

A Rose Depicted through Any Genre Would Smell just as Sweet, Wouldn't It?—Coming to Grips with Genre

Martin Warren

Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature, and in every individual work of a given genre.

--Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

All English majors at the University of St. Thomas are required to take “Issues in English Studies.” The class is an introduction to the history, theory and practice of the English profession. Besides studying such subjects as literary theory, textual activities and research strategies in the class, we work on “common topics”. By “common topics” I mean studying such concepts as narrative, text, context, intertextuality, author, discourse, canon, genre, writing and reading. These topics are “common” because they occur in various critical discourses.

When teaching “Issues in English Studies” in fall 2010, I decided to have students work more deeply in the area of one of the common topics, i.e. genre. I chose genre because genre is one of those terms that students bandy about with great ease without necessarily understanding the intricacies of specific genres, how they appear to work, and their impact in molding the reader’s response and the material in the text. We can certainly debate just how many of us would be able to formulate explicit “rules” for the textual genres we use routinely in the profession of English. Traditionally, literary scholars have regarded genres as fixed forms but genres are not discrete systems, consisting of a fixed number of items that make up the inventory of a certain genre; hence, the difficulty in formulating explicit rules. Contemporary theory emphasizes that both the forms and functions of genres are dynamic. David Buckingham, for example, argues that “genre is not ... simply ‘given’ by the culture: rather, it is in a constant process of negotiation and change” (137). The truth is much of our knowledge of genre is more than likely to be tacit; easy to recognize intuitively but difficult (if not impossible) to define. The flexibility of genre, the difficulty in explicitly defining genre, serve to underscore that genre is something we do and not simply see. The teaching of genre, therefore, needs to (a) account for the flexibility and dynamism of genres, (b) tap into that tacit knowledge of genre, while (c) offering students something substantial with which to work and eventually store in their knowledge base.

Keeping in mind the foregoing, particular concerns of mine were: (1) how do English majors understand the term genre, and subsequent to that, (2) what awareness do majors have of how a genre frames not only the material in the text but the reader’s interpretation of a text? With regard to the second question, I expressly had in mind John Fiske’s assertion that genre is “a means of constructing both the audience and the reading subject” (114). The issue then for me was how to answer my two questions. As much as I needed the students to grasp as best as possible the theoretical distinctions between genres, I wanted them to get their hands dirty, not just through focusing on how readers identify genres but grappling with how genres shape the text, its material, and the text’s readers.

Traditionally, scholars have construed genres as constraining and inhibiting authorial creativity. Contemporary thought, on the other hand, opines that those who write within a genre, while employing the genre’s customary elements, are actually working in creative “tension” with the genre’s conventions. The writer chooses to be constrained by certain conventions while

inventing new elements. Why so? For the sake of efficiency of communication. What is essential is that the readers of the text have knowledge and expectations about works within a genre. That means the text's creator can rely on the reader's knowledge of certain "given" conventions to engage with and explore the text with some success. Alastair Fowler describes this "system of generic expectations" as "a code" (215). What I needed to do was to have my students engage with these codes concretely and apply them. To achieve this, I devised a unit which consisted of two supporting in-class assignments that led to a high-stakes assignment in which students would practice genre by writing about a particular personal experience in two very different genres. What follows in the remainder of this article is the overall description of the high-stakes assignment, a description of the supporting exercises, an example from the students' work and conclusions about the assignment.

Engl. 380: GENRE ASSIGNMENT

Overall Goal: This assignment is intended to have you consider the concept of genre, that genre is something we *do* as well as *see*.

Objectives

The assignment will engage you in:

- **Rhetorical analysis:** analyzing audience expectations (readers of your genres, class colleagues), balancing audience expectations with your own. (This assignment objective meets the following course criteria: **Developing skills in expressing oneself orally or in writing. Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.**)
- **Critical thinking, reading, and writing:** identifying and analyzing genres, developing an understanding of genre through writing and reading. (This assignment objective meets the following course criterion: **Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.**)
- **Processes:** using writing and reading to develop ideas, working collaboratively on writing, reflecting on your writing processes. (This assignment objective meets the following course criterion: **Developing skills in expressing oneself orally or in writing.**)
- **Knowledge of conventions:** understanding conventions of **various genres**, using conventions associated with standard written English. (This assignment objective meets the following course criterion: **Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.**)

Context for the assignment: English courses are currently organized according to a variety of principles. However, we do not always explicitly debate and consciously decide what these are. This assignment is designed to help in this process. We all have an interest in the present shape as well in the future transformation of the discipline. Hence, it's important for us to consider the significance of genre and the ways in which it is used to structure courses and programs, the texts we read and study.

