

How 'bout That Wordsworth!

Teaching literature and first-year composition back to back lately has made me aware of a curious discrepancy in the kind of writing we expect from students in these domains. In first-year composition, at least as I and many others teach it, students write in response to essays on politics, economics, the media, youth culture, and other current topics. They develop their arguments by “entering the conversation” of their culture, as pictured in Kenneth Burke’s celebrated image of the world of ideas as a never-ending parlor discussion (110–11). The assumption is that persuasive writers need such a conversation to motivate their own arguments—that unless we are provoked by the views of others, we have no reason to make persuasive arguments at all.

In many undergraduate literature courses, by contrast, student writers are not expected to enter comparable conversations, to respond to critics or other readers of literary texts. When I ask literature instructors about the matter, many say they don’t assign criticism, much less expect their students to engage with it. Some say they actively discourage their students from consulting “secondary sources,” which would only interfere with their learning to read texts closely and well.

It’s as if the object of many literature writing assignments is not for undergraduates to enter intense debates about literary works but for them to say smart things about those works in a vacuum: there’s an interplay of light and dark images in this poem; this novel is organized on a contrast between innocence and experience or good and evil; the hero of this play is an object of irony. In making such claims, student writers aren’t expected to address the kind of questions that real readers would ask, like “Does anyone say otherwise?” or “So what?” This leads to essays that make an argument clearly enough but fail to indicate why it needs to be made in the first place.¹

The result is a curious situation in which students in first-year composition write essays grounded in real-world conversations, while those in ostensibly more advanced literature courses write essays that sound as if they were addressed to nobody and delivered from outer space. This decontextualized literature essay is essentially a version of the old five-paragraph theme applied to a novel, poem, or play. Even when students are asked to cite secondary sources, as they are in longer research paper assignments, the five-paragraph theme is still the model, as the writer cites the sources to support a preestablished thesis rather than to agree, disagree, or otherwise engage with them.

The five-paragraph theme does require that writers make an argument—a thesis followed by supporting reasons and evidence followed by a concluding restatement of the thesis—but it’s an argument that’s not *with* anyone or anything, an argument nobody would think of making except to fulfill a school assignment.² As my former colleague Maureen McLane put it, the point, in effect, of the classic undergraduate literature essay amounts to “How ‘bout that Wordsworth!”

But surely this type of essay assignment has withered away in the wake of multiculturalism and poststructuralism? You would think so, but in many undergraduate essays I come across, the topic has become more up to date, but the rhetorical form—say something smart about a text in isolation from other views of it—is déjà vu all over again: there’s an oppressed woman in this text; there’s a racial subtext in that one; this one is laced with images of commodification. Since there is still no engagement

with real or imagined other readers, these decontextualized arguments invite the same responses as the old-fashioned ones—“Who would dispute it?” or “What’s the point?”

To be sure, almost any writing assignment can be a valuable exercise in the hands of a thoughtful and creative instructor or an ingenious student. But to be most effective, writers generally need a countervoice, something to push off against, to motivate their writing and give it a point. When literature assignments don’t ask writers to respond to such a countervoice, students understandably grope for things to say and tend to produce opening sentences like these from actual essays: “In Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, there are many characters introduced and involved in the story” or “In *1984*, many themes and situations arise right from the beginning of the story.”

You may say, however, that we’re *right* if we don’t expect beginning literature students to enter our critical conversations, which would put most of them to sleep. The kind of classroom essay you’re abusing makes obvious sense as an initiation exercise in how to read, a sufficient “motivation” for writing. But I would reply that not having to confront interpretations of the text that challenge yours retards the process of learning to read more than it helps. The discipline of rigorously summarizing and responding to a critic who doesn’t share one’s pet assumptions is good tonic for the kind of narcissistic current students Tamar Katz describes, who “want to read every text as saying something extremely familiar they might agree with . . .” (qtd. by Laurence 4).

Nor is it only undergraduates who pick up antirhetorical ways of writing about literature, which often persist in the writing of graduate students and faculty members. Many applications for graduate school, for professional fellowships and grants, and for teaching positions get relegated to the rejection pile because the summary of the applicant’s major project runs as follows: “In my dissertation/fellowship project/book manuscript, I argue that Henry David Thoreau’s thinking is in the pragmatist tradition.” Again, since such statements give no indication of whether anyone thinks otherwise or why the issue matters, they leave readers thinking, “And you’re telling me this because . . . ?” Many job talks, conference papers, and published books and articles misfire for the same reason.

Why do writing assignments persist in not asking students to jump into the critical fray? The simplest reason is that it’s not easy to make the critical fray accessible and compelling to undergraduates. Most academic criticism is written for fellow academics rather than for undergraduates, but even journalistic book reviews tend to be addressed to initiated readers, with references and allusions that would lose many students. If this were the only obstacle, however, we would probably find ways to overcome it. Not all criticism is esoteric, and, even if we can’t find any that isn’t, we can work up our own critical prompts and can turn students’ essays and comments in class into critical conversations the students could enter in their writing.

