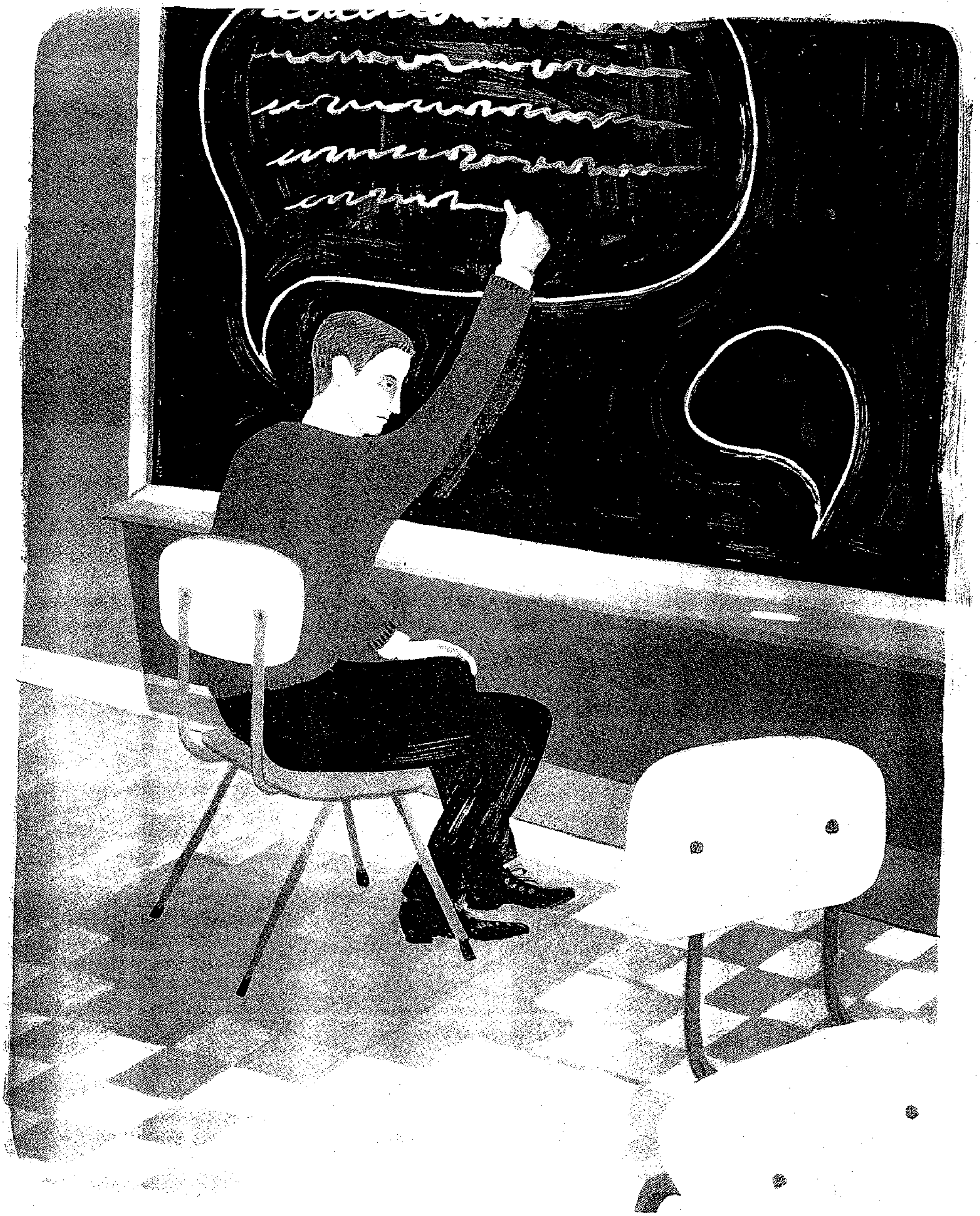
THE UNBEARABLE POINTLESSNESS OF LITERATURE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

BY GERALD GRAFF

I WANT TO START WITH a shameful confession about my college literary education. As an English major, I became devilishly proficient at intellectual fraud. No, I didn't commit plagiarism, but what I did do was almost as bad. I learned to take any poem or novel you put in front of me and write an essay showing that it contains a pattern of light and dark images, a contrast between good and evil or between the individual and society, or the like. I was vaguely aware that these performances were a travesty of real intellectual work, a kind of pseudoargument that's found nowhere outside academic classrooms. But I was getting As on these essays, so how could I stop? Before you condemn me, consider that you too might do as I did if you were in my shoes.