Individual "English" courses tend to be framed in terms of one or more of the following: *author; period; country or region; movement or "school"; social groups; genre; medium; technique or approach; event*. At present the English department's freshman English sequence (Engl.111/112) is structured around genre. English 111 is centered on fiction and nonfiction prose. English 112 is centered on drama and poetry. Prose, drama, and poetry are what we might call the mega-genres. However, in the discipline of English we "stretch" and supplement these three mega-genres. For example, under poetry might come song and performance; under prose, journals and news; under drama, scripts, transcripts, conversations and interviews. Genres are constantly changing so as to produce new variations on old modes as well as substantially new configurations. Thus the genre of *romance* was initially a chivalric tale of love and war in the Romance languages (hence the name); but subsequently came to be the name for any story with a love interest.

Such constant generation of old/new genres should not surprise us. After all the root of *Genre* "gen-“ means "growth," or "creation." What is important for us who work in the discipline of English is to have a strong grasp of what we understand by genre and how the genres work.

End Product: In this assignment, you will practice working with genres. How will you do this? **You will take a personal experience and write it in two different genres.**

Process for the assignment: Choose an experience, event, or place that has shaped your life in a meaningful way. Your choice doesn't need to be anything grandiose; you might decide to use your childhood home, first relationship, or cooking with a parent as experiences to explore.

In order to create this genre assignment, you will need to pick different ways of illuminating the same experience. Using your present understanding of various genres, you should pick **a genre** from **just two** of the following categories:

- A. **Performance Writing:** You will write about your experience in a genre that would be a performance. This can include: *a speech, a fiction reading, a song, a poetry reading, blog, or a radio broadcast.*
- B. **Newspaper/Magazine Writing:** Analyze your experience through the eyes of a critical writer. This can include a *news story, feature story, editorial, magazine feature, series of letters to the editor, sensational news story, obituary, sports story, or a movie review.*
- C. **Imaginative Writing:** Think about envisioning your experience as *a poem, creative nonfiction, lyrics to a song, monologue, dialogue, children's story, or a character sketch.*
- D. **Personal writing:** This includes: *journal entry, diary entries, letter exchange between two or more people, email exchange between two or more people, blogging or text messaging exchanges between two or more people.*
- E. **Workplace/professional writing:** Use your experience to create a: *memo, workplace report, exchange of business letter, letter of complaint, resume, or lab report.*

On 10/15/10 you should hand in a product that includes:

1. A Cover Page with:

- a. A title for your project
- b. Your name

2. A Table of Contents that:

Lists the titles of each part of your project and what genre they are in.

Ex: An Ode to Fido (poetry)

3. Cover Letter: Write a cover letter that addresses the following questions:

- Why did you select the experience that you did for this project?
- Why did you select the genres that you did to present your information?
- How did changing genres influence your approach to the topic?
- What seemed particularly difficult or interesting from this assignment?

4. The two genres that express your chosen experience.

- ✓ **How will we get to this final product?** We will use “supporting” exercises upon which we will build our knowledge base for the assignment. These exercises will take place in class. **See the Supporting Exercises document**
- ✓ **Grading Rubric:** See separate document.

Beyond the fact that the students had to write about the same personal experience in two very different genres (see suggested genres in A-E), thus “dirtying their hands” by practicing genre, what was equally important was the cover letter (see details above) in which students had to answer such questions as “How did changing genres influence your approach to the topic?” Here is where I discovered what students had learned about the significance of genres and how genre conventions frame the material and constrain the writer. To get to the major assignment, the class participated in two supporting exercises.