The more important reason we don’t ask students to engage with critics—and the factor that’s hardest to change—is the deep-seated belief of humanists that reading and responding to commentators about a literary text competes with reading it closely and attentively. Underlying this belief is the assumption that, if a literary work is truly great and if we read it receptively,

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the work itself will tell us what to say about it. To read *Paradise Lost* closely and well, according to this way of thinking, is to submit to the text so fully and to get on such intimate terms with its language that the text's literary discourse will transmute itself into our appropriate responses to it as readers.

Good reading, then, according to this view, consists of letting the work itself dictate what we say about it, leaving no need for the mediating provocation of a critical conversation, which will only get in the way. The converse also follows: if our students come away from a classic with no idea what to say about it, it must be their fault for failing to read it well, not ours for failing to recognize the problem of what students are supposed to say about literature and where they are supposed to find it.

Leaving students intimately alone with the text only favors those who come in with some prior literary background—some stock of things to say—while disabling the rest and forcing many of them to resort to CliffsNotes, if not to plagiarism. For texts (whether they are classics or not) don't tell you what to say about them any more than fireplugs or desks tell you to call themselves by those names. As my correspondent James Berger succinctly sums up the problem, "You don't learn to write an English paper by reading a novel."³ On the contrary, the prompts needed for writing an English paper on a novel come not from the novel but from the conversation about it.

Students need that conversation not only as a prompt for generating their own critical response but also as a model of what critical response to literature looks like. To produce a competent version of literary criticism, which, after all, is ultimately what students have to do in literature courses, they need to see some of the stuff. When we fail to assign criticism alongside literary works (or when we *do* assign it but don't ask students to engage with it), in effect we withhold the discourse from students that we ask them to produce and then penalize them when they produce it poorly.⁴

I started out by observing that students in first-year composition are often asked to enter the real conversations of the university and the wider culture, whereas literature students often are not. This difference helps explain why literary study has been privileged over composition in both the status hierarchy and the salaries, teaching loads, and job security of the teachers. Engaging in the real conversations of the university and the wider culture is a practical, useful, and historically specific activity and therefore, according to our traditions, is inferior to communing in isolation with great works. The irony, however, is that privileging literature over composition greatly retards literary study, which flounders when undergraduates write poorly, in part because we exclude them from the critical conversation.

To be sure, not all literature courses are criticism-free zones, and many writing assignments today do ask students to enter important critical debates. Undergraduate research programs certainly represent a promising recent step in the right direction. I sometimes think that a silent battle for the soul of the literature classroom is being waged between those who want students to engage with critics and those who want them to "just read the works." (How this conflict is resolved will probably be more consequential for the teaching of literature than the more celebrated conflicts over theory and the canon.) Since departments and colleges generally don't discuss this or other similar divisions in the faculty, most of us are oblivious to the fact that our students receive confusingly mixed messages as they go from

course to course—from one course, say, in which they read only *Macbeth* or *To the Lighthouse* to another in which they are asked to take sides in debates between formalist and new historicist interpreters of such works. The assumption seems to be that no discussion of these fundamentally different practices is needed (or is possible) and that individual instructors will figure such things out on their own, as will their students. In other words, to put it less euphemistically, I won't mess with your course if you don't mess with mine. But it seems time that we started seeing questions about how we teach literature—just teach the works or teach them as part of a critical conversation?—not as a private matter but as one to talk about together.

Gerald Graff

NOTES

This essay grew out of talks presented at the 2007 and 2008 ADE Summer Seminars at Kiawah Island, South Carolina, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, as well as at the Bread Loaf School of English and Tulane University in 2007.

1. The same regressive pattern may more or less characterize writing assignments in other disciplines, where undergraduates are not expected to enter the conversations of scientists, historians, and anthropologists (which are assumed to be either too specialized to interest them or too "meta" for them to grasp) but are asked instead to demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter of those disciplines abstracted from disciplinary conversations. Just as literature students read literary works without learning to think and talk like literary critics, they do math and science problems without learning to think and talk like mathematicians and scientists.

2. The AP literature examination does much to establish a monological model of student writing about literature in high schools that often continues through college. See, for instance, the following examples of allegedly successful student writing offered by the 2004 College Board examination pamphlet, *AP English Literature and Composition*. The writers were asked "to compare and contrast" poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost by "analyzing the significance of dark and night in each," while paying close "attention to such elements as point of view, imagery, and structure" (39):

In great literature, darkness is often used as a potent symbol for suffering, sorrow, and even evil at times. Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost utilize the symbolic richness of darkness in these two poems, but while both show a common symbolic element, each poem presents a distinctly different experience with the night. . . . (41)

Literary works throughout history have used darkness and its antithesis, lightness, as various symbols. Sometimes darkness is personified or it represents a hidden fear, while the light contrasts everything the darkness stands for. In the two poems in the passage, the darkness takes on a different meaning. . . . (45)

Both essays go on to show that there is indeed a lot of light and dark imagery in the two poems. Again, all that's missing (since the assignment treats it as irrelevant) is an indication of why that's of interest—a point.

3. E-mail correspondence, 23 June 2008. Quoted with permission.

4. For a fuller elaboration of this argument, see Graff 173–89.

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