But of course you did do so many times over, didn't you? Who hasn't who made decent grades in college literature courses? The kind of essay I've described is the standard one that students have written in literature courses since time immemorial, or at least since the 1950s, when textual close reading became the stock in trade of literature classrooms. It's just what English majors do—and what could be wrong with that? Well, if you don't know and still don't by the end of this essay—then we have to talk.

My quarrel with the standard classroom literature essay is summed up in the characterization of it I just offered: pseudoargument. In my 2003 book *Clueless in Academe* and other recent writing I've made the case that argument—the dialectical clash of ideas—needs to be at the center of education, but that the centrality of argument is actually obscured by the high school and college curriculum. Here's how I put the point in the book:

> For American students to do better—all of them, not just twenty percent—they need to know that summarizing and making arguments is the name of the game in academia. But it's precisely this game that academia obscures, generally by hiding it in plain view amidst a vast disconnected clutter of subjects, disciplines, and courses. The sheer cognitive overload represented by the American curriculum prevents most students from detecting and then learning the moves of the underlying argument game that gives coherence to it all.

In a more recent textbook that picks up where *Clueless in Academe* left off, Cathy Birkenstein and I try to cut through this curricular "clutter" and its "cognitive overload" by showing students "the moves of the underlying argument game that gives coherence to it all."

The most important of these argumentative moves is the one that gives our book its title: *They Say / I Say*. The central premise is that effective persuasive writers "enter a conversation," something they need to launch and motivate their own arguments. This premise is implicit in classical rhetoricians since Aristotle, and it's a virtual article of faith in composition and rhetoric circles today, thanks to dialogical thinkers like Kenneth Burke, Mikhail Bakhtin, and, more recently, David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, Mike Rose, Andrea Lunsford, John Bean, and others too numerous to mention. Bartholomae, for example, in his influential essay, "Inventing the University," observes that "the best student writing works against a conventional point of view. . . . The more successful writers set themselves . . . against what they defined as some more naïve way of talking about their subject—against 'those who think that . . . '—or against earlier, more naïve versions of themselves—'once I thought that.'"

As Cathy and I put the point, echoing Bartholomae, all writing "is deeply engaged in some way with other people's views," with something they "say." After all, we would have no reason to make persuasive arguments to begin with unless we were provoked by the arguments and beliefs of others. That is, "we only make arguments because someone has said or done something (or perhaps not said or done something) and we need to respond." Furthermore, "If it weren't for other people and our need to challenge, agree with or otherwise respond to them, there would be no reason to argue at all."

Where we like to think we're original is in taking this widely shared view of the conversational nature of communication and turning it into a kind of categorical imperative of rhetoric: thou shalt indicate the conversation you are entering, the "they say" you are responding to. If your reader can't identify it, your text probably won't make sense. For it is what others are saying that motivates our writing and gives it a reason for being. Unless you indicate what others think about your argument, you leave unanswered two of the key questions readers and hearers need answered: "So what?" and "Who cares?"

We try to drive home the point through a couple of before-and-after cartoons. In Figure 1, a man delivering an academic lecture states, "The characters in *The Sopranos* are very complex."

The imagined students in his audience wonder, "Yeah, so?" "A-a-nd?" and "Why is he telling us this?" In Figure 2, the lecturer makes virtually the same claim but frames it by making reference to something "they say": "Some say that *The Sopranos* presents caricatures of Italian Americans. In fact, however, the characters in the series are very complex."

By being framed as a response in a conversation, we suggest, an otherwise clear but pointless claim is transformed, taking on motivation and point. As the hypothetical audience's puzzlement in Figure 1 shows, in the absence of a discernible "they say," what you are saying may be clear to your audience, but why you are saying it won't be.

What does all this have to do with the standard literature essay? A lot, for I believe the monological model, devoid of a "they say," is still the dominant one for student writing in American high schools and colleges. As Cathy and I put it, "Too often, academic writing is taught as a process of saying 'true' or 'smart' things in a vacuum, as if it were possible to argue effectively without being in conversation with someone else." We're referring here to the traditional five-paragraph essay, of which the standard literary essay is a close descendant. The five-paragraph essay does force the writer to have an argument, but it's a kind of argument that isn't with anyone or anything, a kind that nobody thinks of making in real life. That is why I call it a kind of pseudoargument and why many writing teachers have reacted against the five-paragraph essay.