The first supporting exercise was a simple “game” in which students practiced “seeing” genres. As the lesson plan below makes explicit, working in pairs students had to quickly write in an assigned genre and read aloud what they had written. The rest of the class had to identify the genre and explain what conventions led them to identify the genre.

Class 1 Supporting Exercise (The Genre Writing Exercise):

Objective: Practicing “seeing” genres

Having read Pope, pp. 212-214, we will practice recognition of genres.

Process:

- Pairs of student will be given a card, each pair having a different writing task. The following examples topics will be used:
 - Advertisement – for a new game in a computer magazine
 - Story – a tale of horror and suspense
 - Newspaper article – on cell-phone usage
 - Biography – of a famous person
 - Review – of a recent film or play for the local evening newspaper
 - Diary – of a university student undertaking a chemistry class
 - Weather forecast – for TV on the 6 pm news
 - Lab report – for an experiment in a physics class
 - Screenplay – for a romantic comedy
 - Academic essay – on the role of women in gothic fiction

Each pair has to write roughly 100 words fulfilling the task on the card. This is done with the various pairs in the class not knowing each other's tasks.

Then the pairs read out what they have written and the rest of the groups have to identify the genre.

Small groups of students then discuss how they were able to identify the conventions of each genre; they must then make a list of the features and consider what and how they would need to keep in mind regarding this list of features when working on the “Coming to Grips with Genre” assignment.

This supporting exercise worked well. Everyone was engaged. Going around the room I could hear lots of discussion about why the pairs could or could not write in various ways. In other words, discussion about genre conventions was taking place. Equally significant was the part of the class where students had to identify each other's assigned genre and explain how they identified the genre. In general, students were (a) surprised to discover how complex genres are, (b) delighted to realize how much they already knew about genre, and (c) beginning to wake up to the fact that they really needed to pay much more attention to genre when working with texts. A measure of the success of this supporting exercise can be found in this response from a member of the class: “The preparatory activity in which each team was assigned a particular genre and asked to provide a suitable model, while the remaining class members hypothesized which genre they were exemplifying was a phenomenal introduction to the concept of 'genre.' While I was familiar with the idea of 'genre,' I had never examined it deeply, and this activity enriched my understanding of the notion.”

Having succeeded in provoking students to think more about genres, the types of genres, the conventions of specific genres, and a brief introduction to practicing genre, it was time to move to the next supporting exercise for the final assignment. The purpose of the exercise was to help students choose the personal experience at the center of the high-stakes assignment and explore which genres would be effective in exploring distinctive aspects of the experience. See the outline below.

Class 2 Supporting Exercise (*Which genre to use?*):

Objective: Prepping for the major assignment

This is your chance to start envisioning your project and setting the framework for how you would like to present your experience. (Check the separate document on the main assignment to refresh your memory of what we are attempting to do.) Let the following questions act as a guide (you don't have to answer every single question) as you consider your experience.

1. How did your experience, event, or place shape you? What changed in YOU because of that experience?
2. Which moments or dimensions of this experience do you want to highlight?
3. Which genres would be the most effective in expressing different dimensions of your experience?

Working on the second supporting exercise in class was most helpful as it allowed me to listen to any concerns students had pertaining to (a) the personal experience the student was considering using, (b) which aspect of the experience to use, and (c) which genres to employ. Most of the conversations at this point were about which genres to work in. Once this stage was completed, the class moved into the first part of the final assignment itself, i.e. describing the personal experience within two distinctive genres.

For the most part, students worked on this stage outside class. However, we did use in-class time so that I could monitor students' progress and answer questions. This was a fascinating time. Students often changed genres since they learned that either one or even both of the genres they had chosen imposed too many constraints, rendered the personal experience impossible to write about in the way the student had envisaged, or did not work for the student's intended audience. As each student finished this first part, she or he moved into part two, i.e. writing the cover letter where they reflected on the experience of the whole assignment and what they had learned.

At this point, I would like to provide one example from the students' work. The student, whose permission I have to use her work anonymously, had become engaged while studying abroad. Her boyfriend, a fellow UST student, had traveled to visit her during spring break. The romantic ambience of Europe prompted them to become engaged approximately four months earlier than planned. The student chose to use two genres to describe the experience of becoming engaged: diary entries and a lab report. Here's the lab report!

