen” by William Stafford

I first asked students to observe how the poem looked on the page, read it over with a partner, and list, stanza by stanza, the linguistic systems they find. The first time students looked for structures, they saw four stanzas of five lines, the repetition of “I was fifteen” in each, and noted the last “I stood there, fifteen” hanging at the end. Then they sat there, looking blankly at me, unable to go any further. I pointed out that by identifying the stanzas as the underlying structure of literary convention, or *langue*, they had already begun to structurally analyze the poem. Add the repetition of “I was fifteen” as the parole embellishing the basic structure of the poem, and they had established a rudimentary understanding of the method; each stanza functioned as a system and meant something, the repetition in those stanzas enhanced that construction of meaning. We only needed to bring these meanings into the open by looking more closely, learning how to use those structures to determine meaning.

Several students recognized the inverted word order in the first stanza, understanding that this stanza established the setting, but wanting to know why it should

be made more difficult by inverting the linguistic structure. “Why can’t he (Stafford) just say it?” Mary complained. “Why did he make it harder for us to understand?” I asked the class to think about what purpose this word order served in the poem.

Answering these questions required students to progress from simply identifying a structural element to using it as a method of interpretation. Instead of filling in the gaps with their own experience, as I discussed in relation to Wolfgang Iser’s theories in the reader-response chapter, students needed to fill in the gaps by ‘pressing’ words further for meaning. When we read the stanza aloud, they began to see how the inversion draws attention to the motorcycle, defining it as the central image in the stanza. Change the order of the words around to the generally accepted speech “I found a motorcycle back of the willows one summer morning...” and the small caesura, the pause before and after the phrase “a motorcycle” would be lost. It is not the way we would say the sentence in everyday language, but we were now working in the *langue* (the underlying structure) of poetry. Therefore, the *parole* (poetic language) is elevated and serves to embellish the poetic structure. So, the motorcycle stands out as the dominant image in the stanza. That the boy is fifteen seems an afterthought or a simple statement of fact.

Stanza two clarifies the metaphoric structure of the motorcycle. It develops a “pulsing gleam”, has “shiny flanks” and “headlights fringed”. It becomes a “companion, ready and friendly”. The language links the two stanzas with an extended metaphor; the metaphorical system exists above the poetic stanza structure, adding another level of meaning. But the stanzas are also linked through the system of repetition created by the lines “I was fifteen.” Why are those lines repeated? What purpose do they serve? Students were still curious about this particular linguistic pattern. We looked more closely.

In stanza three, the linguistic pattern of first-person perspective is broken by the first word, “We,” linking the speaker and the motorcycle. The “confident opinion”

and “forward feeling” of the motorcycle reinforce this connection, extending the metaphoric structure of motorcycle from stanza two to stanza three. The boy and the motorcycle anticipate springing forward, taking off to “meet the sky,” a new sense of freedom that comes with being mobile and old enough to enjoy it (just ask any 16 year-old who just received his driver’s license!). The boy is ready to take off, literally on a motorcycle, and figuratively as he comes closer to adulthood. There is a certain excitement to being fifteen and having an entire lifetime stretching on the horizon.

Reality hits in stanza four, however. The single word, “Thinking”, at the very beginning is enough to bring the “forward feeling” to a crashing halt. The metaphor is abruptly cut off, just as the boy snaps out of his daydream. The owner comes to, the boy regains his senses, the motorcycle is back to a “machine” and the moment is over. The sharpness of the change is only made possible by the extension of the metaphor through the first three stanzas; in one word, all of the tension and joy created through the metaphoric structure is gone: “Thinking”. The owner calls the boy a “good man”. The irony of this is that really he was neither. He considered taking the motorcycle, and he’s only fifteen. This ironic structure further sharpens the change in mood, and as the man roars away, he leaves a dejected boy behind him. The variance of “I stood there, fifteen” as the only line that stands alone as a stanza emphasizes the loneliness and frustration of being fifteen. He is neither a man nor a child, dreaming of bigger places but left behind to just stand there. The repetitive structure throughout the poem sets up the reader for the sense of abandonment the boy feels.

Each stanza builds on the previous to create and extend the metaphoric, ironic, and repetitive systems that give life to the poetic structure. As the systems work with one another, tension and suspense build: Will the boy take the motorcycle, discovering the exciting world of chance, change, and responsibility inhabited by adults? When the boy stops to think, and gives the motorcycle back, the reader is left standing alone with

him as the thrill of excitement and discovery is gone. This poem gave students a good example of contextual ‘denotation’ of words in a work, as opposed to ‘connotation’, which involved an emphasis on affective construction of meaning. How does the context of each stanza change the meaning (or denotation) of the phrase “I was fifteen?” If we were pressing for meaning, then “a word or image which is repeated does not mean the same as it did the first time, by virtue of the fact that it is a repetition” (Eagleton 101). In other words, we continually revise what we’ve already read—retrospectively. Each repetition of the phrase “I was fifteen” leads the reader to a new understanding of what that phrase actually means. If students could recognize the two basic levels of meaning outlined in the diagram on the structuralism study guide, they could begin to explore the systems at work in anything they read. Would they really talk about a motorcycle that way? Why does the narrator of the poem? How does the language and repetition lend a sense of importance to a small event? How significant is this event? What is the importance of being fifteen? How does the poem lead the reader to freshness in sensation?

It was interesting to discuss the repetition of “I was fifteen” and the importance of being fifteen with students while trying to maintain an objective stance. Most of them were sixteen or seventeen and had a driver’s license; the fine line between being fifteen and dependent on others for transportation and being more independent at sixteen was a very meaningful structure to them. “I think your sixteenth birthday is the most important one until you turn twenty-one.” mused John. “You can do more of what you want to do when you’re sixteen. Even if you don’t have your own car.” Matt brings us back to objectivity, though, by saying “Wait a second! Is that in the poem? There is no car there!” The experience of being fifteen, something so familiar to these students who were fifteen not too long ago, was also made strange—they hadn’t thought about the implications of being so close to the freedom of being a legal driver, yet so far from

being able to just take the car out for a drive without being in serious trouble.

J. R. R. Tolkein's *The Hobbit*

I had always used *The Hobbit* in my English classes because it's an engaging and relatively quick book to read. I decided to use the novel to teach objective theory, and perhaps to provide some interesting discussion about the transition from archetypal criticism to structural theory. Students feel comfortable with the novel, know the story, and can therefore take the time to look at the language and the structural significance of that language. Plus there are many interesting and obvious structures at work, along with opportunities to compare and contrast an archetype with a symbol and an archetypal pattern with a structural one.

I used structural heuristics to help students experiment with structuralist theory as an interpretive method. I identified linguistic and metaphorical structures within the novel, and gave students a choice of specific structural elements to investigate (Figure13).

The Hobbit: The Structure of "There and Back Again"

Each of you will be assigned one of the following structures to examine and chart throughout the novel. Pretend you are a scientist carefully dissecting this work; examine details carefully. Look at **words** and their definitions, the **language** of the text and what it tells you about your structure. Look at **events** associated with your structure and where they are placed in the novel. In each instance, think of the literary conventions each structure relies upon or is a part of. Remember, it is your job to make the implicit structure or convention easy for your audience to see.

1. **THE ROLE OF THE NARRATOR** - What does he add to the story? At what times does he appear? Is there a pattern? Does he always say the same kinds of thing? What is the purpose of his interjections? What information does he give? Look at the punctuation of and the meaning of his comments.

2. **THE HERO NARRATIVE CYCLE** - How does The Hobbit fit into this plot design? How does this plot design form a basis for other elements of characterization, metaphor, irony? Identify the bare bones of the narrative and evaluate them as the infrastructure for the novel.

3. **THE POETRY AND SONGS** - What is the purpose of the poetry within the framework of the story? What does it add? When does it appear? Is there a pattern? What does each particular poem mean and what does it add to the section of the novel in which it is placed. Look for rhyme and repetition, metaphor and irony. Are all the poems the same? Why or why not? Is the poetry an essential element of the story?

4. **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT OF BILBO AND DWARVES** - Describe and give examples of the dwarves and their behavior at the beginning of the story. Do the same for Bilbo. Continue to document and compare the development of the dwarves and Bilbo throughout the novel, carefully examining their words and actions. Do you notice a system developing? How does the behavior of each character change during the course of the novel? How do they influence one another?

5. **GANDOLF S APPEARANCES AND DISAPPEARANCES** - When does he show up? When does he disappear? What important things does he do and say? Is there a system developing for his timely arrivals and departures? What purpose does he serve?

Figure 13. *The Hobbit* Structural Elements.

I was a bit nervous about this project, though, partially because I had identified the structural elements for investigation without their input (I had decided it would be better for them to have them in hand as they read rather than waiting until after they had finished reading) and partially because I really didn't have a preconceived notion about the final results of the project. I let them know they were "guinea pigs," however, and they appreciated, somewhat, that they were part of a "study". We started by discussing the basic narrative plot structure as a basis upon which to comprehend the interplay of these structural elements, then broke into "instructional groups" for completing the project.

I found cooperative learning helpful; sharing ideas with group members helped students clarify their particular structural element looking closely at linguistic patterns, including punctuation. I provided coaching during small group work and helped students to focus on their specific structural pattern and take notes on its development. The "Narrator" group, for example, found that the narrator's personal comments throughout the novel are enclosed in parentheses, and that the number of these comments dwindles as the novel progresses. This detail was important as they investigated whether or not they found the narrator to be reliable. The poetry group looked at repetitive words and phrases, the rhyme scheme and meter of each poem, in addition to the ways it provides characterization or background information that adds to the scope of the novel. The Bilbo group charted his "self talk" as he longs for home as opposed to his actions in saving the dwarves time and again. The Gandalf group measured his appearances and disappearances and discovered that each time Gandalf disappears, Bilbo takes over for him with ever increasing degrees of success. But these methods of interpretation didn't come easily. The groups spent several class sessions reading and puzzling through the relevance of both objective theory and the specific structural heuristic they were given. My role as that of coach kept me very busy as I circulated the

room.

For example, one day I sat with the poetry group as they worried about the magnitude of this assignment. “We have the hardest one,” they complained. “We don’t even know what to do.”

“What do you have to do first?” I asked. They thought for a minute, “Read the novel.”

“And while you’re reading, what are you looking for?”

“Poetry” they answered, unenthusiastically.

“And when you find some poetry...?”

“We look at it to see how it fits in the story.”

“Yes,” I answered, “but also how each poem is structurally different or similar compared to others. Think back to the poem ‘Fifteen.’ Remember, all language in the book is important. Why does the poem exist and is placed at that particular spot in the book? How does it function?”

They write down a few notes and look at me dubiously. “We have to do *all* the poetry?” “Well, if you are looking at how it all fits together....” I shrugged and moved on to the “Gandalf” group.

“We’ve got the hardest one!” they lamented.

While we spent much of our classroom time on small group discussions such as this one, large group discussions revolved around the difficulties and benefits of using this method. The reading went quickly, and, because students took notes on the structures they had been assigned and responded to the strengths and weaknesses of their group work in brief letters to me, I didn’t have to quiz endlessly. Students directed classroom discussion with their own questions and ideas about the importance of specific language and signification within the story.

In the end, each group shared their particular structure with the class and argued

for its relevance within the basic plot structure, turning in a written abstract of their presentation to me. They used visual aids to highlight the importance of the structure within the context of the plot, and included examples from the text to exemplify the linguistic patterns for each structure. Students created their own diagram, chart, or graph of the structural element they uncovered, representing the abstract nature of literature and language in a concrete visual form.

The results surprised all of us, and I will include the important statements from their written abstracts interspersed in the description of those results here. The first group to present was the "Poetry" group, who had been working in secret for a week, borrowing all of my markers, scissors, glue and disappearing into the back room of the library. I was slightly nervous about their plans, but didn't interfere or insist on seeing their progress, instead just letting them know I was available if they needed any help. On presentation day, they unveiled a huge mural illustrating Bilbo's journey. At various stops along the way, curious arrangements of numbers and illustrations blocked his path. These represented the poetry. The group summarized in their abstract: "We found that the poetry in the novel introduces character, describes character, and provides background for the reader." They pointed to the first poem, describing the basic ballad structure and the story it told. Then they moved to the poetry of the elves, goblins, and other characters. They ended with a discussion of language: "The poetry adds information that would otherwise be written into the story and would take a long time to read. The novel would not be the same without the poetry because we wouldn't know as much about the characters, not just because of what they say, but the way they say it." In other words, these students found that the poetry adds parole that is elevated, enhancing the language of the novel's narrative structure. The heuristic of the poetry structure had indeed given them a way to discover the function of poetry in the novel.

The "Gandalf" group developed a bar graph with Gandalf's level of activity in

blue and Bilbo's in red. The section of the graph that represents the beginning of the novel included quite a bit of blue but, as the story unfolds, a pattern began to develop. "When Gandalf is gone, Bilbo takes over" students concluded. "Gandalf's disappearance forces Bilbo to do something in an emergency. Pretty soon, he doesn't really need Gandalf to do what he needs to do." Was this Gandalf's plan all along? "If this structure was gone from the story, Bilbo never really would have become the hero, because Gandalf still would have done everything....The words Gandalf says are hints that Bilbo will be strong enough, and by the end he is." The parole of Gandalf and Bilbo's relationship enhances the langue of the heroic narrative. It was interesting to observe students use the heroic structure that we studied in the archetypal unit to comprehend the text in a different way. Ryan, one member of the "Gandalf" group, wrote about it this way: "Mirkwood to an archetypal critic has a heavy, unconscious meaning. It represents Bilbo's unconscious mind and the spiders are the fears he must overcome. To a structuralist, the forest is just another obstacle for Bilbo to overcome on his adventure. You can't compare it to forests in other stories."

I was hopeful at the beginning of this project that students would get something out of assuming a structural stance in approaching *The Hobbit*, and they certainly did. Once again, I learned at least as much as they did not only about the use of structural theory in constructing meaning, but also about having faith in my students as learners. They were developing more confidence in their ability to determine meaning from text, asking some good questions that reflected engaged reading, and starting discussion on their own more often. Once, for example, several students wondered aloud if Tolkein really meant to put all of these structures together. This led to another discussion about the intentional fallacy, and the structuralist assumption that if it's in the text, it's in the text, whether the author was conscious of it in writing the text or not. I stood there, amazed.

Oedipus Rex

Because structuralism hearkens back to Aristotle's time and his theory of dramatic unity, applying Aristotle's theories to *Oedipus Rex* adds an additional element to the structural study of the play. According to Aristotle in *Poetics*, a perfect tragedy the action a compressed time frame, the stage setting should remain the same with only the bare minimum of props, and the action should be limited to only that which is absolutely necessary to further the narrative of the drama. A clear structure can be delineated from *Oedipus Rex*, easily charted by students and measured as they read. It is very similar to understanding the time that passes in *Romeo and Juliet* for example, or *Death of a Salesman*. The power of tragedy is the swiftness of its unfolding. After students have charted the structure of *The Hobbit*, labeled layers of frame stories, and examined the language of "Fifteen," they are ready to tackle a structural approach to *Oedipus Rex*.

I begin *Oedipus Rex* with an introduction to Aristotle's theories on the structure of tragedy as he presented them in *Poetics* (Appendix B).

I wanted them to see that literary theory and criticism was not just a modern phenomenon and that Aristotle established the language of underlying dramatic structure and argued that the power of irony was essential in embellishing that structure. The play is structurally very tightly wrought; the action takes place in one day, emphasizing the power of events. Flashback and foreshadowing, wait time for choral commentary and odes, the prologue, episodes, and exodus all provide a clear dramatic structure. I also focused on how these structural elements add to the irony of the play. Why does the chorus keep interrupting? What does the audience discover in each act? What is the function of the strophes and antistrophes? How does the simplicity of the set and staging actually add to the ironic tension of the play? To prepare for structurally

analyzing *Oedipus Rex*, we compared this basic structure to *Hamlet*. Would they argue that *Hamlet* is structurally sound according to Aristotle?

The challenge of structural interpretation was in helping students understand the concept of “ironic structure” (science scholars said “ionic what?”) and dramatic irony. Irony in any work (movies included) creates tension and suspense while provoking laughter and tears. It is a powerful literary tool, but also the most difficult for an author or poet to pull off. Overstated irony diminishes its impact, yet it must be clear enough to be understood by the reader. The thread of irony can weave its way through a work, wrapping up all characters and events in the end, creating a structure with language and events. The parole of *Oedipus* provides many ironies: the eye imagery in Oedipus’s dialogue, the wisdom of Teiresias, Oedipus’s blind anger, Jocasta’s diversionary tactics, and Oedipus’s decree at the onset of the play. Irony helps to establish character and drive the play forward. Each of these ironies can be traced throughout the play, and the language of the play elevates them, toying with the audience and stretching the tension to the breaking point. I labeled these ironic structures as themes within the play because, in the context of this project, we did broaden our focus from only the text to include commentary on modern society, technically not a structural habit. But each theme is neatly put together, deliciously ironic, and studded with figurative language: exactly a thing for structural analysis. And the conversation turned toward the radical as students thought critically about the ironies of our lives.