The five-paragraph essay does often ask students to write from sources but usually only to support a thesis that has already been predetermined. The same usually applies for the traditional research paper, which is often just an expanded five-paragraph theme. And this is not even to mention the many writing assignments across the disciplines that ask students not to develop a thesis at all but merely to summarize something they have read. No wonder after going from courses in which they are asked only to summarize to other courses in which they have to make an argument, students have no way of predicting what the next teacher will want, forcing them to ask, "In this paper, do you want my ideas or just a summary of the reading?"

The only proper answer, as Cathy and I see it, is "both," or, "We want *your* ideas, motivated by a good summary of the reading. Generate your own argument by pushing off from those of others, whether to disagree, to add to, or to complicate their claims." Sending such a message would require students—and teachers—to move from the pseudoargument of Figure 1 to the consequential real-world argument of Figure 2. The ability to make this move from Figure 1 to Figure 2 has become increasingly urgent in a global world in which we must try to understand the views of people who think very differently from us.

For an example of the type of assignment that mandates pseudoargument in the student literature essay, consider the following question from the 2004 College Board examination pamphlet, "AP English Literature and Composition." Because the AP exam is a crucial gate from high school to college, the kinds of writing it calls for tell us much both about high school and college writing. The sample question asks test takers "to compare and contrast" poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, "analyzing the significance of dark and night in each" while paying close "attention to such elements as point of view, imagery, and structure."

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Unless provoked by some prior conversation, nobody in any actual situation would think of writing, "Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost utilize the symbolic richness of darkness in these two poems," and if anyone did, they would surely draw the sort of response imagined from the audience of Figure 1: "Huh?" or, "And you're telling me this because. . ." or "So what?" An irreverent former colleague, Maureen McLane, once observed that the real subtext of the undergraduate literature essay is "How 'bout that Wordsworth!" How 'bout them images of darkness!

Assignments like those of the AP English pamphlet actually train students in how to be pointless, that there is nothing at stake in academic writing, that there are no consequences as there are in the rhetorical world outside school. So don't ask questions, just do whatever the teacher wants and get on with it. This in turn conveys the lesson that school itself is a series of meaningless rituals that you go along with because you have no choice and you may jeopardize your future if you don't.

But lighten up, you may say. "You're making way too much of a big deal about what is, after all, just a classroom exercise. What you call 'pseudoargument' is just an apprentice exercise that beginning students are quite sensibly asked to practice before they can possibly be ready to enter the prime-time conversation of critics and other readers and make their own arguments. Of course most literary essay assignments don't ask students to enter such conversations, since that is not and should not be their purpose. Engaging with others is appropriate at the advanced stages of literary education, particularly for graduate students or honors undergraduates who aspire to go on to graduate school and become professional academics. But the point of exercises like the AP assignment and its counterpart in course essays is to help *beginning* students learn to read a literary text with close attention, appreciate its particularity, and analyze those features into their component elements." Or as one literature professor put it to me, "What my students most need is to experience the process of discovery undistracted by secondary commentary."

But does an exercise in pseudoargument figure to be good preparation for more advanced discussions in which making genuine arguments with real audiences and interlocutors comes into play? I submit that making arguments in isolation, Figure 1 style, makes the transition harder rather than easier, since writers who learn the more limited Figure 1 model have then to unlearn it to move to Figure 2. It makes sense to initiate students gradually, but asking them to produce a simplified version of the more advanced Figure 2 practice seems preferable to sending them down a false path from which they have to be rescued. From a developmental standpoint, then, the Figure 1 model is a dead end.

I believe many of our classic frustrations in literary education are rooted in the fallacious belief—it's implied by the professor I just quoted—that reading texts closely and well is somehow interfered with by talking about texts and entering the critical conversation about texts, that therefore we must postpone the encounter with criticism to some preprofessional stage of education. In many ways, however, the monological essay—say something about a literary work in isolation from the views of others about it—serves a purpose, enabling students to produce some kind of commentary on literature without having to be part of the conversation of the discipline. There's a real sense in which undergraduate education doesn't expose students to the disciplines at all, something that would mean exposing them to the conversation of critics, scholars, and general readers as it evolves and changes over time. Instead of exposing students to such a literary conversation, the undergraduate curriculum exposes them instead to the subject matter of the disciplines abstracted from those conversations. So literature majors read novels and poems but are not expected to be in on the critical conversation about them; history majors study historical events but not the debates of historians about them; math majors do mathematical problems but are not expected to think like mathematicians, and so forth. This in turn takes the faculty off the hook, because by not expecting students to be part of our conversations, we are excused from trying to show them how to do so.

