Interpreting Staggerford: An Experiment with Literary Criticism

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On occasion, we English teachers have been known to turn off students to the literature we want them to embrace by telling them what we think they ought to know about a particular story or poem. In our desire to share what we learned in our college classes about our favorite literature (after all, it's what we were trained to do), we sometimes make students passive observers in the game. We lecture: "Twain includes the Grangerford-Sheperdson feud to contrast the meanness of life in society with the peacefulness of life on the river." We ask rhetorical questions: "Can you see how Gatsby's life symbolizes the corruption of the American dream?" We see ourselves as literary critics (literary "popes": speaking *ex cathedra*, we hope that our "disciples" will gain some insights from our pronouncements.

I encourage you to resist this temptation, opting instead to let your students participate in the game. Let them become insiders so they can explain what they think a text means to them. Let them become literary critics. Two of the most effective activities I used in my senior College Prep Writing classes at Northfield High School were those in which students interpreted Jon Hassler's novel Staggerford, the one novel we read as a common text in this semester-length course, from the perspective of a particular theory of literary criticism. In making their interpretation of Staggerford, students were asked to choose one of four 20th-century models of literary criticism (Marxist, Freudian, Feminist, or Deconstructionist).

After we finished reading the novel, I set aside one class period to provide some basic information about literary criticism. In the large group setting, I asked students to consider the objective of learning how to read and interpret a text by answering the following questions:

1. Do we need to know the social and political history of the period to understand a work of literature? Why? Why not?
2. How important is it to know something about the author's life?
3. Does the meaning of a text change over time? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. How can we agree on what a text means? Or should we?
5. Are there guidelines we can use to interpret a text?
6. Is it possible to read too much into a text? Can we really know what the author means?
7. Should teachers share their interpretations with students?

This discussion lasted about 30 minutes (one could certainly take more time if necessary); then we discussed how scholars think very deeply about what a text means, writing essays and books in which they offer their interpretations of individual works of literature and the overall works (or *oeuvre*) of particular writers. I suggested that some writers (or critics) interpret these works by using a particular frame of reference or theory of literary criticism and that we would be studying that kind of approach to literature during in the coming days.

Next, I provided a dictionary definition of literary criticism--"the art, skill, or profession of making discriminating judgments and evaluations, especially of literary or other artistic works" (American Heritage Dictionary)--and indicated that humans have interpreted literature from the beginnings of recorded history. For example, in the Hebrew culture we know about the Pharisees and their strict interpretation of the scriptures, and scholars such as Moses Maimonides who attempted to codify the Talmud.

With this condensed overview, we then looked at these four literary theories and how they could be used to interpret a work of literature. I provided these brief definitions for the students:

Marxist theory explains literature in terms of the society that produced it. An effective Marxist text would describe the political struggle toward a classless ideal. The Marxist critic rejects the notion that a text "piously mirrors the universals of the human condition which are essentially unmoved by the economic and political environment in which they operate" (Hicks and Hutchings 8).

Freudian theory praises a work to the degree that it recognizes Freudian concepts such as the Oedipus or Electra complex. Freudian critics often do a biographical profile of an author, explaining a work in terms of occurrences in the author's childhood (Barnet, et al. 285).

Feminist theory views "language as a male property created by a society which has been traditionally male dominated" (Hicks and Hutchings 7). Women in literature are marginalized or depicted only from a masculine perspective and only in stereotypical roles. A good feminist text would contain independent, strong-minded, complex female characters.

Deconstructionist theory is derived principally from the work of French critic Jacques Derrida. The deconstructionist "denies the existence of a text governed by a 'center' or an 'original' core that organizes a single system of meaning" (Cain 26). Each reader writes (or deconstructs) meaning for the text.

You could use fewer models or choose others, such as Historical Criticism or New Criticism, but the four I chose worked best with the two activities I had planned.

These first two steps took one

full class period, so the second day we put theory into practice by interpreting Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." We read the poem aloud twice and discussed what we thought Browning was trying to say. Then the students worked in pairs, reviewing their notes on the four theories of literary criticism, and discussed what a Marxist critic might say about the poem. After reaching some consensus regarding the Marxist view, we "read" the poem from the Freudian, Feminist, and Deconstructionist perspectives. One could of course use a large-group setting, small groups, triads, buzz groups, or any method that would help the students feel comfortable in discussing the poem. The goal was to help them realize that critics assess a story or poem based on what they understand about a theory of criticism. Knowing some basics about these four models helped enable them to do a closer reading of Staggerford and to discover some new and different insights about the novel.