I experienced a “freshness of sensation” with the play when I watched the irrepressible teenage sense of humor manifesting itself in countless ways. Stephanie raced back and forth across the stage playing Aristotle with a bag of cottonballs dropping, one by one, off of her face. In another presentation, Matt plunged broaches (taken from his mother’s jewelry box) into eyeballs made with strategically decorated

raw eggs, creating a huge mess, but also a huge impact on his audience (it truly was cathartic!). Greg presented Aristotle as “The Father of Literary Criticism,” a take on Chaucer as the “Father of English Poetry”. There was the solemn group in full costume with candles and flowing robes (luckily they didn’t start a fire), and the wacky group presenting Oedipus galloping across the stage with reindeer antlers on his head.

Yet each group clearly emphasized the structural method, and argued for the relevance of Aristotle’s model citing modern movies and even current events as evidence that ironies run throughout our lives, and art does indeed mirror life. Discussion turned toward the radical as students ponder abuses of power in current events and in daily routine of school. Who has power in our culture, and how is it used or abused? Do human beings control events through sheer will, or does Fate decide much of what happens in our lives? Contemplating the nature of the tragic hero brought us back to Hamlet and the nature of his tragic flaw. Students wondered if catharsis was really a reader-response concern, because it is based on the experience a reader or member of the audience has with the work. We decided that catharsis in this case was built by the irony of the play, that irony “set up” the audience to fully experience the catharsis of Oedipus’s self mutilation. For effect, I shared the Roman philosopher Seneca’s version of the blinding of Oedipus. Seneca vividly describes how Oedipus rips his eyeballs out with his bare hands, a satisfying “gross out” for students. Comparing of the two versions socio-historically (see Chapter V) could spark an interesting discussion of why the Roman version might be more violent than the Greek. We talked about who had responsibility for what in the play, and the discussion turned to how people don’t want to take responsibility for their actions in American society. Ryan brings up the common “insanity” defense often used in criminal trials, Stephanie ponders the implications of “political correctness” on individual responsibility, John refers to events from *The*

Jerry Springer Show and how the people who appear on it never take responsibility for their actions. I silently considered the irony of this discussion of personal responsibility raging in a classroom full of adolescents.

Frame Stories and Extension Activities

Frame stories provided another application of the structural approach. I used a structural slant as study of *The Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron* (for more on this work, see the socio-historic chapter), the Arabian princesses stories in *A Thousand and One Nights*, and/or *The Panchatantra* from India. Frame stories add an additional structural layer to the narrative form. I demonstrated the structure of frame stories by literally dismantling a frame in class. Alone, each part (the glass, the picture, the backing, and the frame itself) doesn't mean anything, but each is necessary for the finished product. The frame provides the structure that makes the pieces useful together, just as the basic narrative structure in a frame story creates the basic meaning of the work, providing the language which unifies the smaller tales. For example, Eagleton cites Todorov's interpretation of *The Decameron* in which he argues that each story can be read "as a kind of extended sentence, combining [linguistic] units in different ways...secretly casting a sideways glance at its own processes of construction" (91). Understanding that Princess Sherezad is trying to save her life by telling stories in *A Thousand and One Nights* explains why each tale has an ending more surprising and outrageous; understanding the attraction the unchaperoned young men and women in *The Decameron* have for one another explains the pervasive sexual themes within the stories (and the difficulty in picking appropriate stories for the classroom!); knowing that a teacher is using animal tales in *The Panchatantra* to educate young princes in India explains the parables and songs within the stories. Without this structure, each

work would disintegrate into a heap of unrelated stories. In this way, the stories become the parole of the larger frame structure. Yet, just like an individual short story, each tale has both the narrative structure and the metaphoric and linguistic embellishment of the parole. But these structures sit right on the larger structure of the frame. For example, in the *Panchatantra*, the frame tells the reader about the princes who must be educated to rule their people. But the individual story we read is about rabbits and forest animals. The parole of the story includes poetry and songs, the langue is the understanding that the song communicates the lesson. The lesson itself, however, is the parole for the underlying structural purpose of educating young princes in the frame story. Students diagrammed this three-tiered structure, individually puzzling through the added layer of structurality. How do we know when we are back to the main frame structure? How does the language (parole) carry us from layer to layer? How does punctuation function to make this transition possible? The parole, or specific language, of each work enables the reader make the leap from story to frame and back to story.

Conclusion

Using objective, text-based interpretive methods helped students develop the skills to conduct a close reading of textual material, but still often led to response-based construction of meaning. I found that students benefited from learning about structuralism, formalism and New Criticism because they could use such approaches as frameworks for constructing meaning in the same way as knowing about the specifics of archetypal and reader-response theory. In each case, the theory serves to scaffold response, but does not overpower or extinguish student interpretation of meaning. When I asked them to write about the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, Chad wrote that structuralism “gets the opinion out of it. It sets down standards that make you draw off only what you see in the text.” Many other students echoed his

perspective. But some students, like Betsy, wrote that “its weakness is that it is hard to figure out the one meaning and that it might not mean what the author intended”.

Sarah argued that if we really couldn’t use a structuralist approach in much of World Literature, because we were not evaluating the works in the language in which they were written, so we were actually reading and evaluating an entirely different structure than the original. She was right, and I had to think about that for a minute. But unless we were linguistically proficient enough to read ancient Greek or Arabic, translations would have to do.

I again used the progression of historic and heuristic teaching practices that I have outlined in Chapter III, and students again took discussion to the level of critical interpretation. In addition, I found that students would revisit previous theoretical approaches and works of literature to expand on the approach we were currently exploring. They were beginning to understanding the recursive nature of constructing meaning from text as methods of inquiry, not as “the right way” to interpret a text.

CHAPTER V

BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

Introduction

My goal in introducing the concept of what I called “biographical criticism”, a term I borrowed from Harold Bloom (*Anxiety* xxvii) was for students to see how consciously using historical and personal information about an author would help them construct meaning from, and therefore respond to, text. Donald Keesey calls this “Genetic criticism” in his overview of theory *Contexts for Criticism* (9). I used the term “biographical” rather than “genetic” or “authorial” because students were familiar with biography as a genre, however I will use the term “authorial” at times to refer to this critical method in my discussion of its implications. I wanted to see just how much difference prior knowledge of the author really made in student comprehension of text, partially because most of the anthologies students had used throughout their English studies emphasized such an approach. How much had the biographical emphasis of their textbooks informed their need for constructing an authoritative meaning of textual material? Would a biographical emphasis serve as a crutch, or a useful tool? I hoped they would recognize this approach as yet another method for reading and interpreting text.

In this chapter, I will define and discuss various historical and critical ideas about the role of authorial intent in the interpretive process and its relation to the theories I have discussed in previous chapters. I will also discuss the ways in which the concepts of ‘theme’ and ‘voice’ can be taught as a component to a biographical stance

in constructing meaning from text. In addition, I will show how approaching the textual situation with an emphasis on the author was particularly suited for incorporating technology, multi-media and research strategies into the unit. And finally, I will show that students' familiarity with the previous theoretical schools of thought enabled them to readily assume yet another stance in approaching text, indicated that they were building a sound repertoire of strategies and were reaching the point at which they could independently choose and assume a critical stance.

The Authorial Debate

Central to the biographical or authorial theory is, obviously, an understanding of the author of a given work. At its most basic, biographical criticism centers on the argument that it is not necessarily what the text says that is important, but what the author meant using the language particular to his/her position in place and time. The biographical stance assumes that, because the author wrote with specific intentions in mind, the reader must reconstruct the author's intended meaning to reach the most accurate interpretation. While the text itself is an important source of clues for the author's outlook on life, the reader must go beyond the text to fully comprehend the author's use of language, major influences, and personal life events that may have contributed to his/her work. When the reader can accurately assume the author's perspective, in a sense "re-enacting" the author's stance throughout the text, then he/she can come closest to discovering the authorial voice and consequently the basic messages inherent in the work. Concrete facts about an author's life and language can be verified, helping to narrow the range of meaning possibilities and making specific validation of an interpretation as the one closest to the author's intended meaning possible. When understood in this way, a biographical approach can be categorized as

an objective method for constructing meaning from text. I will also discuss, however, the ways in which authorial intent can lean toward the subjective as well, when understood in the broader contexts of postmodern theory.

Authorship as determinate of textual meaning is an approach to reading with a long history, reaching back into antiquity, and maintaining a critical base into modern literary interpretation. From St. Augustine to Chaucer, theologians and authors traditionally established the authority of text by acknowledging the source. This tradition continued through the Renaissance, exemplified in Sir Phillip Sidney's "Defense of Poesy" and the Eighteenth Century, evinced by poet Alexander Pope's extensive analysis of criticism in "Essay on Criticism" which emphasizes authorial intent: "In ev'ry Work regard the *Writer's End*,/ Since none can compass more than they *intend*" (255-6). In the modern era, Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious found its way into the literary criticism as critics applied his theories of the human psyche to examine authorial intent, or "psychobiography" (Abrams 230). The experiences and possible psychoses of the author surfaced in his/her writing, whether he/she was aware of it or not. Analyzing the author's Oedipal complex, relationship with parents and siblings, repressed sexuality, latent desires, and secret fantasies fascinated readers and critics who sought to find the deeper meaning of a work in such details of the author's life. Other biographical theorists sought to understand the authors' use of language in communicating the issues and events that are important within the text. As I will detail in the next section, E.D. Hirsch argued that it is therefore the *author's* language, not the reader's, which defines the range of meaning possibilities.

E.D. Hirsch and Harold Bloom

In 1946, William Kurtz Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley published their landmark essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (*Norton* 1371-1387), in which they argued that the only reliable source for constructing meaning is the text itself. To assume to know the author's intention is unscientific and merely speculation. They posited that a poem or story means what the words constructing it mean, regardless of what the author intended. In 1960, E.D. Hirsch, beleaguered by such New Critical views as well as those presented by structuralists and response theorists, defended his position on authorial interpretation of literature by publishing an essay in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* entitled "Objective Interpretation". In this essay, he argued that the reader's task "is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning, not a mere system of possibilities. Indeed, if a text *represented* a system of possibilities, interpretation would be impossible, since no actual reading could correspond to a mere system of possibilities" (30). He used structuralist terminology to argue that "it is the author's *langue*...and not the interpreter's which defines the range of meaning possibilities" (36). He didn't limit his rebuttal to structural critics however. Reader-response theory was also gaining critical respect and popularity, and he alluded to this theory in his defense of interpretation as "the construction of *another's* meaning...It is natural to speak not of what a text says, but of what the author means, and the more natural locution is the more accurate one" (37, emphasis in original). The concept of a 'natural' construction of meaning, as I've discussed in Chapter II, was claimed by response theorists claimed as the reader's transaction with text, not the initial comprehension of text as the author's intended meaning.

Harold Bloom emphasized the importance of knowing about the author of a text when he wrote *Anxiety of Influence* in 1973. He claimed that all poets are influenced by

the poets who came before them and identified “the defensive ‘revisionary ratios,’ by which...poets ‘misread’ a precursor father-poet and disguise his presence in their own poems” (Abrams 230). Consequently, poets and authors suffer from the anxiety of failing to realize their individual creative potential, and this anxiety is a meaningful presence in the texts they produce. Fully comprehending or interpreting the intricacies of a literary work means that the reader must take these authorial influences into consideration. “Poetic influence...is necessarily the study of the life cycle of poet-as-poet” (7). Bloom includes in his interpretive method the argument that poets inherently resent the influence and presence of the “great” poetry on their work, but the reader must acknowledge such factors in constructing an interpretation of the text. “Poems are written by men, and not by anonymous Splendors. The stronger the man, the larger his resentments....Let us give up the failed enterprise of seeking to “understand” any single poem as an entity in itself. Let us pursue instead the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet’s deliberate misinterpretation, *as a poet*, of a precursor poem...” (43, emphasis in original). Just as the presence of poet him/herself cannot be removed from an interpretation of a poem, asserts Bloom, nor can the poets who preceded him/her. In a sense, this exponentially compounds biographical theory; to know a poem, one must know the poet as well as the poems and poets who influenced him/her. Unfortunately, Bloom seems only to find poets to be men, and consistently refers only to male poets throughout the book.

Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault

French structuralist Roland Barthes joined the authorial debate in 1968 with an essay entitled “The Death of the Author” arguing that modern critics had reached a point at which authorial intention as a final determination was no longer necessary.

Instead of referring to the “author” of a text, Barthes referred to the “scriptor” who didn’t write a text, but instead wrote “a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture” (1468). Because the “scriptor” was influenced by so many outside forces, those of his/her culture, society, background, and literary influences, it is impossible to call the resulting piece of writing as completely that of the “author”. In addition, he recognized that the reader also played a role in the construction of meaning from text, although he wasn’t prepared to fully accept the transactional theory posited by response critics. Instead of emphasizing “the message of the Author-God” he argued, the emphasis should be on the reader’s construction of meaning; as a result “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (1470). Yet Barthes acknowledged that “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher the text becomes quite futile” because “the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (1469). The reader, for Barthes, is stripped of the aspects of ‘self’ and is not the same as the reader for response theorists, who conceive of him/her as an individual with prior knowledge, a sense of self, and personal experience to draw upon in constructing meaning from text. Barthes’s reader cannot be trusted to construct a *definitive* meaning on his/her own, it is the text that delineates the “field” in which the reader operates. But, reader-response arguments aside, Barthes clearly argues that authorial intent cannot determine the definitive meaning of the text.

Another influential French writer and thinker, Michel Foucault, also explored the implications of ‘removing’ the author from the interpretive process, suggesting that “we should reexamine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void” (1626). He emphasizes criticism’s long history of

relying on authorial construction of meaning from text, referring to the “Christian tradition” of using the author to “authenticate ... particular texts. Modern criticism, in its desire to ‘recover’ the author from a work, employs devices strongly reminiscent of Christian exegesis when it wished to prove the value of a text by ascertaining the holiness of its author” (1630). In this essay, however, he did note that “The author...is undoubtedly only one of the possible specifications of the subject and...it appears that the form, the complexity, and even the existence of this function are far from immutable” (1636). In other words, Foucault acknowledges, here, that using an author’s biography as a way of interpreting a poem could be considered one of many ways into the text, but not the definitive meaning of the text. His desire to ‘reexamine’ this method contributed to the expansion of theoretical approaches to text in the post-modern era.

Postmodernism

Harold Bloom asserted in the introduction to the latest edition of *Anxiety of Influence* (1997) that “Biographical criticism [is] long out of fashion” (xxvii). Yet close analysis of the various perspectives of modern literary theory that a biographical approach plays an important role in considering all the meaning possibilities of a text. It is true that the objective stance of E.D. Hirsch, citing authorial intention as *the definitive* meaning of a text, is no longer considered, by itself, a reliable method for literary interpretation, but I will argue that authorial biography is still inherent in modern theory and, therefore, an important concept to teach in literature classes. For example, Jonathon Culler describes the current critical focus on cultural and post-colonial studies as a “‘hermeneutics of recovery’ which seeks to reconstruct the original context of production (the circumstances and intentions of the author and the meanings a text

might have had for its original readers)...[and which] may celebrate the text and its author as it seeks to make an original message accessible to readers today” (*Literary Theory* 64). While this is not an argument for *only* seeking to know the author in seeking to know the text, it does place a certain emphasis on an author’s biographical data in the construction of meaning.

Feminist critical discourse, by virtue of focusing on women and their writing, often includes biographical references. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar rely heavily on author biographical data in *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) to highlight differences in the development of a female literary tradition as opposed to the male literary tradition. Largely considered a correction aimed at Bloom’s complete omission of female authors in *Anxiety of Influence*, Gilbert and Gubar identify the “anxiety of authorship” that women writers have historically suffered. In making this argument, their approach is inherently biographical, as they must unavoidably include personal and social histories of women authors. I will cite the following brief phrases as demonstrative of a biographical stance: “words seem to indicate that Dickinson’s keen consciousness that ...‘guests’ and ‘ghosts’ inhabit all literary texts” (2028); “it was her semi-conscious perception...that gave [Anne] Sexton herself ‘a secret fear’” (2032); “what all these characters and their authors really fear they have forgotten is precisely that aspect of their lives which has been kept from them...”(2035). This implicitly biographical stance effectively supports Gilbert and Gubar’s exploration of feminist theory and literary tradition and is important in my discussion of such theory to refute Bloom’s assertion that biographical criticism is entirely “out of fashion”.