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It would be alarming enough if assignments like the above on images of darkness were limited to high school or AP English. Yet there is no reason to think that such assignments and the essays they call forth are less common in college. You might think the theory of revolution and the multicultural and feminist insurgencies of the last few decades would have driven the "images of darkness" essay into extinction. Instead, I suspect, it has simply provided that kind of essay with a more up-to-date and politically enlightened veneer.[1] Images of darkness are replaced by images of oppressed women or of Empowered Women, a change that may be progress of sorts but of a very limited kind. It's still fundamentally the same essay, one that says true or—in this case, politically unexceptionable—things in a vacuum and fails to engage the views of those who think differently from the writer, in this case readers who don't take it for granted that inventorying texts for oppressed or empowered subjects is what literary study should be about. This is not a slam at thoughtful feminist criticism but rather at thoughtless writing that gives feminist criticism a bad name.

It would be easy but unfair to blame the type of classroom literary essay I am objecting to on the New Criticism. It is true that the founding generation of New Critics distrusted persuasive rhetoric and defined poetic discourse as the very opposite of ordinary persuasive language. But the members of that generation were themselves masterful persuasive rhetoricians, as they had to be to overcome a great variety of opponents. The explications of poems produced by Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt, R. B. Heilman and others were never expounded in a vacuum but always as part of a larger polemical argument with innumerable "they says." Each of the close readings of poems in Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn*, for example, illustrates a larger polemical point, generally against some reductionist view of poetry or life. Thus, when Brooks reads "The Canonization" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as complex, paradoxical texts, he does so to refute a host of adversaries: message-hunting readers who reduce poems to simple moralistic or optimistic generalizations, historical scholars who ignore the literary work itself to focus on its historical background or its author's biography, cultural relativists who undermine the concept of literary value, positivistic scientists and materialists who reduce spiritual values to physical phenomena, shallow journalists who distract us with transitory epiphenomena from the deep tragic vision embodied in great literature, and so on. Even in Brooks and Warren's college textbook, *Understanding Poetry*, the explications of poems are always in the service of a larger quarrel with conventionally accepted views of poetry.

But when New Critical explication was adapted for classrooms in the early 1950s, its polemical rhetorical motivations—the "they says" that members of the founding generation were refuting with their explications of poems—often dropped away. What was left was a professional version of the decontextualized close reading that then became the prototype of the undergraduate literature essay. The richest source for such decontextualized readings is the *Explicator*, a journal founded in 1942 that became the special outlet for such readings, and in the work of second-generation New Critics, most notably Reuben Brower, whose poetry courses at Amherst College and Harvard were legendary models for New Critical teaching that influenced Paul de Man and many later critics. In my 1987 history, *Professing Literature*, I cite Brower's 1951 book, *The Fields of Light*, which I describe as "probably the first major work of the New Criticism that explicated poems without an accompanying cultural thesis." Brower's book more than any other, I think, signaled the shift of New Critical reading from embattled rhetorical argument to explication in a vacuum.

Here, for example, is how Brower opens his chapter in *The Fields of Light* on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "The harmony of the play lies in its metaphorical design, in the closeness and completeness with which its varied elements are linked through almost inexhaustible analogies."

In other words, the characters in *The Sopranos* are very complex.

Neither here nor elsewhere in his essay (or book) does Brower indicate why he thinks he needs to say what he is saying, that is, who might dispute it or why it matters. Unlike Brooks and Brower's other New Critical predecessors, Brower writes as if his methods were self-explanatory and needed no justification. And in fairness to Brower, perhaps by 1951, they no longer did need justification at least for the many academics who by then were already persuaded that his assumptions about reading poetry were the right ones. But letting the views you are opposing go unidentified is a poor model for students, who may not even be aware that dissenting views exist.

But what, then, can be the "they say" that students can push off in writing essays on literature, saving them from having to make claims in isolation that don't respond to real questions anyone has asked or would ask? To give student writing genuine motivation, we need to assign some form of literary criticism along with primary literary texts, not only in advanced college literature courses but also in introductory college courses and even non-AP courses in high school. Moreover we can't be content to just assign criticism—as college instructors now tend to do more frequently than they did in the past—but need to ask students to engage with it, which means finding ways to help students to enter into critical conversations.

