What We Teach and Why: Contemporary Literary Theory and Adolescents*

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> The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions…. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.
>
> - James Baldwin

> Everything we do in life is rooted in theory.
>
> - bell hooks

Introduction

Over seven years ago, in my introduction to *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*, I made the following statement: "We live in dangerous and complicated times and no one is more aware of it

than our teenagers" (Appleman, 2000, p.1). It's ironic to note that when I wrote those words, the 9-11 attack hadn't happened, the war in Iraq hadn't begun, and Columbine had just heralded the era of mass school shootings. Now, almost a decade later, the times we live in have become considerably more dangerous and even more complicated. We are all, in the twenty-first century, poised precariously between ecological, economic, and political crises. It has become more and more difficult to navigate our way in an increasingly ideological world.

In addition to the crises wrought by war and both natural and human made disaster, we are also bombarded with messages, slogans, and pleas from the left and from the right. The radio airwaves, the Internet, print and television ads, and films and documentaries all compete for our attention as they attempt to sell us their version of the truth. While this cacophony of ideologies can be deafening even to adults, it can be absolutely overwhelming to young people. For those of us who engage with adolescents through literacy, our charge, as Paulo Freire (1987) has pointed out, is to help students read both the world and the word. Our job is not simply to help students read and write; our job is to help them use the skills of writing and reading to understand the world around them. We want them to become, in the words of bell hooks, "enlightened witnesses," critically vigilant about the world we live in. In order to become enlightened witnesses, young people must understand the workings of ideology.

Ideology

What *is* ideology? Bonnycastle (1996) offers an adolescent friendly definition:

> In essence an ideology is a system of thought or "world view" which an individual acquires (usually unconsciously) from the world around him. An ideology determines what you think is important in life, what categories you put people into, how you see male and female roles in life, and a host of other things. You can visualize your ideology as a grid, or a set of glasses, through which you can see the world.
>
> - Bonnycastle

Bonnycastle rightly emphasizes the unconscious quality of ideology. One is reminded of Leo Lionni's classic *Fish is Fish* (1974), where a tadpole's lively description of what he observed on land is translated by his fish listener into mental pictures that all look like fish-cows, birds, even humans. The fish is unaware that everything he hears is translated unconsciously into his own limited, fishy paradigm.

While Lionni's depiction is playful and points to the foibles of limited experience and imagination, Ryan offers a somewhat more sinister definition of ideology:

> The term ideology describes the beliefs, attitudes, and habits of feeling, which a society inculcates in order to generate an automatic reproduction of its structuring premises. Ideology is what preserves social power in the absence of direct coercion. (1998, 37)

In other words, when we teach the concept of ideology to young people, we are helping them to discern the system of values and beliefs that help create expectations for individual behavior and for social norms. Although ideology can be individual, it is generally a social and political construct, one that subtly shapes society and culture. As history has taught us, ideologies are not always benign or harmless and they need to be questioned and sometimes resisted.

Although ideological constructs help each of us learn how we fit into the world, ideology is often invisible and transmitted unconsciously. It is what Norman Fairclough has dubbed "ideological common sense." He writes, "Ideological common sense is common sense in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power."

I was recently on an airplane when a woman in a pilot's uniform boarded the plane. The gentleman sitting next to me whispered, "That's the co-pilot." As a frequent flyer on the airline, I recognized the pilot's uniform and knew the man was mistaken. His ideological common sense kept him from seeing that a woman was the pilot. While this example may seem trivial, ideological common sense also influences who we think are

college-bound students, trustworthy renters, or plausible presidential candidates.

A literature or language arts class at the secondary level is an ideal place to help students learn to read and, if necessary, resist the ideology that surrounds them. In our literature classes, we teach texts that are full of ideology. As Fairclough explains:

> Ideology is most effective when its workings are least visible … Invisibility is achieved when ideologies are brought to discourse not as explicit elements of the text, but as the background assumptions, which, on the one hand, lead the text producer to textualize the world in a particular way, and on the other hand, lead the interpreter to interpret the text in a particular way. Texts do not spout ideology. They so position the interpreter through their cues that she brings ideologies to the interpretation of texts—and reproduces them in the process!
>
> -Fairclough, 1989, p. 85

When we read Frost's "The Road Not Taken," we attend to the assertion that "taking the road less traveled by" makes all the difference. From Fairclough's perspective, the text "positions" us to embrace the ideologies of American individualism and nonconformity. In Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the racialized portraits of Huck and Jim normalize a particular kind of America, whose ideology of inequality was unquestioned for too long. Our responsibility as literature teachers is to help make the ideologies inherent in those texts visible to our students.