There is a similar role for biography in post-colonial theory and cultural studies. When an author springs from a marginalized or oppressed people, he/she becomes representative of that culture. The author’s biography is then of some import and

informs interpretation to a certain extent. That the author is from a marginalized population, that the author is female, a minority, gay or lesbian, oppressed by a dominant culture or social class, has become crucial both in the reader's stance toward the work and whether or not the work is included in an English curriculum. The debate surrounding the literary canon rages over whose voices should be included and, consequently, heard in the field of literary study. When the author becomes representative of his/her culture, class, race, or gender, he/she also becomes the voice for that population. A teacher's decision to include a 'multi-cultural' or marginalized literary work in an English curriculum is a decision to include a voice which will, by default, speak as the authority for a certain class, gender, race, or otherwise marginalized population and bring it into the mainstream. Bringing the themes and details of the author's life to light increases the likelihood of critical discussion in a classroom concerning feminist, ethnic, gay and lesbian, cultural and post-colonial issues.

I bring this argument to bear here to again emphasize my purpose in teaching biographical theory as a way into a text, but also to pave the way for the next chapter of this dissertation. A biographical stance was the starting point for my students, but as they began to inquire into the lives and times of the authors they chose to read, new worlds opened up to them. Their inquiry drove our study of literature not only further into the postmodern landscape than I ever thought we'd go, but also into the darkest places of human experience. But we had to start somewhere, so I again used the literature available to me in my World Literature classroom to investigate biographical theory as yet another way to construct meaning from text.

Teaching Methods and Practice

Researching and responding to a significant individual's biographical history is a commonly used research project at all educational levels and content areas; I was

certain that my students have been through such research before. Even though the anthologies used in the existing literature curriculum emphasized the personal history of authors, I did not know if students had fully explored how the details of an author's family, social, and psychological life offer a perspective for understanding his/her works. Too often the lesson ends with finding and recording facts about an artist's birth, death, and accomplishments with no higher cognitive application for researched information. I decided that in World Literature, we would go beyond the basic research exercise and experiment with biographical criticism as a way to construct meaning from text. I did not, however, include specific references to the critics I have discussed in detail above, but rather adopted a general view of authorial biography as interpretive method. I again used progressive instructional methods, beginning with historical background information, developing heuristics for constructing meaning, and eventually encouraging students to assume a critical stance as they evaluated and responded to literature.

Authorial Theory and Franz Kafka

I conducted the most extensive research into teaching biographical criticism centered on the life and works of Franz Kafka. This was in part due to the inclusion of Kafka's work in the textbook and World Literature curriculum, and in part because students often found his writing difficult to understand. I wanted to see how students would fare with Kafka's work if they assumed a biographical stance. In Chapter II, I discussed ways in which Kafka's "The Hunger Artist" required students to fill in many gaps with their prior knowledge and experience to construct meaning from the narrative. Similarly, in this chapter I will discuss how students filled in those gaps with prior knowledge of the author. Not only did students come to a better understanding of his work, but they sympathized with the man and his eccentricities, and gained an

appreciation of the impact of reading any work with a biographical perspective. I encouraged them to draw conclusions from his works as interrelated pieces, not just individual stories, using each piece as a starting point for interpreting the next piece. Working with *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and the movie *Kafka*, we investigated the concepts of voice and style, theme and, of course, meaning. In addition, we reviewed the concepts of structural, response and archetypal theory throughout the unit.

I assigned Part I of *The Metamorphosis* giving no information on Franz Kafka, but asked students to examine how the story was constructed. I purposefully began with a structural emphasis so they could experience the difference in knowing and not knowing the author on their actual interpretive methods. Students noted the division of the story into three sections and pointed to the dramatic and, for them, unbelievable, first sentence. But a structural approach didn't help them construct a significant or unifying meaning for the rest of Part I. "There's no way this could ever happen! This story is crazy" several students protested. "He's probably dreaming and will wake up any second and go 'Whew! What a dream!'"

It's true that the story requires an enormous leap of faith on the part of the reader, and this made it difficult for them to assume any stance toward the work at all. For some students, the whole concept was too large a leap and they resisted a serious study of the work, simply assuming that Gregor would wake up in the end. Our textbook translation read that Gregor Samsa discovers one morning he has turned into an enormous "dung beetle".

"What is a dung beetle anyway?" Mary wanted to know. Unfortunately, there was a picture of a large, black beetle in their textbook, which immediately formed their interpretation of Gregor's transformation. We parsed the word: dung is another word for feces, while of course a beetle is a bug with a protective shell. "Oh, a shit bug!"

shouted Patrick, much to the amusement of the rest of the class. This wasn't helpful. We discussed this translation and compared it to other translations of the first sentence, in which Gregor has transformed into a "vermin" or "cockroach". Is turning into a "vermin" different than turning into a "dung beetle?" We talked about segments and gaps, and students tried to answer their questions about the information that they felt was missing from the narrative. They noted that the picture of the beetle that accompanied the first page of text filled in some gaps for them, but, because they were becoming increasingly critical of what they read, (and saw, in this case) they weren't sure they could rely on it.

They decided they disliked the father and began to sympathize somewhat with Gregor, but they didn't understand how Gregor transformed and what it could possibly mean. To help them develop a better understanding of Gregor and make a connection with Kafka himself later, when we would specifically address a biographical approach, I asked them to list reasons why they thought Gregor was unhappy even before he turned into a dung beetle. They noted his exhausting job, his father, money, responsibilities to his family, and his lack of friends, finding that they had more information about Gregor than they had thought. After the first section had thoroughly confused and intrigued them, they were primed for understanding the benefits of approaching a work biographically. Knowing about Franz Kafka himself, I hoped, would help them to construct meaning from the text.

First, to introduce them to Kafka more intimately than the sanitized, textbook paragraph of "author background," I gave students a few excerpts of Kafka's personal writing. I had chosen these excerpts from Kafka's journals and "Letter to His Father" (taken from *I Am a Memory Come Alive* by Nahum Glatzer, 1974 (Appendix D) to correspond with people and events in *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka was a prolific letter and journal writer, leaving an overwhelming body of primary sources, so I felt it was

important to carefully choose appropriate excerpts. I didn't want to overwhelm students with the minutia of his personal writing or the wealth of secondary biographical sources that interpret that minutia.

As they read the journal excerpts included here, I asked students think about Kafka and his troubles in life, listing some of his problems and comparing them with the problems they listed for Gregor Samsa. They were amazed at the similarities between the two lists. "He's just like Gregor! I feel sorry for him." "Why didn't he just move out of the house? Couldn't he just leave?" "That's why the father in the story is such a jerk. Kafka's father was mean, too." "He probably really did feel like a bug!" Their curiosity was piqued; they wanted to know more about this man. They recognized elements of his voice in Gregor's words, or vice versa.

As with the previous perspectives in literary theory we studied, I started the unit with a study guide and discussion of the biographical approach (Appendix C). Students immediately grasped the concept, and had some thoughts about authorial theory as interpretive method.

"That's not for just writers, though" said Amy. "If you know anybody's personal history, you can understand why they do some of the things they do."

"Like politicians, or movie stars. Maybe Marilyn Manson was abused by his mother or something. That would explain him, sort of." mused Beth.

"What about the (hypothetical) kid down the hall you think is weird?" I asked. "If you knew his personal background, could it change the way you understand him?"

"Yeah, sometimes other people don't like a couple of my friends. But I know them pretty well, and I know why they act the way they do. So it doesn't bother me" offered Patrick. "I guess that's like understanding the writer helps to understand the book."

"What if I just want to read without having to know everything about the

author? What if I just like the story?" Jeff wanted to know.

"Do *all* writers have weird lives?" asked John, suddenly changing the subject.

"Well," I answered, "I guess you'd have to be a sensitive person to be a poet, or at least a person with the luxury of time on your hands to write seriously." (I think of Thomas Gray's "mute, inglorious Milton" lying in a country churchyard.) "Why do you think people want to become writers, or any kind of artist for that matter? Do all writers musicians and artists make a lot of money?"

The class thought for a minute. "Not very many, really" says Jeff. "I don't think they really want to *become* artists, I think they just *have* to tell a story or play music." This class wasn't quite sure why an individual would choose these types of occupations. "Maybe your life has to have been difficult so you know about the problems other people might have, too."

"Does knowing the author change the way you understand a poem or story?"

"I wouldn't even try to understand 'Kubla Khan' if I didn't know anything about Coleridge" says Anna, who had studied the poem in my British Literature class the year before. "Especially because he dreamed it up while he was passed out on opium." (Our textbook had provided that little tidbit, of course omitting many other aspects of his biography that would have been enlightening.)

"Lots of novels have author notes on the back" says Chad. "Sometimes I read those."

"Maybe you just don't really get the real point of anything you read" says Matt. "Maybe you just don't really understand it if you don't know about the author. But who cares, if you like the book anyway?"

In this conversation, students were essentially talking about the inherent connection readers' make with text, and where the author may (or may not) fit in the big picture. They were having trouble putting this into words, but they were talking about

the basic cognitive activity of constructing meaning from text.

This class discussion dealt with issues of the author's message and the ways in which he/she presents it. I wondered if, when students began to understand an author's perspective, they would 'hear' his/her voice and comprehend his/her message within a work. Could they develop a certain sympathy for the author and an insight into the craft of creating setting and character as a vehicle for that message? I decided to teach concepts of voice and theme in this unit (Appendix).

Voice and Theme

If approaching a work biographically is defined as assuming the author's perspective in constructing meaning, it is important to recognize and understand his/her use of voice. If the assumption is made that the voice in the text is that of the author (which, in Kafka's works, I felt was a safe assumption), 'hearing' the author's verbal meaning through the written words on the page requires some knowledge of the author's personality. Just as verbal conversation relies upon the extraneous details of facial expression, tone of voice and non-verbal gesture to communicate the meaning of words, so does this approach to constructing textual meaning rely on the extraneous details of the author's connotations for words, general outlook on life and probable verbal intent in his/her communications. The basic elements of an author's voice and style remain fairly consistent throughout many of his/her works. When students can discern the author's voice in the text, he/she becomes a real human being with a story to tell and a message to convey. I hoped this could help students to find their own voices in writing; they can better communicate their own ideas or tell their own stories if they understand how an author is communicating his or hers (Appendix E).

We went back to Kafka's personal journals and letters again to identify his voice and compare specific words and phrases with those of Gregor. Kafka writes of

the “uproar” and “inconsiderate” noise of his household as if it is unbearable. The most routine activities of a family’s preparation for the day become magnified; the “slamming,” “shouting,” and “singing” and even the “hushing that claims to be friendly” of his father’s leaving for work only lead to a “more distracted, “more hopeless noise” of the day to come. He contemplates finding the solitude for writing with words like “yearning” and “desire”, bemoans the “agony” and “hedged in” feeling of working and, most importantly refers to himself as a “snake” or “worm”. Similarly, Gregor describes his job as “grueling” and “torture” and describes himself as “a tool of his boss, without brains or backbone”. His father speaks to him in a “deeper, warning voice” and wears “a hostile expression” while he marvels at his mother’s “soft voice”. Gregor has transformed into a vermin, while Kafka only referred to himself as one. In his personal writing, Kafka’s voice is humanly authentic (“straight up” says Matt) as he wrote those words only for himself. In the stories, even though he has removed him-self personally from the situation through his characters, students could clearly recognize his voice in both the narration and the voice of Gregor. Developing an ear for Kafka’s voice helps students recognize the message inherent in the text, or, as a bio-graphical critic might say, assume his stance or perspective as they interpret the events in his work

Kafka, I must acknowledge here, is not the most appropriate author for studying the particulars of voice. We read his words in translation; his true voice is garbled somewhat with the translator of a particular text. But his life and work truly fascinated students as they discussed differences in various translations and particulars of his voice. As we studied his works, we discussed the understated power of the first sentence of each work, the melancholy nature of dialogue and description so characteristic of Kafka. These distinctly recognizable elements of voice allow students to readily hear him and grasp his message. To this end, and at this level of literary study,

trusting in the translation gives students the opportunity to identify the voice telling the story as distinctly Kafka's.

Teaching theme as "the author's message to the reader" further connects the author and the text, giving students another angle from which to approach a work (Appendix F). They can stop and think: How does recognizing this author's voice help me to interpret and evaluate, then accept or reject his/her message? The theme or message of a literary work conveys what we identified at the beginning of this unit as the author's perception of an inherent truth about the world in which he/she lived. I discovered later that the greater concept of 'perceived truth' served as a starting point for the larger student inquiry projects I will describe in Chapter VI, but in the beginning we simply discussed this as an aspect of theme.

Initially, students had difficulty clearly expressing a theme. They wanted to use short one or two word statements like "alienation" or "family relations" to describe the message they perceived. I encouraged them to express a theme in depth, using a complete sentence that was focused and specific. For example, rather than simply arguing for an author's sense of "alienation" as a theme, I pressed students to develop something closer to an exploration of "the problem of a person's alienation from society and the coping mechanisms he/she must develop for surviving as an individual." As we read from Kafka's work, the class brainstormed themes like these: "There are consequences for refusing to conform to an authority's opinion of who we are and what we should do" or "Real communication between individuals is impossible, because we are all separate and have our own ideas about the world." It was interesting to discuss the relevance of theme to both the structuralism and biographical unit. When a reader assumes a structuralist stance, theme becomes a fundamental concept or issue that supports and enhances the plot, like the "irony" themes we had discussed during our reading of *Oedipus Rex*. But when a reader assumes a biographical stance, theme

becomes an issue relevant to the author's background and history that the reader can assume he/she desires to communicate through the story or poem. Realizing this difference emphasized the importance of critical perspective. Again, this discussion of and practice in identifying a specific theme also served as a foundation for the next unit.

Reading from *The Trial* and *The Castle* helped students continually review what they knew about the author and use that knowledge to construct meaning, emphasizing the relevance of a biographical approach. Both novels are fast reads, but I assigned only key chapters as required reading and allowed students to read the rest on their own to conserve time. Reading one of the novels entirely and a synopsis of the other could also help with the time crunch. The first chapters are obviously essential, and the last chapters of both novels end dramatically. Picking two or three key chapters from the novels to emphasize in class helped students to examine the same themes they identified in *The Metamorphosis*. The novels' obvious similarities in main characters, (both named K.) I also found a great film, entitled *Kafka*, to use as the culmination of our "Kafka" unit. Starring Jeremy Irons as Franz Kafka, the movie cleverly blends bits from his personal history and writing in a plot of mystery and intrigue. The opening scene is extremely dramatic, drawing students immediately into the plot, and they delighted in recognizing subtle allusions to the works they had read. To top it off, it's a bizarre mystery (Kafkaesque, of course!) incorporating his major themes, including surrealistically slow chase scenes and strangely aloof characters, helping students review the themes and the works we've studied as they watch.

By the time we've finished the movie, the class had completed a thorough overview of Kafka's most important works, including the concept of voice and theme; they even noticed similar structural patterns that emerged. The most striking linguistic pattern was the power of the first sentence in each work, as Kafka throws the reader right into the thick of the plot. Another pattern that emerged was Kafka's use of

surrealism. Students recognized that Kafka's voice and theme contributed to the mysterious and dream-like quality of Kafka's work, creating a distinct element of surrealism in his stories. "This is like the 'X-Files'! Or 'Unsolved Mysteries'!" The dream-like state of Gregor's predicament, the nightmare Joseph K. experiences in *The Trial*, the strange way the Castle seems further and further away as K. tries to reach it in *The Castle* and the agonizingly slow chase scenes in the movie *Kafka* are examples of surrealism that students readily identified. A pattern that remains consistent and easily traced throughout Kafka's body of work, surrealism is effective for a bio-graphical, thematic focus. Why would Kafka consistently include such surrealistic events?

Authorial Biography and Media Literacy

Because students were already familiar with using encyclopedias and other basic sources for finding biographical information, and because grasping the concept of using authorial intent as an interpretive strategy wasn't a complex one for students, I could use this particular approach to teach in-depth research skills and encourage inquiry-based research projects without confusing them with too much information. Our school media center had recently added a new computer lab and updated electronic sources, which I was eager to introduce to students. I worked with the Library Media Specialist to develop some guidelines for student research using both in-depth print sources and electronic sources for gathering biographical information. Technology allowed students greater flexibility in devising research topics and research questions because information was readily available and accessible. I wanted to help students become competent critics and researchers, locating and examining journals, letters, and personal artifacts from an author to help them gain perspective on the author's mind and message.