Lab Report: The Effects of Romantic Environments on a College Couple
[Student's Name]
Department of English, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN
Introduction

College students are studied extensively, especially in regards to their habits in relationships. They behave very differently in a controlled environment and in environments where romance is an inherent part of the landscape. This study examines the effect on [Male] and [Female], a couple who have been dating for two years and have been discussing the option of marriage recently, as they think about their future. They are both juniors at the University of St. Thomas and have begun to think seriously about their life together after college. They have discussed the possibility of getting engaged in the summer of 2010. [Female] studied abroad in Italy for the spring 2010 semester and [Male] travelled to visit her in Florence with a weekend trip to Paris, France for his spring break. The control in this experiment is their everyday life in Minnesota. This study is intended to measure the impact of the romantic environment on [Male] and [Female]. To obtain our results, we will measure the romantic gestures presented by both [Male] and [Female] in both unique romantic environments. It is anticipated that they will have a romantic time exploring both cities together and at some point [Male] will propose marriage as a result of the environment and their loving commitment to each other.

Methods and Materials

[Male] and [Female] were first observed for the entire month of November 2009 to understand how they interacted with each other in the controlled environment of Minnesota. They were then observed for the entire week of March 26th- April 5th, 2010 while [Male] and [Female] explored Florence and Paris together. Their reactions to external stimuli were recorded, and then how they reacted towards each other in the midst of the external stimuli of art, food, and architecture. The effect of dinner on the evening of March 30th was also documented, as they made reservations for the Goldenview restaurant to celebrate their two- year anniversary. This event was specifically recorded because it provided a commemorative event, as well as one of the most perfect opportunities for a marriage proposal- the grand romantic gesture. The materials needed for this experiment included 1 ticket from Minneapolis to Florence, several romantic dinners, museum tickets, Piazza Michelangelo, a sick professor who cancelled class on March 30th, the Arno River, one dinner reservation at the Goldenview restaurant, 2 overnight train tickets to Paris, the Eiffel Tower, 2 monogrammed coin purses from the leather market, and a diamond ring.

Results

The effect of this romantic environment on [Male] and [Female] significantly influenced their decision to get engaged on March 30th, 2010 instead of during the summer of 2010. The two-year anniversary plans for dinner at the Goldenview restaurant overlooking the Ponte Vecchio, prompted [Male] to think romantically about the possibility of engagement 3-5 months earlier than they had originally discussed. This proliferation of stimuli caused [Male] to think different about Italy as a romantic place especially when compared to the controlled environment of Minnesota. [Female] was almost desensitized to the romantic aspects of Italy before [Male] came, causing her to think that he would not propose during his visit, but still agreed that the control environment of Minnesota was slightly more mundane as it was ordinary to them. However, when [Male] arrived, her level of romantic interest in her surroundings increased as she went on many more walks along the Arno with him and visited Piazza Michelangelo at night. Their romantic interactions continued in the city of Paris as well. They held hands and explored the area around the Eiffel Tower together and cuddled on the Metro, something that would not have happened on Twin Cities public transportation.

Discussion

It is known that most college students, as well as other age groups, behave more or less romantically when out of their controlled environment. The romantic impulse is heightened when the couple is amongst beautiful architecture, wine, and romantic natural landscapes. The romantic impulse is also heightened as they experience new aspects of life together, especially when experiencing a new culture. It is also possible for these romantic factors to bring out frustrations in these couples as well, but in the case of [Male] and [Female], it resulted in the ultimate grand romantic gesture, that was heightened by the setting of both Florence, Italy and Paris, France. It is possible that the romantic outcome would have been altered had the couple visited different cities that did not have the same reputation for romance. In further experiments with other couples in the same stage of love and commitment it would be interesting to determine the effects of different locations such as Cancun, Mexico or Toronto, Canada on the romantic interactions between a couple, and if in those cases those atmospheres would lead the couple to pursue an engagement.

References

Bell, B., & Radula-Scott, C. (Eds.). (2002). *Paris*. Maspeth, NY: Langenscheidt Publishers Inc.