The best way to uncover and explore these ideologies is through the explicit teaching of contemporary literary theory. Literary theory provides readers with the tools to uncover the often-invisible workings of the text. As Bonneycastle explains:

> The main reason for studying theory at the same time as literature is that it forces you to deal consciously with the problem of ideologies … There are many truths and the one you will find depends partly on the ideology you start with. [Studying theory] means you can take your own part in the struggles for power between different ideologies. It helps you to discover

> elements of your own ideology, and understand why you hold certain values unconsciously. It means no authority can impose a truth on you in a dogmatic way—and if some authority does try, you can challenge that truth in a powerful way, by asking what ideology it is based on … Theory is subversive because it puts authority in question.

But isn't it too political?

There are those who may say that they signed on to teach English, not social studies, and that this approach is too political. I have two rejoinders to that objection. First, being a teacher is essentially a political act, a political stance—a stance that advocates for the literacy rights of everyone, a stance that acknowledges that when you give someone literacy, you give them power.

Second, even our seemingly neutral reading of texts is political. In our literature classes, then, we should focus on helping students read texts with an eye toward ideology that is inscribed in them. An African proverb puts it this way: "Until lions tell their stories, tales of hunting will glorify the hunter."

Our canon has been filled with tales of the hunter. Recently, tales of the lion, works by authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, Amy Tan, and many others have begun to fill our schools' bookrooms and our students' sensibilities. In addition to hearing from the lion, we can continue to teach tales of the hunter but with the remediating lens of literary theory—a postcolonial lens for *Heart of Darkness*, a feminist lens for *The Great Gatsby*, a Marxist lens for *Hamlet*, just to name a few possible examples.

For those who say, we should simply teach the literature "neutrally," I offer the perspective of literary scholar R. Staton:

> Contemporary theory holds that there is no such thing as an innocent, value-free reading. Instead, each of us has a viewpoint invested with presuppositions about 'reality' and about ourselves, whether we are conscious of it or not. People who deny having a critical stance, who claim they are responding "naturally" or being "completely objective" do not know themselves.

We could continue to uncritically teach *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* because they are classic pieces of literature without regard for the problems engendered by the use of the "n" word. That decision privileges the arbitrary literary value of a canonical text over the significance and relevance of a changing student demographic. It ignores the deeply politicized history of the "n" word and how it differently affects different populations. Teachers often make these kinds of decisions, teaching the same texts in the same way without re-assessing their changing effect. That, too, is a political decision, just as political a teaching as offering a post-colonial analysis or reading the texts through the lens of critical race theory.

The importance of multiplicity

On the other hand, it is very important that we don't offer only a single theory to our students, for that truly is dogmatic or propagandistic teaching. It is the mono-theoretical approaches of most secondary English classrooms that drew me to the notion of multiple perspectives as an antidote. Even a reader–response lens is limiting if it is the only possible theoretical frame in which one can produce a reading. Bertolt Brecht extols the virtues of multiplicity this way: "A man with one theory is lost. He needs several of them, or lots! He should stuff them in his pockets like newspapers."

Offering students several ways to look at texts does more than help them learn to interpret literature from multiple perspectives; it also helps them develop a more complex way of thinking as they move from the dualism of early adolescence to the relativism of adult thinkers (Perry, 1970). F. Scott Fitzgerald perhaps most notably stated the virtue of this kind of thinking:

> The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. (1964)

Reading media, Reading the world

> The relationship between the text and the world is not simply a fascinating problem for textual theory. It is, above all others, the problem that makes textual theory necessary.
>
> - Robert Scholes

Three years ago, in one of my weekly visits to local high schools in Minnesota to help teachers introduce literary theory, I asked students to find a cultural artifact worth analyzing. I told them that they should find a print ad, television commercial billboard or even a web site where they might find some cultural ideology inscribed and then use the literary lenses or perspectives that we had learned together to help them read the ideology within the ad. Remembering that it was Super Bowl weekend, I enthusiastically recommended that they used the halftime of the super bowl to view the commercials. Yes, it was *that* halftime. Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction. And even a card-carrying ACLU member like myself was taken aback by a primetime breast-baring!

When I realized that I had assigned this viewing to over 60 high school students, I panicked. Then I also remembered that I had armed them with literary theory cards. Sure enough, students streamed into the class the next Monday with feminist, Marxist, reader-response, and deconstructive readings of the events, to name a few. For example, one student, using the Marxist lens, wrote that the incident was a capitalistic ploy timed to coincide with the release of Jackson's latest album. Another, using the feminist lens, observed that what was shocking about the episode was not the bare breast, but the seeming acceptance of a somewhat violent gesture toward a woman (ripping off her clothes). What, I wondered, might their viewing have been like if they hadn't been armed with the theory cards?