Using the Internet and other on-line services not only allowed students to

discover information on the most obscure of authors, but also obscure information on well-known authors. Most contemporary authors have their own home pages and large publishing houses feature “author of the month” spotlights and on-line chats, making biographical approaches more interesting and accessible than ever. Primary sources and original documents are available to teachers and students through numerous on-line projects. Two that were particularly useful for my classes were the Library of Congress American Memories collection (www.loc.gov), where students could read from personal journals, both in the writer’s own handwriting and in transcription, and the National Archives and Records Administration (www.nara.gov) which catalogs a vast amount of primary sources. Although we did not take advantage of it for this particular unit, video conferencing could provide additional opportunities for connecting with authors or scholars and is a field that is quickly expanding in the field of education. Students love to research on the Internet, and material on classic books and authors as well as contemporary writers can be overwhelming; students must also learn to critically examine any Internet site they used to ensure it was accurate and up-to-date. But I also wanted to encourage students to use traditional sources for research to avoid over-reliance on the Internet. My relationship with the Library Media Specialist was invaluable; she helped me gather source materials, determine which were potentially most useful, and teach students how to use the sources effectively. The key was to make sure students used the author background material as a springboard to interpretation, developing a feel for the author’s point-of-view and intent in writing a particular piece. I used the concepts of theme and voice to encourage students to do so.

After reading the excerpts of Kafka’s personal writing and discussing themes from *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and the movie *Kafka*, students had enough information to move on and formulate a research question. Our goal was to see how much knowing about Kafka’s personal history would help inform a final

interpretation of his body of work. But I had struggled with deciding when students should write their research questions. Should it be before they read or after? Should it inform their immediate interpretation of the text, or 'round out' a reading as they reflect on their knowledge of the author? I decided to have students do much of the reading first because I was looking to emphasize biographical criticism in stages of understanding; I wanted students to recognize the influence of prior knowledge of the author after they had read so they could see if it made a difference. These students were accustomed to having some biographical information before they read anyway, because their text-books always provided it.

Using the theme they had chosen as their basic subject of inquiry, students formulated research questions that structured their investigation into Kafka and his works. Their research questions evolved directly from their own curiosity, but I gave them a few guidelines. I required that each research question contain two or three basic concepts about Kafka, his message and his works. For example, one aspect of Kafka's writing that we discussed was his use of surrealism and how it contributed to the dream-like quality of his work (one student expressed this theme as "Surviving a life you hate can be a nightmare"). A research question engendered by a student's curiosity about this theme could be something like "Why did Kafka include surrealism so often in his works?" This deceptively simple question addresses the concepts of Kafka himself, surrealism, and any of his works. A more complex question, like "Does Kafka's need to be separate from his family and co-workers show up in a positive or negative way in his characters? Do they all have the same need to be alone or different, and does this turn out to be a good or bad thing?" covers Kafka, his theme of the innate separateness of the individual, and his main characters. Researching the answers to their own questions encouraged students to continue investigating Kafka's voice and theme, and using the information they discover as a basis for understanding the works.

I used biographical research to teach research strategies using such phrases, key words, and subject headings as research tools, helping students find information on the research questions they had formulated. When they had their research questions in hand, but before we began research on the Internet or with any electronic database, I asked students to write what I called a “search phrase” for their research question. A search phrase consists of key words taken from the research question, but they are written in boolean terms. Boolean searches include key words joined by “and,” “or,” and “not,”; may include “nested” phrases in parentheses, and may include phrases in quotation marks to ensure the words appear together in a resulting source. The purpose for writing a search phrase is to find only the hits, or sources, that will contain specific information for answering the research question. A perfect search in an extensive electronic database will elicit just a few ideal sources; using just one or two key words can produce a list of thousands of sources, which is, of course, not helpful for conducting research. I also spent some time showing them how to use the “help” or advanced search functions available in most web browser or database search fields to identify shortcuts and symbols for truncation, which may differ from search engine to search engine.

For our Kafka research, I taught boolean search techniques by asking students to look at their research question and list as many synonyms for key words or concepts as they could. This would enable them to either broaden or narrow a search by using different words that may appear in a discussion of their topic. Then we talked about the peculiarities of the boolean search; the fact that joining two key words with “and” will result in fewer hits than joining them with “or,” which is exactly the opposite of the way we use those words in daily speech. For example, if you ask someone for an apple *and* an orange, you will receive two pieces of fruit. If you ask them for an apple *or* an orange, you will only receive one. But if a boolean search phrase asks a search engine

for “Kafka *and* surrealism” only hits that include both words will result. If the search phrase asks for “Kafka *or* surrealism,” hits containing either one or the other word will result, and doubling the number of hits returned, many of them will not have anything to do with Kafka at all. “Nesting” refers to boolean search commands set apart from the rest of the phrase with parentheses. For example, a search phrase for the research question “Why did Kafka include surrealism in his works?” might be written like this: “(Kafka or “Franz Kafka”) and (surrealism or surreal) and (“The Trial” or “The Castle”) and (journals or letters)”. The resulting hits would hopefully contain information about Kafka’s personal writings in relation to surrealism and his novels.

Students were resistant to boolean searching at first. They wanted to use natural language to search with a browser on the Internet, choosing from the top sources listed in the results. Natural language searches still use key words, but simply search the text of sources for word matches, disregarding function words like “and,” “or,” and “not”. While many search features of this kind will offer the researcher a choice of “all the words” or “exact phrase” and so on, and this will often elicit results, many times students will miss out on excellent sources because they either weren’t specific enough in their search or they didn’t carefully consider which hits would really provide useful information. In addition, there are many marketing reasons why one source may appear at the top of a search engine hit list; students must carefully evaluate the sources they choose to use. And many electronic databases don’t function in the same way as Internet search engines. Students were impressed with the results they obtained from their boolean search phrases, even though they were initially resistant to writing them out.

Results

The primary goal for researching Kafka’s biography was for students to find

their own way “in” to his works, learn some literary techniques and research methods; I found again that organizing activities around a specific method of literary theory was quite successful. I spent very little time lecturing, but instead served as a guide, helping students progress from a state of mystification at the first reading of *The Metamorphosis*, through a period of fairly self-directed inquiry to a final determination of meaning and thematic understanding of the man and his message. Along the way, students learned about methods of research and information evaluation. Because they had followed their own research paths to answer questions they had posed themselves, finding something to say about Kafka and his work came much easier to them, as evinced in the following writing samples from the end of the unit.

Matt focused on how Kafka “shows how he believed in being alone as well as his dislike of society. Throughout his writing signs of despair and loneliness come into play continuously. In this novel [*The Castle*], the main character, K., never had a solid foundation to stand on. He was an outcast who apparently was satisfied with who he was and did not seem to care one bit about others around him. K. did not receive people well and had a hard time making friends”. He goes on to describe Gregor who “represented Kafka himself associating every event that happened to Gregor with that of his own life. When Gregor became the beetle (sic), his family turned against him, especially his father as ‘he went for Gregor with a sullen look on his face...and Gregor staggered at the ...soles of his boots.’ Reflecting on Kafka’s life, this piece represents society attacking him. Kafka was the little ant on the street who always felt like he had to run for his life when people came walking by”. Matt assumes Kafka’s perspective on life, gained through reading his journal excerpts.

Sarah wrote that “Even though Kafka is now a renowned writer his life was not so magnificent. Kafka never accepted society, or himself for that matter. His works represent him as well as the people around him, exemplifying a different part of society

and how it feels to be at the bottom of the social ladder”.

Patrick realized that the “alienation felt by Franz Kafka led him into a life of isolation, an isolation then carried over to his stories, bringing to life characters much like himself”.

John compared Kafka’s sense of isolation with Gregor Samsa’s. “He was forced not only into mental isolation but also physical. ‘It took great self-control for him [Gregor] to stay under the couch...in his cramped position where he could hardly breath’ but he did it for his family so they wouldn’t have to see him looking as he did. This forced isolation led Gregor into an unhappy, short life much the same as Kafka. Franz Kafka was a very isolated man and through his grotesque tales he showed his feelings by creating characters mirroring himself”.

Conclusions

In summary, I found that when students construct meaning using information from an author’s personal and cultural background, they engaged in the following progression of literary understanding:

1. They researched aspects of the author’s life for insight into work.
2. They examined an author’s language to identify authorial voice.
3. They developed an ear for the author’s voice to discover message or theme.
4. They continued to focus author research into specific research questions.
5. This research enabled them to develop sympathy for the author and greater sensitivity to theme.
6. This sensitivity led to a construction of meaning based on their perception of the author’s message.

7. They could then declare this interpretation and argue for its relevance based on their prior knowledge of the author.

Each stage of comprehension led to the next as students became more acquainted with a particular author's life and literary works.

By assuming a biographical stance, students had learned not only about literary interpretation, but also the implications of understanding a way of life that may be quite different than their own. For example, the more they knew about Kafka, the more they begin to sympathize with him, synthesizing themes running throughout his works. When, through their research, they experience the difficulties encountered by others, they learn that different people have perspectives on life that are different than theirs, and develop a sense of empathy for the struggle that others have had at times to merely survive. Students are more likely to grasp the intention of the author if they have a knowledge base with a basic understanding of the author's purpose in writing a story, novel or poem. If students adopt or understand the perspective of another, the vision of life they experience can be significantly different and recognize a message that gives them something significant to say about a novel, story or poem. Once again, a specific critical approach gives them the focus and language to define that meaning and communicate an interpretation. The particulars of biographical theory provided them the language with which to say it.

CHAPTER VI

THEMATIC CRITICISM

Introduction

By the time we had finished the biographical theory unit, the year was nearly two-thirds over. I was painfully aware that we had barely begun to scratch the surface in the study of either literary theory or World Literature. I also wanted to provide time for students to just *read*, and choose what they were reading. As I mulled over the schedule for the weeks we had left, contemplating how we could cover as much theoretical and literary ground as possible, I decided to extend our cooperative learning by having students read novels individually, then share their reading with the class. That way we could discuss a greater expanse of authors, literature, and cultures. The unifying framework, again, would be theory. But I still had all of modern theory to cover: Marxism, feminism, cultural studies, deconstruction and the like. How could I possibly introduce all of these concepts? I thought about my larger goals: to encourage metacognitive awareness, critical reading and interpretive strategies, and engagement with text. Thus far students had readily grasped theory when I presented it sequentially, in structured activities. What would happen if students also investigated theory on their own, settling on their own methods of interpretation? I decided to provide the larger frameworks of modern theory and allow student-generated inquiry to further our study into literature and theory.

Students were taking the helm, and I was often just along for the ride, so we did not advance in as neatly a linear fashion as we had before. Consequently, at times we discussed theory and terminology in tangential mini-lessons, tackling some larger

concepts as they arose in discussion. I did not provide study guides or questions, nor did I provide specific historic information. I did, however, organize these larger issues into a general framework. I will first define briefly the main terms I used in broadening our study of literature and theory, then provide further detail as I present the results of student inquiry.

I use the term “thematic criticism”, as identified by Stanley Fish, to refer to critical methods in which “a work is discovered to be the literary expression of [various] concerns, be they economic, psychological, political or military, sexual...what the thematic critic then produces are economic or psychological or sociological or political or philosophical readings” (*Reader* 106). Thematic criticism can be understood as an ‘umbrella’ term, providing a larger framework for many post-modern and traditional approaches to literary interpretation. I did not use this particular term with students, although in retrospect I believe it would have been useful. Because we had spent time discussing theme in both Chapters IV and V, the designation “thematic criticism” would have provided a clear connection to previous approaches we had studied. But this term is useful in the context of this chapter because, according to Fish’s definition, it covers many of the concepts of our final units of study more accurately than the term “postmodern” or “post-structuralism”. Many of the theoretical concepts students chose to pursue were not modern and could not be classified under either of these terms.

I wanted students to recognize specific theoretical approaches, such as feminism, historicism, deconstruction, Marxism, etc., as separate and identifiable schools of thought but, at the same time, to become increasingly self-directed as they inquired into theory. I was faced with a dilemma: if I introduced students to specific theory, I would have to choose between a few additional approaches and omit others; if I let students

engage in their own inquiry, I could not be sure they would have enough critical scaffolding to tackle difficult theoretical concepts. I settled on a compromise; I would organize our study into two general themes, briefly discuss the basic concepts of each, then allow students to discover the details in their search for meaning in the literature they read. Because my larger goal was to encourage students to read and think, I gave students many choices in interpretation and reading material by organizing our study of theory into two main topics: sociological and philosophical.

I chose these terms because both invite further study of modern and historical thought, allowing student to focus their ideas without overly limiting their opportunities for developing an interpretative approach to any text they chose to read. Sociological criticism implies more than the study of society, but also the study of ideologies that privilege certain aspects of society while oppressing others, perpetuating the concept of the “other” in social stratification. I simply found I could not separate larger concepts of sociological theory from ideology.

Philosophical criticism, on the other hand, also includes the history of ideas, but includes interpretive discussion of how these ideas are exemplified in a literary work. I will begin my discussion of teaching methods with sociological, including students’ response and writing, then follow with a discussion of philosophical theory. Both themes allowed students the freedom to pursue historical and modern modes of inquiry and provided students with some concrete guidelines and language for expressing their interpretation of literary material.

Theoretical Background

Sociological Criticism

It made sense to begin this larger scope of theory and interpretation with a

sociological approach, because it provided a logical progression from biographical criticism. M.H. Abrams defined such an approach as an

“interest in the ways authors are affected by such circumstances of their time and place as their class status, gender, and interests, the ways of thinking and feeling characteristic of their era, the economic conditions of the writer’s profession and of the publication and distribution of books, and the social class conceptions, and values of the audience to which writers address themselves. Sociological critics treat a work of literature as inescapably conditioned...by the social, political, and economic organization and forces of its age” (174).

A sociological approach, therefore, contains within it the opportunity to explore ideological theories of race, Marxism, feminism, and cultural studies, while also opening the door for students to examine broadly historic approaches to constructing meaning from text. Because these are all important issues in and of themselves, I will address them individually throughout my discussion of student activities and response.

Sociology: History and Society

Sociological theory is a stance toward a text in which the reader assumes that in order to understand a literary work, the reader must understand the society in which it was written. Students grasped this concept quickly, and without any study guide, because, of course, they had already been studying history and society for years in school. But, more importantly, because they were well acquainted with the intellectual activity of criticism, they could readily move on to the next category of theory. Susan wrote that she liked sociological criticism "because you can draw parallels between things in the society and have a better understanding of the work". Then students had to decide how they could use historical knowledge to fill in textual gaps, answer questions, and solve problems in the text, thereby supporting their interpretation of characters and events. We again revisited Gabriela Mistral's short story "Why Reeds Are Hollow," and this time Zack noted that:

"when this story was written, in 1914, World War I had started. In Europe, Germany was trying to grow bigger, change its shape, size and purpose. The story shows that everything has its natural shape, size and purpose and that it's wrong to try and change that. Everything should work together with their (sic) differences and there will be harmony. 'Beautiful is the violet for its minuteness, and the lemon tree for its gentle shape. Beautiful are all things as God made them: the noble oak and the brittle barley.' Knowing it was written during World War I makes this more meaningful."

Students were quickly ready to move on to more complex ideological issues.

Ideology: Marxist and Feminist

A discussion of sociology's role in literary interpretation inevitably involves addressing the subject of ideology. Ideology is defined as "a set of concepts, beliefs, values and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by which they explain, what they take to be reality" (Abrams 219). Ideology informs perception, but does not uncover, and can even obscure, 'truth' or an objective view of society and the world at large. All societies in history have perpetuated an ideology inherent in a system of values, beliefs, ideas and customs with certain expectations for the behavior of the individual in upholding that ideology. Ideological assumptions help each of us determine how we fit in the world, what we believe, and how we should treat others and are often unconscious, unarticulated and embedded in daily social and personal interaction. We unconsciously hold to ideological paradigms that we've learned through the living of life and contact with our social environment. An entire society can hold to a system of ideological beliefs, or it can be a private and individual belief system. Ideologies "like to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not" (115) in a given society, and lead to oppression of those in society who do not hold with the ideological beliefs of the majority. Raymond Williams defines ideology as a "set of ideas which arise from a given set of material interests or definite class or group" in society (156). Ideology is a political construct, actively causing an

individual to behave one way or another in society even if he/she is not aware of holding to the tenets of a specific ideology, and is often an emotional response to social and personal issues. It is therefore a cause rather than an effect, which, combined with the emphasis on material interests, draws a clear distinction between ideology and philosophy.

Exploring the role of ideology in literary interpretation was similar to methods of affective critical theory that we've previously discussed. For example, when a reader approaches a work from a biographical perspective, he/she often looks to the author's ideological beliefs to elucidate questions about the meaning of a work. Response theorists argue that meaning construction incorporates the reader's ideology as a means of filling in the gaps of a text. This is not so obviously the case, however, with objective methods for constructing meaning such as formalism, structuralism, or New Criticism, although making the choice to assume such a stance is an ideological one on the part of such readers, who "are nowhere more clearly ideological than in their attempts to ignore history and politics altogether" (Eagleton 170).