Bietoletti, S. (2005). *Florence: Art and Architecture*. Udine, Italy: Magnus Edizioni.

Wild, F. (Ed.). (2006). *Italy* (10th ed.). New York: DK.

Not surprisingly, when it came to the cover letter describing what was learned through the assignment, the student had certainly discovered the constraints imposed by specific genres. Here is what she wrote:

The two genres changed my approach as a writer. The diary put me in a very intimate position where I was writing about what was happening to me. In that genre, I was the active participant, determining my feelings as well as my actions. The form was also more free-flowing; I didn't have to subscribe to certain conventions and didn't have to section off my thoughts as I did in the lab report. I had ultimate power. With the lab report, I was forced to take on the observer's point of view with little control over the results of the "test." I was not able to put my emotions into the report, which was difficult, as I have only thought about the event with a strong emotional attachment.

I think that the most interesting aspect of this assignment was taking the same event and portraying it in two separate and distinctive genres. It was challenging to think of an event so personal and emotional in an impersonal kind of way. I thought that it made me pay even closer attention to how I worded and presented my event. Writing my diary in Italy, I literally put down whatever was in my head. It was very stream of consciousness because I wanted to capture what I was seeing and feeling in that moment. The lab report was more calculated, where I had to write about what I observed, rather than how I felt. I was also limited in my word choice. I could say anything I wanted in my diary entries, but I had to use scientific language in the lab report.

While success varied in the actual employment of the specific genres that students had chosen to work in, each student's cover letter demonstrated that they had come to a much deeper understanding of genre, validating the efficacy of such an assignment. Here follow statements from other students' cover letters in which they write plainly about what they had learned from working in two distinct genres:

“I found it extremely fascinating how two separate genres cause a person to look at an experience in such unique ways, regardless if you are the reader or the writer.”

“Comparing potential audiences adds more depth to the comparison of the two genres. The diary entries, for instance, had no intended addressees. They were simply a product of self-reflection. Readers will likely interpret the entries much differently from the creator. … Conversely, when writing the news article, an everyday American/Canadian citizen was my targeted audience. Thus, I avoided the inclusion of complicated climbing lingo and strived for audience appeal. I think this assignment was a creative, enjoyable way for students to express their understanding of genre.”

“What was particularly interesting about the comparison of these two genres was to see how the mode of expression in each is well suited to its function. The main function of text messaging is the conveyance of small bits of information that are too tiny to warrant a phone call. Thus, the primary virtue of text messaging is brevity and, hence, it tends to incorporate abbreviation and incomplete sentences. However, this brevity severely limits the extent to which texting can express subjective experience. Relating subjectivity requires an extensive description which, in texting, is impossible. It is for this very reason that text messages tend to be impersonal. Diary entries, on the other hand, have a very different function: to write in a diary is to vomit one's thoughts of the day onto the written page for the purposes of introspection and catharsis. As with text messaging, the form of diary proceeds directly from its function. Diary rambles, it is long, and it is centered on subjective experience. In this way it fulfills its function.”

While having the students write about a personal experience within two distinctly different genres was essential, I was not so much concerned as to whether a student succeeded in emulating a genre perfectly. Students had used genres like text messaging, emails, Twitter and Facebook besides such genres as poetry, fiction and drama. Those who had chosen to employ Twitter or email were particularly concerned as to whether they had to have the interface just right. In fact, we had examined how email exchanges, text messaging and Twitter had been displayed in books and articles. What was paramount was the reflection students engaged in in the cover letters. There I could see how they had come to an understanding of the term “genre,” and begun to develop not only an awareness of how a genre frames the material in the text but also the reader's interpretation of a text. The students' reflections also revealed how they had started to appreciate the flexibility and dynamism of genres.

Works Cited

Buckingham, David. *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1993. Print.

Fiske, John. *Television Culture*. London: Routledge, 1987. Print.

Fowler, Alastair. "Genre." *International Encyclopedia of Communications*. Ed. Erik Barnouw. Vol. 2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. 215-7. Print.

Pope, Rob. *The English Studies Book: An Introduction to Language, Literature and Culture* 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.