In addition to reading media, students have also fruitfully used literary lenses to read the world. For those who think that this is not in the purview of the English teacher, Bruce Pirie offers this perspective:

> It is *not* that we shouldn't care about individual students and texts. We should, and I do. We also recognize, however, that students and texts are embedded in huge, living, sometimes contradictory networks, and if we want students to understand the workings of textuality, then we have to think about those larger systems. (1997, 75)

Our study of texts is deeply intertwined with the social world in which the text was produced and the social worlds in which we read them. Studying theory does mean that we study and read the world as well. At a local metropolitan high school, students who had studied several of contemporary theories and had applied them throughout the year were asked the following question:

> Think of something you've heard about or seen outside of class that struck you as worth thinking about. It could be related to school:
> - an interaction between two people
> - a school policy
> - a social group
> - something about the building itself
> - how the school day is structured
>
> or
>
> Something outside of school:
> - a state, national, or world event or circumstance
>
> Describe this event or issue and explain why it is important.
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> Then, consider this event from at least two of the lenses we've been working with. What do you notice or what questions emerge for you as you apply these critical perspectives to that event? How do these lenses affect or increase your understanding of the event/issue?

Here is a list of the kinds of things the students chose to read using the perspective of the lenses:

- Racially motivated fights in school
- The mild winter
- The existence of God
- The war on drugs
- The lack of school funding and school overcrowding
- September 11
- Hurricane Katrina
- The high school dress code
- Cliques and divisions within the school
- Government spying
- The continuing war in Iraq
- The effects of the media on teenagers

And here is an example of some of their readings:

Topic: Fights and violence witnessed during high school

> The psychological lens helps interpret these fights very well. It brings up questions like: Are they scared? Do they enjoy it? Why are they doing it? Do they know what will happen afterwards? It [this lens] increases our understanding by asking why. The gender lens also helps us understand fights. In our society guys are taught to be "tough" and not take anything from anyone. They often resort to violence, and think violence actually solves something, which is absurd. Genderlenses shows us that males are more prone to fighting and the sexes are raised in different ways.

Topic: The cliques in the halls at the school

> I noticed all of the different groups and cliques at CP. One way to view that would be with the cultural lens. The groups could be formed to with everyone's many different cultures and/or religions. People seem to hook-up with the other people who like the same things as them and the same backgrounds. Another lens to use for the different groups is the gender lens. Most guys and girls seem to be forming groups with their own gender, girls with girls and guys with guys.

Though there is some breaking of this pattern.

Topic: The effect of media on high school students

> Looking at this issue I believe that the Gender lens is a good way of looking at it. It affects girls in a way of personal appearances and how they think they should look. It affects boys in their mannerisms. After analyzing it a question does arise; What gives media the right to tell millions of kids how they should be? Looking at the subject though a psychological lens might be more interesting. It will give you a look into why kids decide to follow the ways they see. What makes them want to and why feel it is important to be just like everybody else.

Topic: Iraq weapons of mass destruction

> Looking at this issue through the historical lens helps a great deal. It seems that many of the wars we into to try and help people, have a tendency to "backfire" on us. For instance, the Korean War, we went in to try and help the South Koreans fight the North, and ended up going no where, just spending a lot of money and losing many lives. This is basically what is happening in Iraq. It is costing us a lot of money and we are losing soldiers, and it does not seem to be getting us anywhere. Another lens to look through on this issue is the psychological lens. It is hard to tell what the real reason we came into this war is. Many people believe it was to stop terrorism, stop communism, keep our oil, or even that President Bush is only trying to finish what his father never did. It could be anyone of these things, but looking through the psychological lens has helped me to come to the conclusion that it is a combination of all of these things.

These students, "regular" students in a non-advanced English class, demonstrated that they were able to use the tools of critical theory to read local and national and world events from at least two different perspectives. They were able to sustain the possibilities of multiple explanations and to apply an abstract system of thought to an empirical event.

Conclusion

In the end, by teaching literature with theory, we help students learn to decipher the world inscribed within the texts we read together and to help them read the world around them. They can become the enlightened witnesses that bell hooks calls for, noting how power and privilege are inscribed all around us, and learning to read both texts and worlds with a nuanced and critical eye. Our students can become, with our help, truly educated in the way James Baldwin envisions, able to critique one's own society intelligently and without fear. This kind of teaching is difficult. It requires a willingness to give up one's ultimate authority in the classroom. It reminds us, as Smith and Rabinowitz suggest, that we are not teaching readings but teaching ways of reading (1998).

This kind of teaching changes our conception of what we teach and why. We are no longer transmitting knowledge, offering literature as content, as an aesthetic experience or as neutral artifacts of our collective cultural heritage. Instead we are offering our students the chance to view the world from a variety of lenses, each offering a unique perspective sure to transform how adolescents read both words and worlds. As Lois Tyson writes:

> For knowledge isn't just something we acquire; it's something we are or hope to become. Knowledge is what constitutes our relationship to ourselves and to our world, for it is the lens through which we view ourselves and our world. Change the lens and you change both the view and the viewer. This principle is what makes knowledge at once so frightening and so liberating, so painful and so utterly, utterly joyful. (1999,11)

* This article is adapted from a keynote address given by Deborah Appleman to the Annual Conference of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English in April 2007 in Brainerd, Minnesota.

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