On the third day, I divided the class into groups of five and charged each group with the task of interpreting Staggerford in the manner of one of these critical theories (see Table 1). We used an entire class period to complete the "interpretation" and the writing, then shared our sometimes and always insightful analyses in class the next day. For instance, in looking at the interactions between the central character English teacher Miles Pruitt and his student Beverly, the "Freudian" critics thought her school-girl crush on Miles was a longing for the father she had lost, a kind of Oedipus complex by adoption. The "Marxist" group thought the Native American "uprising" was a perfect example of a class struggle between the underclass, the Native Americans, and the ruling class, the school and by implication the white community.

Following on the heels of this group activity, students were assigned the task of writing a short review of the novel, selecting a particular point of view outlined in one of these four theories of criticism (see Table 2). Some wrote from the perspective of the model of criticism they had discussed in their groups, but most chose the Freudian or Feminist models.

These two assignments were the most successful of the semester for a number of reasons: first, students were required to do a close reading of the text; second, the cooperative group discussion was good preparation for the writing activity; third, both activities pushed students to a higher level of thinking; and finally, the book review was an appropriate concluding paper for our unit on Writing about a Novel. From a pedagogical perspective, these activities also support current Constructivist views of learning. In The Case for Constructivist Classrooms, the authors maintain that learners construct their own understandings of the world in which they live (5). In this type of classroom, "student questions are valued, students are viewed as thinkers with emerging theories about the world, teachers seek the students' points of view, and students primarily work in groups" (Brooks and Brooks 17). So providing students an opportunity to become literary critics strikes me as an effective method of letting them "construct" meaning from the text and at the same time helps us resist the temptation to tell students what they should know about a text.

Critics for a Day

Objective: In your groups, "rewrite/interpret" Staggerford using one theory/model of literary criticism as your guide.

Procedures:

1. Select the model of literary criticism you will use for your discussion (Marxist, Freudian, Feminist, Deconstructionist).
2. Choose a character, a scene (or scenes), theme, plot, etc. to interpret.
3. Brainstorm ideas. Take at least 10 minutes to discuss your model of interpretation.
4. Write your interpretation, keeping in mind that you will read it to the class tomorrow.

Requirements:

1. List the following items at the top of your paper:
   a. The scene, character, etc. that you are interpreting.
   b. The model of literary criticism you have chosen.
2. Write one or two paragraphs of interpretation.
3. Explain how your interpretation fits the model you have chosen. One paragraph will do.

Evaluation: You will receive a group grade for this assignment (10 points possible).

1. One point each for listing the scene, character, etc. , and the model of criticism chosen (two points total).
2. Six points for your "interpretation." Points will be deducted if the "interpretation" doesn't match the model.
3. Two points for your explanation.

Table 1.

Works Cited

Barnet, Sylvan, Morton Berman, and William Burto. The Study of Literature: A Handbook of Critical Essays and Terms. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960.

Brooks, Jacqueline, and Martin G. Brooks. In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1993.

Cain, William E. The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984.

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Book Review

Objective: Assume the role of a Marxist, Freudian, Feminist, or Deconstructionist literary critic and write a book review of Staggerford.

Audience: Your peers or a magazine or your choice (real or imagined).

Procedures:

1. Introduce the reader to the story, identifying the major characters, setting, plot, etc. Do not reveal the ending, however. Write one or two paragraphs.
2. Choose the model of literary criticism you will use in writing your review.
3. Brainstorm ideas, perhaps even write an outline.
4. Compose a rough draft of your review, focusing on a character, a scene (or scenes), a theme, the plot.
5. Ask someone you trust (a classmate, a friend, your parent) to read your paper and offer suggestions.
6. Make the necessary corrections and write the final copy.

Requirements (what to turn in):

1. A rough draft.
2. A final copy written in INK (or composed on a computer) and MANUSCRIPT FORM, containing the following elements:
   a. TITLE (centered at the top of the page).
   b. a brief SUMMARY of the novel (one or two paragraphs).
   c. a REVIEW of the novel following the model of literary criticism you chose (one to two pages in length, or 400-600 words)

Evaluation (30 points):

1. Summary--10 points possible.
2. Review--20 points possible
   a. Clear thesis statement--3 points
   b. Organization--3 points
   c. Mechanics--2 points
   d. Evidence or original thinking/clear personal voice--5 points
   e. Following the model of literary criticism--7 points

Table 2.