But this was difficult stuff, and required students to keep an open mind and the willingness to 'stretch.' I hoped that by studying the concept of ideology first, students would be able to comprehend philosophical theory later. I began by asking students to analyze their own world view, to help them recognize that they are influenced by the many events and people that play a central role in their lives. This met with varying degrees of success; while students could easily point to *someone else's* ideology, they had much more difficulty recognizing their own. When Susan shared her ideological notion that people should treat others as they would like to be treated, Nathan objected, "That's not ideology! That's just doing what's right." Amy intervened with "That's what you think is right. Someone else might think that you should treat people any way you want to." I offered them Karl Marx's statement "Man is the product of his

environment, and of conditions; he cannot therefore be free in the choice of his profession, he cannot be the maker of his own happiness". Having been taught that they can be anything they choose to be, students overwhelmingly disagree with this ideology. "You can go to school, you can decide to be a lawyer or a doctor and go for it." said Patrick. "If you can't afford college, you can just get a scholarship."

"If you work hard enough, you can do anything." argued Matt. Other students cite a number of individuals that prove this belief: Oprah Winfrey, Dave Thomas (the founder of Wendy's fast food restaurants), Derek Jeter (our home-town hero) and several others. I asked them if they thought these individuals would have been successful in a different time or place; what if they lived in Afghanistan or China? "Well," said Mary, "I guess no one in Afghanistan cares about Oprah's low-fat diet." Matt feels fortunate for "the luck of being born here where anyone can get rich". I was struck that getting rich was the yardstick to measure a society's level of enlightenment.

"If that's true, then why isn't everyone rich?" I asked. "Who is it that gets rich in our society?" I wanted students to think about what factors determine whether an individual remains in an upper or lower class in our society. These middle-to-upper class, white American students had grown up in what we might consider an 'enlightened' society, yet most of them had difficulty conceiving of clear social stratification and were surprisingly oblivious to oppressive forces that existed in their own society. They were so optimistic about what the future had in store for them, and how much they could control it, but they had little concept of the existing societal system that made it easier for some individuals to achieve economic and personal success. When they began to think carefully about these issues, they began to think about key issues in Marxist ideology.

Marx argued that, because an individual is a product of social development, his/her ideology is both consciously and unconsciously the result of societal class

struggle. Because these students lived in a particularly wealthy and insulated suburban community, they were part of the privileged class and had difficulty recognizing how that had influenced their personal ideologies. I discovered, as I will describe in my discussion of the final inquiry project in this chapter, that they would continue to consider the implications of social stratification as they read and further questioned ideology in literature.

To avoid overly confusing students and overtly influencing them with my own ideologies, I introduced the concept of ideological theory as an interpretive stance through Marxism and feminism. Both theoretical approaches to literature are particularly appropriate for exploring ideology, because they are modes of thinking that specifically and purposefully demonstrate the power of ideology and seek to make ideology visible. In addition, issues that we discussed in the context of Marxist and feminist theory also provided a framework in my World Literature class for postmodern theories that students would investigate later. As I present classroom discussion and student response to Marxist and feminist theory, it will become apparent that many issues that arose are issues inherent in cultural studies, post-colonial and minority theories of literature.

Marxist theory allowed students to draw upon previous theoretical approaches to literature, as well as their responses to the concept of ideology, as it “typically undertakes to ‘explain’ the literature in any era by revealing the economic, class, and ideological determinants of the way the author writes, and to examine the relation of the resulting literary product to the social reality of that time and place” (Abrams 219). In this way, Marxist theory challenges the reader to recognize the inadequacies and injustices of a given social system, the hidden ideological agendas, which result in the oppression of elements of the social population. The oppressed within a society often are unable to contribute to the literary output of the age; they are considered the “other”

and their voices are not heard. This ideological struggle between the dominant and oppressed classes is key to Marxist theory. The concept of oppression and “other” has been incorporated into aspects of postmodern theory; recognizing these ideas as part of Marxism laid the groundwork for student inquiry into postmodern theory during the final inquiry project.

Marxist literary theorists Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton emphasized the importance of ideological and political agendas in methods of literary interpretation, including the concept that literature reflects the economic base of the society that produces it. Some Marxist theorists argue that most literary works reflect and promote the privileged voice, emphasizing the subsequent biases and weaknesses of literature produced by the privileged voices in a society and demanding that literature depict the reality of all society. This aspect of Marxist theory suspects that the real message of most ‘great’ or canonical literature supports and legitimizes the status quo. Consequently, these critics value literature that is revolutionary and subversive in seeking to expose the agenda of the privileged in order to change society. I asked students to think about this. “How can literature support the status quo? Do most authors seem to support the status quo on purpose, as a personal agenda?”

“Well, what about movies?” asks Zack. “Can’t they show different classes? You can tell by who’s the bad guy and who’s the good guy. If it shows that society is fine the way it is, then the bad guy is a robber or a criminal. If the bad guy is a cop or politician or something, then the movie is about problems in our society, right? Then we think about the problems like that and want to change them.” They were obviously getting the point.

But Marxist critics can also recognize great writers as those who can transcend political boundaries and depict a more objective view of society, even if they do belong to the privileged class. Just because a writer is male, white, and middle to upper class

doesn't mean he can't challenge the status quo of society. For example, Charles Dickens enjoyed a fine London lifestyle, but accurately wrote of the injustices imposed on those characters who inhabited the seamy underbelly of London's prisons and alleyways (even though he did end his novels with a rich guy who appears to save the day). William Shakespeare's genius is markedly apparent in his characterization of individuals hailing from all social classes, including his complex female characters. And, of course, the English Romantics do emphasize a need for social change by highlighting the plight of England's poor, as in Shelley's "England in 1812". In the modern age, writers like Bertolt Brecht incorporated Marxist principles into their work. Brecht argued that literature should jar the reader out of an acceptance of privileged priorities by challenging him/her to see society in a new light, stirring a desire for necessary change. The "estrangement effect", which I have referred to also in Chapter IV, is part of the modernist experimentation with disruptive forms of drama and literature emphasizing the incoherencies of societal structure. Luigi Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill, and Jean Anouilh wrote dramas in the form known as "theatre of the absurd" to shock the viewer (or reader) into a closer scrutiny of society's ideologies.

We practiced with Marxist theory first by reading works that exude politics and class struggle. The prose poem "Journey Along the Oka," (Albert, *et als* 1267-8) by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who was imprisoned as a leading literary critic of communism as practiced in the Soviet Union, uses church buildings as a central metaphor. The churches in Soviet Russia depicted in the poem housed community activities but not religious worship. The poem emphasizes the loss of not only religious freedom, but freedom in general under the Communist regime. In the final line of the poem, the status quo prevails over the quiet musings and stark descriptions of vandalized churches as the speaker is called to join in the community activities taking place on sacred ground. Even though it seems as though the speaker's participation is supportive of the

status quo, the irony inherent in the poem illuminates its revolutionary theme. After reading the poem, we returned again to Mistral's "Why Reeds Are Hollow," and Jenny writes that she now recognizes it as "a story in which the higher class is wanting power and so the lower class suffers as a result of their greed. So a major social revolution takes place among the plants".

Issues of race, oppression and white privilege came up as several members of the class read *Kaffir Boy*, the autobiographical story of Mark Mathabane's childhood in Soweto, South Africa, during the years of Apartheid. While most class members were still remarkably oblivious to their social position of privilege as that of middle to upper class white society, they were quite sympathetic to both the historic and contemporary oppression of minorities for racial affiliation and religious beliefs. Many students expressed outrage and support for marginalized cultures, and in the final inquiry project sought to enlighten the rest of the class on their plight. For example, after reading *Kaffir Boy*, Mary found that Mathabane "uses whites and their ideology to show how wrong they were. Schools were even teaching their students to look down on black people. Clyde's [a young, wealthy white character] mind is full of wrong information." Susan commented on the marginalization of black South Africans:

This is what the black South Africans do; they make the money by working for the whites. Clyde says 'That's why you can't live or go to school with us, but can only be our servants.' This deals with the suppression of one class by another that will benefit by their power. Dr. Verward suppressed Africans, saying 'Bantu education should not be used to create imitation whites.' This is so that whites can remain established as the superior class.

Matt agrees that "in *Kaffir Boy*, the author is struggling against a society which he cannot change. The system protects itself. Apartheid never allow[ed] the blacks to voice anything. They [were] forced into submission". *Cry the Beloved Country*, by Alan Paton, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Robert Cormier's young adult novels *After the First Death* and *I Am the Cheese* also provided material for a

Marxist approach.

The concepts of oppression and “other” also lay the foundation for a transition into feminist theory. While Marxist theory recognizes societal struggle along the fault lines of upper and lower socio-economic classes, feminist theory finds the struggle apparent in the patriarchal societal system which privileges men and subordinates women. Marxist theory recognizes class struggle in which the lower classes are oppressed, feminist theory recognizes a gender-based power struggle in which women are oppressed. The results are the same for the respective subordinated groups; the oppressed “other” in society is dispossessed of a voice. Both theoretical approaches to literature focus on representations of the tensions and contradictions that result from these societal stratifications. I was impressed with the students’ response to societal marginalization, and surprised by how little these World Literature students recognized the class-based power structure in their own society. But I was not prepared for their initial response to feminist theory.

Feminist theory seeks to highlight the roles of women in literature, rejecting stereotypical characterization and interpretation of the male as dominant, active and rational being and the woman as the passive, submissive, and emotional being. Feminist theory highlights female characters, but also traces the development of women writers who had few role models and a limited literary tradition upon which to draw, as exemplified in Gilbert and Gubar’s discussion of “anxiety of authorship” in Chapter V. Referring to women as an oppressed societal class, particularly in the realm of literature, is, without a doubt, historically and socially accurate. But more than just emphasizing this oppression, some forms of feminist literary criticism, according to Michael Ryan, seek “to be at once critical and enabling...[taking] issue with the way the male-dominated canon has represented women, and [finding] in the literary evidence signs of a counter-narrative, an alternative story of women’s experience” (104). In

other words, in addition to focusing on the oppression of women, feminist theory can also focus on those depictions of women, including those written by men, that are the exceptions to the stereotype. In addition, historical feminist critics concern themselves with the establishment of a counter-canon of women writers to recognize the contributions women have made in literary history.

I first introduced feminist theory by revisiting Karl Marx's statement on an individual's freedom to find happiness in society. I did not tell students that they were now going to learn about feminist literary theory, I merely asked them who was missing from Marx's "Man is the product of his environment..." statement as he wrote it. They were silent, absolutely puzzled by my question. "Look at the pronouns" I hinted. Nothing. "Who is he referring to?" Jill ventured a guess "People?"

"Human beings" Jeff answered. "That's a dumb question."

"But which human beings?" I prodded. I waited a bit longer, until I was sure they weren't going to answer. "Why does he only refer to male human beings?" I finally asked. Groans erupted around the class.

"It's just a figure of speech!" John emphatically said, throwing his arms in the air.

"But what are the implications of this 'figure of speech?'" I asked.

Scott groaned, "Don't tell me you're one of those femi-nazis!"

"Yeah," Patrick chimed in. "When will we talk about masculine criticism?"

I was stunned. I found myself hesitating, becoming almost apologetic as I answered "You don't have to be militant to be a feminist critic; it's not a man against woman method, it's just another way to approach a text". None of the methods we had studied had elicited such a response, or the resistance that would follow, not even when I referred to the biblical stories of creation as myths, as I described in Chapter III. I looked at the young women in the class for support, but they were unresponsive. What

was going on? Class ended on that note, but I was thankful I would have some time to recover from this response, and prepare for a discussion.

I felt responsible, to a certain extent, for these students' reactions to feminist theory because up to this point I had essentially adhered to the canonical "givens" in my curriculum, the textbook, and even in the theoretical approaches I had presented to students. And, because I was consciously *not* revealing any bias I felt for either a theoretical approach or particular text, I had not been openly challenging the "androcentric literary canon, [in which] men are able to see themselves (or possibilities of themselves), while women are forced to become the Other—to adopt a male persona, to see themselves as male, and to participate in an experience that can never be theirs" (Obbink 39). I felt strongly about the marginalization of women in the same way I felt strongly about the marginalization of other minority populations who are forced into the role of "Other". I wanted to know why this approach seemed to be so different for students than the other ideological theories. Feminist critic Dale Spender pointed out that there is an underlying threat inherent in feminist theory:

Fundamental to the patriarch is the invisibility of women, the unreal nature of women's experience, the absence of women as a force to be reckoned with. When women become visible, when they assert the validity of that experience and refuse to be intimidated, patriarchal values are under threat...And when we assert that the reason for women's absence is not women, but men, that it is not that women have not contributed, but that men have 'doctored the records,' reality undergoes a remarkable change (11).

I believe it was this sense of "threat" that, in part, explains their reaction to feminist theory. I wanted them to understand that assuming a feminist perspective, while it may be different than the literary study they had been engaged in via their textbooks and literary canon in past years, did not negate the importance of what they already knew about literature. Instead, it should enhance what they already knew. So, when I brought the poem "Myth" by Muriel Rukeyser (Levi 252) to class the next day,

I was hoping to encourage further discussion of feminist theory as an ideology, similar to Marxism and sociological criticism. I'm including the full text of the poem here, because it was the beginning of a re-envisioning of the literature we had read so far and continued to influence our further literary study that year:

Myth by Muriel Rukeyser

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads.

He smelled a familiar smell.

It was the sphinx.

Oedipus said, "I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recognize my mother?"

"You gave the wrong answer," said the Sphinx.

"But that was what made everything possible," said Oedipus

"No, she said. "When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening, you answered, Man.

You didn't say anything about woman".

"When you say Man," said Oedipus, "you include women too. Everyone knows that."

She said, "That's what you think."

We read the poem together in class, and I asked students why it was that Oedipus didn't recognize his mother, according to the poem.

"Because he only recognized men" said Sarah. "If he had recognized the importance of women in his society, he would have taken a closer look at Jocasta. I never could figure out why he didn't recognize her when we read the play." Indeed, Oedipus never gave evidence that he valued the ideas or significance of women in his society. How could he recognize Jocasta as his mother if he didn't recognize her as anything but a status and sex symbol? The play continually emphasizes the marriage

bed, but what about the role of the queen in society and government? How could he truly “see” his situation if he was blind to the power of women in his life and society?

“That’s like Gertrude, too” offered Ross. “She married the king’s brother because she didn’t want to go live in a little house somewhere.”

“Even if she didn’t know Claudius murdered his brother, she still married him pretty fast. I think she was just looking out for herself—and Hamlet, too. I can’t believe she was having an affair with him all along. Why would she risk that? Hey, maybe she was trying to protect Hamlet for real. Maybe she was afraid Claudius would kill him too!”

“They were smart about their marriages anyway. They couldn’t be King after their husbands were dead. They did the next best thing. What other real choice did they have?”

“I think both of them knew a lot more than they let anyone else know. Why would Jocasta kill herself all of a sudden? Why did she want Oedipus to stop asking questions early on? She just blew him off and didn’t want to think about it.”

These students were right about the position of Jocasta and Gertrude as enigmatic central figures in *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. They both sustain a central core of action and theme development in the plays, but establishing their motivation isn’t easy. How much do they know about the circumstances of their second marriages and when do they know it? Students reflected further on the social position of women in each play’s society, the possibility that each character knows much more than she lets on, and that each woman married to retain her social position. Jocasta and Gertrude (Ophelia as well) each define their social and individual selves through a liaison with a man. These women struggle within the constraints and powerlessness of their femininity and position in society, trying to create or maintain a certain quality of life, and are undone. Discussing the poem “Myth” had led to the discussion of the women

in these plays, and students were now asking questions about the roles of women in literature. Laura Apol Obbink, in “Feminist Theory in the Classroom” (1992), points out the importance of such reflection and questioning in applying feminist theory: “Reentering texts is much more than an exercise in reading technique, for the silencing of women is part of a larger oppression...by asking different questions of the text—hearing different questions in the text—we can begin to value women’s writings, and we can allow our students to do the same” (40).

I also shared an excerpt of *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf (I had to make photocopies from my personal copy of the book), in which Woolf argues that a woman must have privacy and money in order to write. I asked students how many of them had heard of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau and every hand went up. I asked how many had heard of Margaret Fuller, and they stared at me blankly, astounded to discover that she was a prolific and knowledgeable transcendentalist writer in her own right. As the first editor of *The Dial*, a transcendentalist magazine published in 1840, she was instrumental in publishing Emerson and Thoreau’s writing as well as her own. This was not some repressive regime in a far away country, but their own country and not all that long ago.

I reminded students that, even though we had studied primarily male heroes in the archetypal unit, the animus was also an important element of the female consciousness; women weren’t just characters in literature to provide the anima, or romantic counterpart, to male heroes. Women, I argued, have been just as marginalized as the black Africans in Apartheid that had outraged them so much in *Kaffir Boy*. Amy suddenly volunteered her thoughts on *Emma*, by Jane Austin, which she had read during the biographical unit. “Women had to find a man to have a life. All the girls did in the story was worry about who they were going to marry. But I don’t think the author thought it was a bad thing, I think she liked it that way. So she was supporting

the status quo of women only being wives and mothers, right?”