This is a tall order, to say the least, because most criticism, especially academic criticism, is notoriously unreadable to nonacademics, to say nothing of students. I know from bitter experience, having assigned critical writing that bombed more often than I care to admit. And even journalistic criticism and book reviews can be almost as esoteric, because they often assume a readership that is already initiated into literary culture. Pieces from the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* can contain enough references and allusions to discourage or turn off most undergraduates.

If I'm right that writing in authentic ways about literature requires being part of a real conversation, then we have to overcome such obstacles. Furthermore, we ask students to produce a version of critical discourse when they write essays about literature and talk about it in class, and to do so competently, they need to see models of what that discourse looks like. As James Berger has sagely observed, "You don't learn to write an English paper by reading a novel."

Berger's comment reminds us that literature students don't have just to read literary texts but to find things to say about them, to produce some kind of book talk, and the culture they live in provides them with few models of such book talk that might help them become familiar with its conventions. Given the foreignness of literary discourse in our culture, assigning literature without also assigning criticism is like teaching French without exposing students to any French texts. I make the comparison advisedly, because literary criticism in English—like other forms of intellectual discourse—is as much a foreign language as German or Chinese. The point is that what we misleadingly call teaching literature really means teaching literary criticism, for what literature students are expected to produce is not poems and novels but talk about poems and novels. When the literature syllabus consists of primary texts with little or no criticism, there results a double bind in which we withhold the critical discourse from students that we expect them to produce and then punish them at grading time for producing it badly.

In case you were wondering, I'm not suggesting that Derrida's *Of Grammatology* be assigned to high school students, college freshmen, or even senior English majors. That's the sort of thing that has given criticism a bad name and made assigning it seem outlandish and out of the question. But there are ways to make critical discourse accessible to high school and college students. We could start with the fact that many of the debates about popular culture that get into the news offer accessible models of critical discourse that could help us build bridges for students to advanced literary critical discussions.

An example came to hand a couple of years ago in the media debates that were provoked by the mysterious blackout that concluded the final episode of *The Sopranos*. These debates are a promising place to start looking for classroom-ready criticism, because its admirers regard the series as a kind of twenty-first century equivalent to the Balzacian realistic novel—a claim that could make for a good debate in a literature survey course. There's nothing new, of course, about bringing in popular culture to illuminate canonical texts, but what we haven't done often enough is to use criticism and critical debates on popular culture to provide students with conversations that could motivate their writing. However remote *The Sopranos* may be from high literature, the debates in newspapers and on blogs about the way the series ended strikingly mirror the debates of literary critics about the seemingly anticlimactic endings of such classic novels as *The Ambassadors* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Furthermore, the same logical, inferential, and rhetorical practices come into play in the debates about the ending of both the popular series and the literary classics, just as both sets of debates raise common meta-level issues: how do we determine whether the blackout ending of *The Sopranos* is a moving and fitting conclusion to a television masterpiece or an example of pretentious kitsch? Does interpreting the ending involve inferring an author's intention, and if so, how do we do that? What kinds of evidence can be adduced about what happens in the scene or about how dramatic conventions work that would support different interpretations of the ending? Debating such issues with respect to a range of different works would get students to wrestle with key questions about why canonical classics have higher status than popular works and whether such distinctions are justified.

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None of this is to suggest that published academic criticism needs to be off limits to undergraduate classrooms. I've had relatively good results assigning the two literature textbooks I've coedited (with James Phelan)—Bedford "Critical Controversies" editions of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—which collect critical conversations that figure to be accessible enough for students to enter. But if it's hard to find published criticism that figures to be accessible to students, there is another source of nonesoteric critical conversations about literature that seems to me vastly underused. This is our everyday class discussions, which could be the basis of written conversations that students could be asked to summarize and respond to, writing in response to a provocative claim by a classmate or an exchange between several classmates. If teachers had students transcribe their contributions to the class discussion of a literary work and then circulated a portion of these transcriptions to the class as reference points to use in writing about the work, not only would student writing likely improve but class discussion would as well.

I have argued that much of the challenge of improving American education can be usefully reduced to one of how to move students from making monological claims in a vacuum to making claims in a real conversation. The challenge, in other words, is to provide students with a way into real academic and cultural conversations from which they have not only been excluded but also excluded by the very expectations built into our assignments. If I am right, standard undergraduate writing assignments actually institutionalize students' exclusion from these intellectual conversations by giving students a way to make claims without being part of those conversations. Our students can do better than this, and so can we. ●