Our discussions about ideological theory may not have brought them to the point of clearly recognizing their own, they were able to recognize some of the ideologies inherent in what they were reading. And it was time to move on to philosophical criticism.

Philosophical Criticism

As our final leap into the realm of theory, what I termed ‘philosophical theory’ gave students some room for individual research and exposure to some of the important historical ideas about life and the living of it. Philosophy is an academic discipline in which larger issues about the meaning of life and truth are rationally argued, with a long history hearkening back to Aristotle and Socrates. Philosophy is “an academic discipline...whose traditions are special” according to Fish, and is “that area of inquiry in which one asks questions about the nature of truth, fact, meaning, mind, action and so forth, and gives answers within a predictable range of positions” (*Reader* 104). Philosophy is not arbitrary or individual but can be understood as a *product* of ideological, social and psychological awareness: the examined life. A philosopher must examine the assumptions of both his/her individual ideology, societal ideologies, and historical ideologies to formulate a theory philosophy. For example, Confucianism is not an ideology, although the ideologies of the ancient Chinese society in which Confucius lived are inherent in his philosophy. Feminism, on the other hand, can not be considered a philosophy. Ideology refers to socio-political theory, philosophy is a much broader topic; ideology is active and causal, philosophy is academic and theoretical. Philosophy becomes ideology when it is imposed on someone else. For example, a religious belief can be a philosophy, but becomes ideology when it is wielded in a social situation as a means of establishing a power structure. An ideological belief can

be developed into a school of philosophy when its basic premises are closely examined and objectified in the larger context of the philosophic tradition.

Everyone acts according to the tenets of an ideology, but philosophy can only be the result of closely examining the larger questions of life in general. Consequently, while the subject of philosophy is broader in aspect, there are fewer people engaged in philosophical contemplation than those engaged in ideological debate. Fish also argues that even though “the relevance of philosophy to every aspect of human culture has been assumed for so long that it now seems less an assertion or an argument than a piece of plain common sense,” this understanding of philosophy is erroneous because it is based on the “debatable proposition that almost everything we do is a disguised and probably confused version of philosophy” (*Reader* 104). Philosophy is the larger process of consciously and rationally developing a conclusion about life and the purpose of living, not merely a rationale explaining why people do the things they do. Raymond Williams distinguishes between ideology and philosophy by noting that “sensible people...have a *philosophy*; silly people rely on *ideology*” (157). Assuming a philosophical stance in approaching text first requires an understanding of the particular philosophical thought itself, much like assuming an archetypal stance means understanding the concepts of archetypes and the representation of the Jungian self. So philosophical interpretation can be understood as the recognition of this structure in the text, making it a more objective approach than when the reader assumes an ideological stance. Again, I make this distinction not to pedantically mince terms, but to explain my rationale for using these terms in the way I did with students. I wanted to open as many doors for student inquiry as possible while still supplying frameworks for theoretically approaching literature.

Philosophical criticism, then, can be defined as a method of constructing interpretation by applying philosophical schools of thought (e.g. existentialism,

creationism), the theories of an historic philosopher (e.g. Hume, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), or even a specific theology (e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Zen) as a means to unlock the text. In other words, the reader, in this case, uses the basic tenets of a philosophical theory to fill in the gaps and link segments of a text, very much like the interpretive process students used for the archetypal approach. Although Fish argues that philosophy and literary theory are distinctly different subjects of study, he acknowledges that “traditions of philosophy and literary criticism display certain points of intersection...in the past 25 years philosophy has become something that literary critics do or attempt to do” (*Reader* 104). A specific philosophy can be applied to a work regardless of the work’s form, author, or place in history. For example, an existentialist approach is not limited to works by existentialist philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre or Albert Camus. In fact, recent trends in young adult fiction lean toward stark realism and provide excellent vehicles for existential discussion.

Because, as Fish pointed out, the term ‘philosophy’ has often been used loosely to encompass various ideological views, when I first introduced the term in discussion, students initially asserted that each individual has his/her personal philosophy and life. When I asked them what their philosophy was, I received a barrage of answers. “I think you should just have fun every day” said Matt. “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” offered Amy. “Seize the day!” says Patrick. I point out that either these are personal ideologies, which we had discussed previously, or proverbial sayings, but not exactly philosophy.

I cited Socrates as the epitome of a philosopher (“So-crates!” they crow, almost in unison, as they remember him from the movie *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*). I explain the Socratic Method of questioning to uncover truth, or to find there is no such thing as truth. What can we know? What is reality? Who am I? What is truth? Does life have meaning? What is the difference between right and wrong? According to

Socrates, the only true wisdom is in knowing that you know nothing. “Gees, Matt” teased Stephanie, “maybe you’re smarter than you think!”

“Hey, Siddhartha would have liked Socrates” Sarah announced. “We should have talked about philosophy when we read that.”

I also discussed Marxist philosophy. Even though we talked about his ideology, and categorized that under the designation of sociological criticism previously, I explained that he also posed philosophical questions about world history and the role of production and the labor of the “masses”. Separating Marx’s philosophy and ideology was a difficult distinction for them (and for me) to make, so we decided that it was acceptable to use a Marxist approach in either a sociological or philosophical context.

Individual Novels

We started applying philosophical and sociological criticism by reading novels that invite this particular approach. The novel is “the art form which raises questions about our existence in the world as self-conscious beings [exploring] human existence in the world” (Linn 74-5), making it an excellent vehicle for exploring philosophical thought. I devised this project also as ‘practice’ for the final inquiry project, which I will detail in the next section, so students would have some experience and a starting point for their larger group research (Appendix G). My purpose in developing this project was for students to not only read a good novel, but also for them to learn about the philosophical ideas depicted through the characters and events of the novel, then use those ideas to fill in gaps and construct meaning from the text.

The novel project was an individual one, and students presented a synopsis and review of the novel they chose so we could cover as much literary ground as possible. I worked with the library media specialist to pull appropriate novels and bring them to my

classroom on a cart, and I encouraged students to spend some time examining the books, eventually choosing the one that most interests them. Novels I put on the cart spanned from obviously philosophical works by Ayn Rand, Elie Wiesel, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Leo Tolstoy, Albert Camus, Zhang Jie, Bette Bao Lord, Chinua Achebe, among others, but other more contemporary novels which would still invite philosophical interpretation also found their way to the cart. I included novels by Maxine Hong Kingston, Laura Esquivel, M.E. Kerr, and Robert Cormier for some students who may have some difficulty reading the larger, more difficult works. The point was to apply theory, which, as evinced by books like *The Tao of Pooh*, could be done with just about any book. I wanted the books in my classroom, rather than just taking my class to the library, because I wanted to give students the opportunity to talk about and compare novels, handling them for at least two days before they had to make their final selection. I didn't restrict them to only the books we had put on the cart, and allowed them to switch books for the first few days of research, but reserved the right to make a final approval of any book they chose in the end. I wanted to be sure each student chose a novel with enough substance to fulfill the project requirements, but because a philosophical approach is so universal the field was wide open.

It took some time for students to 'settle in' to their choice of book and philosophical approach. The first hurdle was for students to establish a philosophical method; I did not specify which theories they should pursue. My only stipulation was that the method they chose must be present in a legitimate source, and I provided sources like the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, a ten volume resource for vast philosophical research, so they could zero in on the particulars of the philosophical school of thought they decided to investigate. I made many photocopies. We wore a path between the classroom and the library for students who needed additional sources. Even so, students were nervous and unsure about making these choices "cold," and I

spent my time conferencing with them individually as they worked through the beginning of the project. Most were not familiar with philosophy except for the brief introductions I had given, and felt uncomfortable at first. Once they were started, however, they found the questioning inherent in philosophy interesting, and I found that I learned at least as much as they did. Several students chose philosophical methods I was not familiar with, but were included in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, like Sufism (a branch of the Muslim faith). Even though the beginning phase of the project seemed hectic and time consuming, the resulting discussion and exposure to philosophical thought and literature was well worth the stress of the beginning few days.

Once student had gotten a good start on their reading and identified their philosophical approach, I asked them once again to formulate research questions and search phrases. They researched philosophical thought, authorial and sociological background of either the philosophy, the proponents of the philosophy, or the author. In some cases, Ayn Rand, for example, these were all the same person. The library media specialist bookmarked some Internet sites from university English and Philosophy departments that posted coursework on the subjects, the *Internet Public Library* (www.ipl.org) was very helpful, as well as the many other Internet resources students located with their search phrases. As in the biographical unit, the Internet allowed students much more freedom in the philosophical approach they chose to explore; and this project was another example of how technology can change the way students learn and teachers teach.

Because students had chosen their own path in this project, they were very proud of their work and of showing off what they learned. They found their way in to their novels, becoming even more aware of the reading and interpretive strategies they used. They used their prior knowledge, they predicted, analyzed, synthesized and finally, shared their meaning constructions with the class. Patrick learned more about Brecht's

Estrangement Effect and applied it to Douglass Addams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Amy presented an existentialist interpretation of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and Dan decided he wanted to join the Objectivist Club (there was a card inside his paperback copy of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*) and shared the materials the organization sent to him during his presentation. They quickly realized that becoming familiar with a particular philosophical approach meant they could apply it to many different texts, and they shared their thoughts with each other during the presentations. They also reported flexing their theoretical muscles at the family dinner table, in other classes and during those awkward moments of a first date, using their fledgling knowledge as ammunition in discussion with unsuspecting peers, parents and teachers (even with the principal in one tense situation). They were ready to move on, and the novels served as a starting point for larger inquiry into these issues.

Final Inquiry Project

Thematic Criticism and Student Inquiry

By the time we had completed the Novel Project, there were only seven weeks left of school, and I wanted to give students further opportunity to expand on what they had already learned about literary theory and constructing meaning. I decided to end the year with this large project, although engaging students with thematic criticism does not require such an approach. My objective was also to see how much the students could do, how well they could independently research, and to provide the class with as much discussion of literature and theory as possible. To me, an extensive research project seemed like a good way to accomplish these goals. I gave students detailed guidelines and a specific schedule for the duration of the project (Appendix H). This project required students to form small groups and research more fully one critical approach to

literature, developing a detailed explication of literary examples from a specific geographic area or literary circle. Because this was World Literature, I asked them to choose topics and authors from outside the United States and Great Britain. Their research and reading culminated in a 45-minute presentation centering on their chosen country and literary tradition or development of a particularly influential literary circle. This is why I introduced students to sociological and philosophical theory; these critical areas were broad enough to apply to any cultural literature and I wanted students to have as much choice as possible. Students could choose to focus on ideology, history, culture, society or philosophy. They were required to research and locate poetry, essays, short stories and one novel or full-length drama. They had to read and analyze individual pieces, then synthesize what they had read into a unified theme centering on philosophical, ideological, sociological or critical concept. Ultimately, I wanted them to use this opportunity to delve more deeply into an aspect of our study of World Literature and literary theory that they found particularly interesting. Of course, each group member was not required to read each individual literary work; instead they assigned roles to one another, dividing the reading responsibilities however they chose. But I did want them to discuss what they read within the larger context of theory, and put it all together into a presentation for the rest of the class.

Completing the project required students to draw upon all the critical and research skills they had learned throughout the year, and become more independent thinkers and learners, but I was sure to make my expectations very clear. Modes of inquiry were completely student generated, yet I established specific requirements and due dates to monitor student progress and keep them on track. The tightly organized schedule was crucial for ensuring students were on task and providing them with enough feedback so they did not become overwhelmed or lost. I had a copy of the

schedule grid for each group, which could consist of no more than four students, and I checked off due dates and materials they turned in as the weeks went past. Students could check their progress at any time, and continually plan their next step. The project also ensured a certain flexibility for students and for me as we proceeded one day at a time. My role was that of facilitator; I taught mini-lessons to individual groups and the class as a whole, reviewing concepts of theory, research and interpretation. I conferenced with each group on a daily basis, and did not even bring the entire class together; often students just went straight to work when class began without any direction from me. I designed the particular details of the project to ensure that students did not procrastinate and set due dates intermittently so they had time to think of the big picture, but also had to pay attention to the small steps along the way. Students were required to turn in a written research question, bibliography cards, note cards, and an annotated bibliography that included at least one scholarly journal from either the MLA or ERIC database before the final presentation date arrived. The annotated bibliography was required to correspond with Modern Language Association guidelines for research papers. I also required them to keep a journal detailing their progress, and asked them to write every day about their progress, their questions, and their discoveries. The journal proved to be invaluable, as many students kept all of their research materials in it, and used it to keep track of ideas. But the journal also help to keep me informed about each group's progress as well, and if there was a problem that students were not comfortable sharing with me in a group setting, they could write it in their journal. For example, if one group had a member that wasn't pulling his/her weight, the others could write about their concern in their journals and I could deal with the problem without having a student take the risk of "telling" on the offending group member. Unless a certain group and I agreed otherwise, the final grade would be a group grade, so this aspect of the journal

became an important way for me to monitor group interaction.

Deciding on a group theme, or research focus, was, of course, the biggest hurdle. In order to accomplish this in a scope large enough to fulfill the requirements for the project but narrow enough to be realistic and manageable, students would have to draw upon a culture's literary tradition. Time periods in which the literary output was substantial, or the development of a particular culture's literature over a longer period of time provided thematic clues for students to investigate. As with the novel project, for the first few days students were full of questions and concerns; I sat with each group and conferenced with them about their interests, questions and group responsibilities to help them begin to consider their options. I encouraged students to think about something they were sincerely interested in, or start by talking about the novels they had just read to identify possible areas of research. They could peruse their World Literature textbook for ideas, go back to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, or use another reference book from the library to search for ideas. One source that was particularly useful for the beginning stage of this project was the *Dictionary of World Biography*, which includes extensive indices to influential people from all countries of the world organized chronologically. This source gave students a quick glance at the intellectual developments of a given country, and led many of them to their final thematic focus. They had to discuss options, negotiate with group members to decide on a basic idea, then evaluate that idea to see if it was a viable basis for research. In order to do this, they had to think and talk about theory, literature, research strategies, and brainstorm ideas for ways of presenting what they eventually discovered.

The Results

The results of student inquiry that I will present here are taken primarily from

journal entries and transcribed from video footage of the presentations. These are their words and their ideas. I did not see any rehearsals of their final presentations, so I did not know exactly what would happen on these days. I had, and still have, faith in these students as learners. I had handed them a certain amount of autonomy and responsibility and, by doing so, had communicated my confidence in their knowledge and unique strengths. I felt this was an important aspect of not only the entire year of World Literature, but particularly this project. I think it is important here to note again that these were not the Advanced Placement students, that in fact many of these students had not successfully completed a literature-based high school English class. Any discrepancies or inconsistencies in their research as I present it here is still present because I want to show the results of this project exactly as the students shared it with me and the class. I have chosen just a sample of the projects completed in World Literature, and have had a difficult time choosing which to highlight more than others. I still feel so proud of these students as I write this, and am so thankful for what they taught me about being a teacher and a student.

The Final Product

I walked into my classroom on the morning of the first presentation to find that Mary, Sarah, Betsy and Kelly had already been there for some time, preparing their “environment”. They had convinced the custodian to let them in early, and transformed the room into a Brazilian rain forest. They lugged in palm trees, stuffed animals and yards of plastic vines to create the environment, complete with a hut they made out of a giant sheet of brown paper, suspended from the ceiling and decorated with more vines and flowers. They had cut a door in the paper, stored all props and accessories behind the paper hut, so during the presentation they came in and out of it at various intervals.

They spent the last few minutes before class started running around to complete finishing touches while I went to retrieve the VCR unit. They were planning to show a short film describing the horrors of life for homeless children in Brazilian cities as a part of their emphasis on the disparity in Brazilian societal structure. After quickly changing into their costumes, while the Spanish-speaking member of the group practices her Portuguese (spoken in Brazil), the group distributed their handout, entitled "Feminist/Marxist Literature in Brazil" to the class (Figure). Their central thesis was "Social Realism: Contemporary Brazilian authors openly examined the social ills of their time in order to expose people to them and to eventually facilitate change." Even though I had conferenced with this group many times during the previous weeks, I was stunned at the power of their material. Central issues for this group were the plight of homeless children, who had little hope of living until the age of the students in this World Literature classroom, and the oppression of women in Brazilian society.

Betsy, Zack, and Ross researched the *Tao te Ching* and its influence on not only the Chinese literary tradition, but on contemporary works as well. They hung strings of paper lanterns, lit incense and played soft Chinese music throughout their presentation. They began by silently walking in slow circles, allowing the class to absorb the ambiance they had created, to illustrate the meditative search for 'the way' and the concept that the journey is more important than the destination. In their presentation, they included excerpts of the *Tao te Ching*, the *Chinese Book of Changes*, and *The Tao of Pooh*, among other works, to exemplify the tradition of Taoist philosophy. The Russian group introduced us to "acmeism" as described by Russian poet Anna Akmatova and her literary circle. "The 'acme' of something is the highest point, the best you can get." explained Betsy. "To reach the acme is to write a poem or story that perfectly describes a situation or emotion without using extra words or images; that's

what they were trying to do.” Their discussion of acmeism included references to Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and “The Man in the Case” by Anton Chekov.

Sarah, Dan, and Mary focused on the topic of “French Existentialism”. Instead of putting up elaborate decorations, they spent a great deal of time taking everything down. Posters, bulletin boards, sign and student work that had covered my walls for the year were, to these existentialists, “meaningless and in the way”. They wanted nothing significant to be visible; they even covered the clock with blank white paper (causing much anxiety among their classmates, but certainly emphasized how dependent we were on something as meaningless as time). While some groups had elaborately prepared food for their presentations, this group handed out water and crackers. Mary began: “I glance around the room and a violent disgust floods me. What am I doing here? Why are these people here? Why are they eating? It’s true they don’t know they exist.” This excerpt from Jean Paul Sartre’s *The Wall* introduced their discussion of the existentialist reduction of life to a series of “meaningless non-events.” They invoked Sartre again: “to do something is to create existence—and there’s quite enough as it is”.

Students immediately latched on to this. “Hey! I like this guy! We don’t have to do anything...let’s just go now!” laughed Matt.

Mary glared at him. “You don’t get it. He said there was enough existence as it is, but he was putting more things into existence himself. When he wrote that, he put it into existence! So you can’t believe him, because he doesn’t follow his own advice.” This generated a discussion about existentialism and nihilism, which evolved directly into a discussion of the literary theory of deconstruction. “Is there really existentialist criticism” Patrick asked. “How can it be that books mean nothing?”

“Maybe their just like Socrates” mused Amy. We looked at her, puzzled.

“You know, question everything until you know it. If you keep asking questions, pretty soon you’re not sure what you know!”

Deborah Appleman in *Critical Encounters* (2001) presents a discussion of deconstruction in a high school A.P. class. Students in that class became distressed when they discussed deconstruction. “They get it, they can apply it—but they hate it. They seem uncomfortable. As if they managed to chew something unpleasant without choking but now the aftertaste is killing them.” One student complained bitterly “Why did you teach us this? ... Here I am at the end of my high school education and now it seems as if everything I was trying to do is worth absolutely nothing. Nothing means anything. Is that what I’m supposed to believe?” (111-2).

My experience with students was much different; I believe the difference arises out of the fact that it was the students themselves who discovered deconstruction within their own critical discourse; I did not introduce or require them to explore it as an interpretive approach. Mary had seen right through Sartre’s argument, she did not have to accept my interpretation of it as something she would have to know or apply for a grade; the rest of the class followed her lead. We talked about the experience of the war in Europe and how that must have impacted the way people felt about life and society. Patrick, who had been in the Holocaust group and had also centered on existentialism as I have included below, said “But it does mean something when they write about it. It means something when I read it, anyway. Isn’t that the point? Maybe somebody could come in here and say that the books we read don’t come together to make sense, but they do to *me*.”

Ray Linn, in *A Teacher’s Introduction to Postmodernism* (1996) expresses Patrick’s sentiments, as well as presents a great way to approach this touchy subject: “The postmodern idea that there is no truth might at first seem demoralizing...but it is

also liberating. Not only are we liberated from the burden of searching for what cannot be found, we are also liberated from an oppressive urge to shove others and ourselves into preconceived cages...[this liberation] redirects our energies toward what human beings are good at—creating ourselves and the worlds we live in” (145). Students were liberated as they became more confident in their interpretive abilities, and could question some of the most basic premises of postmodern theory, while accepting the relevance of others. They were also creating worlds from the books that they had read and developing confidence in themselves. Patrick, in saying that books meant something to him, was referring to the creative act of constructing meaning from text—a critical, aesthetic reading, in which he ‘listened to himself’ (Rosenblatt 25). I sat in the classroom that day and was amazed at the way these students dealt with the deepest reaches of theory, both in life and literature.

Existentialism and Literature of the Holocaust

The final presentation day arrived, and John, Patrick, Chad and Matt came into the classroom during lunch to string red lights around the room in random circles. The lights symbolized, and in fact closely resembled, the barbed wire surrounding World War II Nazi concentration camps. They covered the windows with black paper, readied a spotlight to shine on them as they presented their theme: “Existentialism and Literature of the Holocaust.” Patrick, who was very thin and wiry, was dressed almost too convincingly as a camp inmate, in long underwear with black duct tape creating the stripes that clearly identified Jewish prisoners. “Nobody really wrote anything for about *ten years* after the Jews were liberated” marveled John (ten years is an awfully long time to a sixteen-year-old). “The subject was completely avoided. Do you know why? Because people needed ten years to recover from the war. They tried to find

meaning for what they lived through. But how can there be any meaning for that? People really began to write about it in the 1960's because the move toward self-expression for everyone made the time right for publishing their stories. Even then, nobody could find the meaning for wasting six million lives." Matt added "Elie Wiesel was really the first to write a lot that many people read. He paved the way for people to write about their experiences. He also looked for a meaning in what happened to him, but couldn't find any. In the book, *Night*, he said 'never shall I forget that night...which has turned my life into one long night...Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live.' Eyewitness accounts like his were the first things to appear [in print] because people wrote about it so they could try and understand it." They discuss *The House on Prague Street* by Hans Demetz, poetry by Julie Heifetz ("The Wheel," "Departure," and "Auschwitz") as well as several critical essays regarding literature of the Holocaust. They were so proud to have discovered a new literary genre: "documentary fiction". In their reading, they found the Holocaust "was compared to slavery in the United States. That makes it seem closer to home. Every society persecutes one group or another. If you want the real picture, don't ask the master if slavery is O.K., ask the slave".

I was particularly proud of this group because they had always had difficulty with reading, literature, and constructing meaning. All four of them had been in my freshman Introduction to Literature class, and we had gone round and round about the 'gray areas' of finding meaning in literature. Learning with them throughout the year, watching them first realize they could engage in constructing literary meaning independently and then become fascinated with the material they were reading, was enormously gratifying. I remember this presentation as one of the most profound, largely because of the progress these students had made during the year. They told me afterward that

knowing about philosophy and theory had made literary interpretation comprehensible. They found it made sense to understand literature through a philosophical stance, to thematically explore literary representations that exemplify the meaningless Nazi persecution of Jewish people. How is it possible to understand the wasting of so many lives?

Obviously students could stretch and grow through their own inquiry. I couldn't have designed better learning activities for students than these presentations, as well as the presentations of the Japanese group, who focused on a sociological reading of *Black Rain*; or the German group, who explored the philosophy of Nietzsche and its effects on modern literature and theory; or the group that presented on New Zealand's literary history.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

Knowing about theory gave students who had not been successful in literature classes before an advantage, because they had something specific to look for in a text. When a theoretical approach drove literary study, students could find their way through what had been for them a nebulous world of metaphor and symbol within a literary text. A specific method provided a formula or “bottom line,” showing students how to find meaning, instead of “vainly struggling to achieve some mysterious and rarified experience” (Richter 43), a comforting thought for those who may not have grasped the concept of literary interpretation in the past. Student reading became not only more effective, but also more efficient, a term used by Ken Goodman to describe reading in which readers construct meaning “with the least amount of time effort and energy...[using] only enough information from a published text to be effective” (91). This contributed to their overall sense of confidence in interpretation, leading to the aesthetic reading that Louise Rosenblatt calls “...” The final goal of teaching literature. Instead of removing the reader from the process of constructing textual meaning, theory showed my students the way in. It was not just reading good books that drew them into this experience, but as Richter attests to in *Falling into Theory*, “having issues to watch out for made it possible not only to concentrate...but to put myself in the text” (39). Theory, therefore, does not take the student out of the picture, dictating meaning and interpretation; it puts the student back into the process of constructing meaning. Patrick’s comment in Chapter VI, “this is what it means to me” emphasizes this crucial point.

Furthermore, proficient students can advance in learning and applying critical theories through enrichment projects and readings. Creative projects, writing assignments and collaborative group work allowed every student the opportunity to use critical methods according to their learning styles, limitations, or talents. With critical theory as the emphasis, students could read different books within the same class while my responsibility was to guide lessons in interpretive method, not in textual detail. If some students needed a challenge, I'd require them to approach the assigned reading material from a feminist or Marxist perspective while others might review a structural approach. We'd all read the same thing, but I adjusted the levels of difficulty in this way to meet the varied needs of the students, and they never even knew it was happening.

Learning about theory gave students the tools and the freedom to make informed literary choices but held them accountable for interpretation. When students responded from the perspective of a particular literary theory, they logically approached the text according to theoretical guidelines, and were empowered to justify their responses. They could change theoretical "hats" to better respond to a given assignment or situation regardless of the specific text being studied. I was no longer grading hundreds of responses to literature and still wondering how to accurately tell the difference between a sincere but off-base response, and an off-the-cuff scribbling that a student turned in just to get credit. Interestingly, many students had an experience similar to Gerald Graff's realization that theory was the "secret" behind constructing meaning from text.

What was unclear to me was what I was supposed to *say* about literary works, and why....I now had some issues to watch out for as I read, issues that reshaped the way I read the earlier chapters as well as the later ones and focused my attention. And having issues to watch out for made it possible not only to concentrate...but to put myself into the text—to read with a sense of personal engagement that I had not felt before" (Graff 42-3).

Theory did not limit my students' personal responses, but increased the connection and engagement they felt with a piece of writing, improving their reading comprehension and, consequently, their enjoyment of text.

Because designing units around a theoretical approach refined and enhanced existing curriculum, it didn't take any more time to complete each unit. In fact, at times it helped to conserve time and streamline units of study by providing a specific focus area. We spent most of class time on application to literature, unless students launched into a lively debate about the merits of one approach over the other. And that was (almost) always gratifying to watch. I found that methods could be continually compared throughout the year with each new unit of study. After the archetypal unit was finished, for example, there was room for discussion of archetypal interpretation, even in the middle of the structuralism unit. It was exciting to listen to students discuss and compare critical viewpoints and literature without having to drag ideas out of them. We were never just 'done' with a unit of study, we constantly revisited previous schools of thought. One was not more important than the other, and students came to an understanding of literary interpretation through constant practice, application and evaluation of text. Students remembered to which of the literary works they applied a given method for evaluation, so they were more likely to remember the work because we were dealing with complex application of ideas and cognitive skills reaching into their long-term memory, not the quizzes requiring only short-term retention of information.

I also found that incorporating an inquiry-based, critical approach in the classroom created a "community of learners" atmosphere in which I learned at least as much as I taught. The cooperative groups and discussions made possible by using theory to structure lessons provided opportunities for peer scaffolding. Students learned from and supported one another in the exploration of World Literature and

literary theory, and the journey towards meaning became as important as the meaning itself. Instead of giving students an interpretation, or deciding if a student's interpretation is "correct" or valid, I could outline theoretical methods and simply say to students "Let's see if this works". Often, as I have shared with brief excerpts of student writing, students evaluated the theoretical method itself, citing the strengths and weakness they observed inherent in a given approach. I did not remain one of the "exegetes of the sacred text of literature" (Scholes 16), but instead joined the class discussion. If a student rejected a theoretical base, it was not a rejection of my interpretation or knowledge, but only methods we were currently practicing. Consequently, my personal ideology was less relevant in the interpretive process, discussion or grading and I read *with* them, not *for* them. The transaction between students and teacher, reader and text, student and class-room community infused the class with a certain energy.

Putting literary *meaning* into words is a difficult thing, even for proficient readers and experienced literary theorists. How *does* a work come to life for us; how does it transcend the strings of words so necessary in enabling us to comprehend its existence? When my students used a theoretical approach when they read, they found they had something solid and important to say, and the language with which to say it. I didn't force them to express their views by rolling theoretical vocabulary around in their mouths like over-sized jawbreakers, but concentrated on the basic vocabulary and perspective each approach offered. Theory provided a common language for both myself and my students to articulate ideas, and, because theory was the scaffolding for response, each student could contribute to the conversation and still recognize his/her own voice in doing so. As students engaged with theory, the specific guidelines I provided for each method enabled them to clarify ideas for an idea or concept and we

experienced the thrill of articulating a thoughtful, focused argument. When they experienced the shock of recognition, comprehending a specific meaning within a work, I exalted. But as they eventually uncovered and discussed *dimensions* of meaning, real depth emerged in the classroom discussion and I was overwhelmed. As a basis for this discussion and comprehension, theory provided clarity and gave students a specific language for communicating the importance of a given work in that thrilling teachable moment.

I quickly discovered that theory applied to more than just school for many students; they drew connections to other areas of their lives. They were not just interpreting literature, but developing an ideological framework for understanding the world around them. For those students who did not plan to go on to college, the logic they practiced using theoretical methods enabled them to respond critically to life situations. They better understood the many different ways of looking at the world and experiencing “truth;” they came to understand that there were no absolutes in life. Suddenly, movies, T.V., life events, history, and society became interconnected. One day Stephanie walked into class after watching *The Fugitive*, starring Harrison Ford, the night before. We had been practicing archetypal criticism for a week, and while she watched the movie she continually elbowed the person next to her as she pointed out archetypes in the story. “He jumps down the waterfall, loses his clothes and is a different person when he comes out. I kept saying, ‘there’s one, there’s one’ over and over. You’ve ruined movies for me,” she wailed. “I see this stuff everywhere!” In other words, she began to think critically about what she saw and experienced on her own, outside of class. This is just what Robert Scholes meant when he asserted that students “are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media...” (16). Critical strength was a direct result of a knowledge of literary theory. I

realized the importance of this aspect of theory when Betsy came back to visit after she had graduated, specifically to let me know that knowing theory had helped her in college. “I knew what to do when the professor said ‘Please comment intelligently!’” she told me.

This investigation, as I have presented it throughout this dissertation, answered the fundamental question of whether general high school students could comprehend theory and use these methods to better understand the process of constructing meaning from text. But I have not included everything we studied or every experimental activity that took place in my classroom, and had to painfully omit some student projects. I have chosen to present certain activities and discussions because they encapsulate most of the issues I was exploring. Because of space restraints, and to maintain a clear purpose and thesis, I chose not to detail some interesting activities: the World Mythology project that students completed; our class “Biameron” that was modeled on Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, in which we escaped from the plague of the ordinary school day by having a picnic and telling stories; our structural analysis of Dante’s *Inferno*, when students designed their own levels of Hell; and many more extraordinary student creations. But my exploration is only the beginning of the work that can be done to examine the role of literary theory in the classroom. In each chapter, issues and questions inviting further research await investigation. For example, I still mull over the students’ surprising reaction to feminist theory and wonder if this was an anomaly, or whether it is part of a larger societal phenomenon? How far can we push students in the direction of theory, while keeping them in the “zone of proximal development?” And how can teaching theory impact student performance on standardized tests? I have recorded this study to join the larger pedagogical conversation about the ultimate goals of teaching literature; there is still much to talk about.

Appendix A
Find the Structures

Find the Structures

“Fifteen” by William Stafford

South of the bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road and stood with that
companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back farther in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale—
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me a good man, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.

Application:

1. Describe the basic underlying structure of literary convention (see diagram).
Look for structural patterns and stanza configuration.
2. Look closely at each stanza. What linguistic structures do you notice in each?
Look for metaphor, descriptive words, word placement, meter and rhyme, etc.
What specific structures do you see?
3. Why is the phrase *I was fifteen* repeated? Does it mean the same thing in
each stanza? What is the **denotation** of the phrase? What **connotations** does
the phrase have in each stanza? How can it mean something different?
4. How do these specific uses of language *embellish* the basic poetic structure?
How do they link stanzas, develop themes, or otherwise add meaning to

stanzas?

5. Why does the last line stand alone?
6. How has the boy changed by the end? Why is this brief, seemingly trivial experience so important? How does the structure of the poem communicate the importance of this experience?

Appendix B

Tragedy

TRAGEDY

The historic philosopher from Ancient Greece, Aristotle, wrote "Poetics," the first essay on literary criticism. In the essay, he outlined specific methods for evaluating drama and poetry, describing the basic characteristics we still use for literary interpretation. His ideas established structure in literature as the basis for interpretation and evaluation, and clearly illustrate the two levels of structure we discussed with The Hobbit.

The Basic Structure of Tragedy:

Aristotle first developed a structural outline for the underlying system (or *langue*) of a good drama. Each of the dramatic elements listed creates the bottom layer of the structure, reinforcing dramatic unity and drawing the play onward. A good drama includes:

- A. Prologue: First Act (establishing basic situation)
- B. Parados: Entrance of Chorus (introducing chorus and providing background)
- C. Episodes: Acts (delivering the action of the drama)
- D. Stasima: Choral odes (offering the people's views, providing missing information)
- E. Exodus: (providing resolution for conflict, delivering cathartic ending)

The chorus is an important structural element. The choral odes relieve tension between episodes, give background of preceding events, converse with and give advice to characters, and helps the audience to interpret events.

Aristotle believed that less is more. The fewer words, the "tighter" the plot, the better.

Unity of action: A single unifying plot; all action relates directly to its development

Unity of place: No change of scenery or location

Unity of time: Events take place in one day

These elements provide the basic, underlying plot structure.

Art Imitates Life

The upper layer of structure in tragedy (the language of the play) should build and complement the basic level. Tragedy compacts many of life's truths into a single, unified action. In other words, the tragedy should have as little extraneous detail as possible, focusing on the "truths" communicated by the systems of the work. So the "parole" of a good tragedy includes only the language and interaction necessary to communicate the basic truths important in the play. Yet the language is embellished with artistic ornament, providing the formalist "reach" and challenging the audience or reader to see the situation as fresh or new.

The character must be well structured, basically good, believable, and consistent, for the audience or reader to be horrified by his or her fate. Again, the specific layer of language (the parole) must communicate characteristics. The audience must identify

with the main character and find something likeable about him/her. But the character must have some error or flaw in his/her personality that leads to his/her downfall. The hero's downfall arouses in the audience the emotions of pity and terror, resulting in a **catharsis** of these emotions. The audience is horrified by the hero's demise, yet relieved that this is only an imitation of reality. This mixture of emotions, pity, fear, horror, and relief, provides the impact of tragedy. The work is cathartic because it purges the audience of these emotions in a safe environment. Then, relieved and cleansed, the audience can go home.

Catharsis isn't produced by violent actions, however. In the ancient tragedies, violence doesn't take place before the audience - reports of violence are given, but not enacted. Too much violence detracts from the basic plot.

The Tragic Hero

Aristotle defined the concept of the tragic hero. The irony of tragedy lies in the contrast between the vision which the tragic hero has of his future and the shocking disaster that befalls him. The structure of this irony traces the descent of the hero; the individual's suffering refines him or her, causing a deeper understanding of the condition of man. Again, the audience understands this irony as a mixture of pity for and revulsion of the character (or catharsis).

- A. The tragic hero begins the story with supreme pride and confidence in his own freedom. But the hero has an enormous capacity for suffering as he further develops throughout the play. He or she exhibits a sense of commitment to his or her cause, and vigorously protests forces working against him.

Thought Questions:

1. Are Aristotle's methods still practiced today? When have you experienced catharsis as you finished a book or watched a movie?
2. How has modern drama evolved from Aristotle's ancient tragedies? Consider in particular the question of violence and the unity of time, place, and action.
3. If art imitates life, how appropriate are the differences in ancient Greek tragedy and modern American tragedy? What life is each imitating?

Appendix C
Franz Kafka: His Personal Musings

Franz Kafka: His Personal Musings

November 5, 1911: I want to write, with a constant trembling on my forehead. I sit in my room in the very headquarters of the uproar of the entire house. I hear all the doors close, because noise only the footsteps of those running between them are spared me. I hear even the slamming of the oven door in the kitchen. My father bursts through the doors of my room and passes through in his dragging dressing gown, the ashes are scraped out of the stove in the next room. Valli asks, shouting into the indefinite through the anteroom as though through a Paris street, whether Father's hat has been brushed yet, a hushing that claims to be friendly to me raises the shout of an answering voice. The house door is unlatched and screeches as though from a catarrhal throat then opens wider with the brief singing of a woman's voice and closes with a dull manly jerk that sounds most inconsiderate. My father is gone, now begins the more delicate, more distracted, more hopeless noise led by the voices of the two canaries. I had already thought of it before but with the canaries it comes back to me again, that I might open the door a narrow crack, crawl into the next room like a snake, and in that way, on the floor, beg my sisters and their governess for quiet. (Glatzer 35)

December 8, 1911: I have now, and have had since this afternoon, a great yearning to write all my anxiety entirely out of me, write it into the depths of the paper just as it comes out of the depths of me, or write it down in such a way that I could draw what I had written into me completely. This is no artistic yearning. (Glatzer 38)

December 28, 1911: The agony that the factory causes me. Why didn't I object when they made me promise to work there in the afternoons? No one used force to make me do it, but my father compels me by his reproaches. Karl [husband of K's sister Elli] by his silence, and I by my guilty conscience. I know nothing about the factory, and this morning, when the committee made an inspection, I stood around uselessly with my tail between my legs. I deny that it is possible for me to fathom all the details of the operation of the factory. And if I should succeed in doing it by endlessly questioning and pestering all those concerned, what would I have achieved? I am fit only for cooking up something that looks all right, to which the sound common sense of my boss adds the salt that makes it look like a really good job. But through this empty effort spent on the factory I would, on the other hand, rob myself of the use of the few afternoon hours that belong to me which would of necessity lead to the complete destruction of my existence, which, even apart from this, becomes more and more hedged in. (Glatzer 42)

From "Letter to His Father" 1919:

Dearest Father,

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of the ground for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete, because, even in writing, this fear and its consequences hamper me in relation to you and because the magnitude of the subject goes far beyond the scope of my memory and power of reasoning.

.....

You struck nearer home with your aversion to my writing and to everything that, unknown to you, was connected with it. Here I had, in fact, got some distance away from you by my own efforts, even if it was slightly reminiscent of the worm that, when a foot treads on its tail end, breaks loose with its front part and drags itself aside. To a certain extent I was in safety: there was a chance to breathe freely. The aversion you naturally and immediately took to my writing was, for once, welcome to me....I was really quite glad of it, not only out of rebellious malice, not only out of delight at a new confirmation of my view of your relationship, but quite spontaneously, because to me that formula sounded something like: "Now you are free!" Of course it was a delusion...My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast. It was an intentionally long-drawn-out farewell from you, yet although it was enforced by you, it did take its course in the direction determined by me (Glatzer 177-9).

Interpreting Character:

First list the characteristic of the man who wrote these journal entries. Then write a brief character sketch of him. Include your ideas about his physical appearance, his social life, his professional life. Cite examples from the excerpt or give reasons for your interpretation of his character. What makes him happy? What makes him sad? What problems does he have in life?

Appendix D
Biographical Criticism

Biographical Criticism

A biography is the story of a person's life. Biographies fulfill our human need to understand one another, explaining why and how an individual did some of the things he/she did and helping us to understand the person's motivation and purpose. We can "walk around in their shoes for awhile" momentarily catching a glimpse of their perspective of the world and developing a certain amount of sympathy for their individual circumstances.

Knowing the biographical details of an author's life helps the reader to understand the author's **purpose** in writing a story, novel or poem. Every author has a **message** to communicate; if the reader understands the author's purpose or motivation, then he/she can more clearly grasp that message. In fact, many biographical critics believe that the only way to fully understand the work itself is to understand the person who wrote it. The meaning the readers understand then should be the author's intended meaning. It is also easier to understand an author's message if you have developed some sympathy for the author. Who is he or she? Why did he or she feel it was important to communicate to us? Have his/her life events contributed to the novel, story or poem and the message communicated through the work?

How do you know what the author intended, even if he/she lived a long time ago? Through research, finding out everything you can about an author's life, language and personal beliefs and learning to recognize his/her **voice** speaking to you through the events and characters in a story. When you know about the author and can "hear" the author's voice, then the author's message to you is clearer, and you can find the meaning of a story, novel or poem.

Thinking Biographically:

Do you have a friend that others may find difficult get along with? How do you manage? Does knowing his/her personal reasons for acting the way he/she does help you? Explain.

Research a famous person whose actions, words or music you find difficult to understand. Do you find out anything about him/her that explains his/her behavior? Does it change your interpretation of his/her work? Can you understand his/her message more clearly?

Appendix E
Voice: How Does the Author Speak to You?

Voice: How does the Author Speak to You?

When the phone rings and you pick it up, do you ever know immediately who is on the other end of the line? How can you tell? Is it the words he/she says, the immediate subject of the conversation, or the tonal quality of the actual voice on the line? Often, it is not difficult to distinguish the voices of family and friends because you know them well, even if you weren't prepared to hear from them, by the characteristics of their speaking voices.

But just as every individual has a speaking voice, he/she also has a writing voice. Sometimes we can tell who the writer is from the writing on a piece of paper because we recognize the writer's choice of words, subject matter and the actual flow of the script. It's surprisingly easy to identify the person who wrote you a note if he/she is someone you know well.

Everyone has distinctive characteristics about both their verbal and writing voice, and part of understanding an author and his/her works is hearing the author's voice within the story, poem or novel. Whenever we read a story, we have a sense of the individual who carefully chose words to create the characters, setting and complications in the exact way he/she wanted them to establish his/her position or opinion about the subject matter of the work. Then, just like a conductor in an orchestra, he/she directs these inventions with some end result in mind. It is this sense of convincing authorial voice that controls the work and persuades the reader that it is a believable and worthy creation. In a sense, you "hear" the author throughout the story.

Identifying the author's voice is very much like identifying your friends' or family members' voices. If you become familiar with the author and his/her works, you'll begin to recognize patterns in language, the subject matter and elements of plot.

Thinking about Voice:

Compare Kafka's personal writing from his journal entries and excerpts from his fiction. What elements of his personal voice are consistent with his voice in his fiction? Do Gregor, Joseph K. and K. say things that are similar to Kafka's reflections in his journals? List similar word choices and subject matter you notice.

Look at some of your own writing on homework papers, tests, essays, and notes or letters you may have written to your friends. Note any words or phrases you may use over and over, or subject matter that you discuss. What can you recognize about your own voice? Are there passages that even you don't understand or feel you want to explain? Does your writing voice change from paper to paper? Is it different than your speaking voice? Explain.

Appendix F

Recognizing Theme: The Author's Message to You

Recognizing Theme: The Author's Message to You

The “themes” of a novel, short story or poem is basically the message the author desires to communicate to the reader. Themes are communicated through plot design, setting and character interaction. Once you have learned to recognize the author's voice, it is easier to hear his message and identify the major themes within a given work or in the author's body of work. The author had a purpose in mind and through his/her work communicates basic ideas about people, life and living. Knowing about the author can make a theme within his/her works clearer.

For example, a theme traditionally associated with Alice in Wonderland is the contrast between the inherently illogical nature of the societies in which we live and our desire to logically organize our lives. Louis Carroll was a mathematician, and examines Alice's actions, her surroundings and the characters she meets in a completely logical way, with some pretty strange (and very funny) results. If you were to read the novel again, understanding Carroll's mathematical background and intent to present the events in a purely logical way, you may be surprised at how much sense the seemingly senseless characters and situations actually make. The story can take on a completely different meaning.

Now that you have examined Franz Kafka's voice and understand his personal background and intentions, think about the message he communicates throughout his works. Examine the characters, actions, reactions, setting and plot sequences from the perspective of a man like Kafka. Can you hear his message? How is he communicating to you? The events of any of his stories may seem absurd, but he presents them to the reader with purpose in mind. Can you understand his purpose more clearly as you hear his voice?

As you read and recognize elements of Kafka's voice and message within his works, record your examples and ideas on the chart included here. Spell out the relationship between each character, event or specific plot sequence you note as important and any details you may have discovered about Kafka's personal life that explain the significance of that character even or plot sequence. Finally, indicate the message you believe Kafka communicates through these aspects of the story. The message may be the same for several of your examples. Remember to record page numbers for each of your examples; the information here will help you write the essay at the end of the unit.

When you've taken some time to complete this chart with examples from several of Kafka's works, think about what you've learned.

1. What are the main themes in the works you ve read?
2. Could you identify Kafka s voice within his works? Explain.
3. What elements of Kafka s personal life helped you to recognize these themes?
4. How does understanding Kafka further clarify these themes for you?

Character, Event Quotation (Include source and pg#)	Facts About Kafka (Include source and pg#)	Theme or Message Communicated

Appendix G
Novel Project

**WORLD LITERATURE
NOVEL PROJECT
*THE AUTHOR AND HIS/HER PHILOSOPHY***

For this project, you will be choosing one of the novels on the list you've been given. Your purpose is to explore the relationship between the author's life, socio-historic relevance and philosophical views to the characters and events in the novel. The following areas must be exhaustively researched, learned, and shared by the time you finish your novel:

I. Author background

Research your author and his/her philosophical beliefs. Understand the message the author conveys throughout the story. You will be required to turn in author background research sheets to ensure thorough research of appropriate materials in the library.

II. Philosophical Base

Research the basic premise underlying the philosophy communicated in your novel. Know where it comes from and how it was utilized. Be able to use this knowledge to interpret specific aspects of your novel.

III. Time period

Research and understand the socio-historic relevance of both the author's life and the school of philosophy. Who else was practicing this method of understanding the world? Investigate the arts: visual artists, dramatic artists, other novelists. Who influenced the author? Look into the political climate of the time for influence as well.

IV. Critical approach

We will be using a biographical approach primarily - with a bit of sociological criticism thrown in for good measure.

V. Annotated bibliography

Create a detailed bibliography of at least 20 sources. Each annotation should indicate the type of source, relevant sections of the source, and the value of the source. What can one learn from this material? Additional sources can translate into extra credit IF they are relevant and useful.

VI. Critical Essay

A brief essay discussing your interpretation of the novel and the author's philosophy. Will include a Works Cited page.

You will be required to create bib and note cards for this assignment. Specific point values, number of cards due and due dates will be outlined in class. Use the bib and note card format to your advantage in both earning points and organizing your

material!! Hopefully we'll be doing a bit of group work on this project. It depends on which novels you choose. Each student is responsible for his/her own novel and research, but discussion groups on philosophical method and thought would be helpful.

Appendix H
World Literature - Final Project/Presentation

World Literature Final Project/Presentation

For this project you will be working in groups of three or four and focusing on one major geographical or philosophical area. You will be researching both the social history and the literary tradition of the country or philosophical group, including any critical and philosophical theories and their effects on the literary output. Your final goal is to develop a 45 minute presentation incorporating the required information outlines below. We will be working for approximately five weeks in preparation for the presentational and I will require that you turn in materials during the process of research to check your progress.

Research Area Requirements for Successful Completion:

- I. Criticism and Philosophical Base
 - A. Discuss particular theories important in the literary tradition of the area or group
 - 1. Existentialism?
 - 2. Nietzsche?
 - 3. Marxism?
 - 4. Feminism?
 - B. Identify an appropriate approach to the literature
 - C. This section is worth 35 points
- II. Social History relevant to literature
 - A. Included here any significant governmental, historical, or social occurrences that are reflected in literature (in other words, briefly delve into an historical approach).
 - B. 25 points.
- III. Major writers and their works
 - A. Include at least one long novel or drama
 - 1. Present plot summary
 - 2. Discuss importance in literary tradition
 - 3. 20 points
 - B. Analyze body of poetry including several poets significant to your focus area
 - 1. Explicate with copies for the class (turn in to me at least four days in advance if you need copies made)
 - 2. Utilize a defined critical approach
 - 3. 20 points
 - C. Include short stories and essays you may discover
 - 1. Included copies for the class
 - 2. 20 points
- IV. Outline to distribute to class
 - A. Include an "agenda" of your presentation
 - B. Define unfamiliar terms and ideas
 - C. Give this to me four days in advance
 - D. 20 points

- V. Utilize visual aids
 - A. Overheads, posters, maps, videos (short!), pictures etc....
 - B. 25 points
- VI. Extras
 - A. Music, food, costumes, props, etc... Create atmosphere!
 - B. 20 points
- VII. Formal Annotated Bibliography
 - A. Include all materials used
 - B. Differentiate between primary and secondary sources
 - C. Use bibliography cards and MLA format
 - D. 25 points

You will want to research constructively to define a specific focus for your presentation. Investigate philosophical methods, appropriate critical approaches and/or progression of ideas relevant to your area of interest. BE PATIENT!! You will only identify this central focus after searching, reading and generally exploring your chosen focus area.

Grading

This project will constitute your entire final marking period graded. The final presentation is worth 200 points, however, you are not simply earning points on the actual day you present. You are earning points on all of the work required in preparation for it. Do not expect to be able to put this off until the night before and still pass; I am consciously working out point values to ensure group cooperation and participation throughout the next six weeks.

Each group must designate individual responsibilities to all members. As a group you will keep a research log of your progress on a day to day basis, with each member recording his/her accomplishments or problems for the day. These journals will be kept in class so the entire group's work will be available every day even if someone is absent. I will be checking these journals to note your progress. Each student will receive an individual graded on journal entries! I reserve the right to deduct points from this portion of the assignment at my discretion based on your participation on any given day. If you are absent for any more than two days during the course of this project, you will lose three points per additional day.

Appendix I

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: April 12, 2002

To: Allen Webb, Principal Investigator
Lisa Schade, Student Investigator for Dissertation

From: Mary Lagerwey, Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 02-03-21

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "How Does It Mean? Literary Theory as Metacognitive Strategy for Reading and Interpretation" has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapprove if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 12, 2003

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