

Melissa Troise

Approaches to Reading with Multiple Lenses of Interpretation

High school teacher Melissa Troise challenges students to recognize the relationships that exist between literary theories, such as Marxism, feminism, and postcolonialism, and urges students to expand their contexts for reading texts by accessing and combining theories. Troise believes theory provides students with the potential to better understand unfamiliar ideas and ideologies, even if they may not agree with them.

Having experienced both honors and AP English classes, I realize now that the reason why many people loathe the subject is because you never learn anything new . . . [T]heme, symbolism, and imagery become your only way to look at a text.

—*Twelfth-grade student*

Students wrote self-evaluations after taking a semester-long course focused on learning to use multiple lenses of interpretation to read texts. They made legitimate and specific criticisms about the way they had always been taught to interpret literature, and they revealed that they recognized the limits frequently placed on ways of reading in English classes—but only after they were offered something else.

Literary theories provided the broader interpretive lenses through which students were asked to read. Three years ago, I began teaching this course at a high school in Long Island, New York, through Project Advance, a Syracuse University program that offers high school students the opportunity to take college courses. It had never occurred to me to use literary theories on this level, as I had only recently learned about some of the theories myself, and they seemed much too difficult for high school students. Besides, the whole concept challenged the way I have always “taught” literature, as an interpretive practice typically limited to a version of New Criticism.

New Criticism is a valuable approach, but it is rarely identified to students as *only one* way of

interpreting. Many students therefore experience some form of New Criticism as the only way of reading. There is a great risk that the possibilities of interpretation will get lost amid the search for symbolism and a neatly reduced statement of theme. Such an approach can also, over time, suggest to students that the purpose of reading is merely to find what is already in the text and what the teacher and SparkNotes already know. It would be logical for students to then begin thinking that meaning is closed, singular, static, and *findable*.

Instead, I want students to understand that meanings are multiple, changeable, and actively constructed by the author, the text, the reader, and the many contexts that surround and influence all three. Teaching students various lenses through which to read texts of all kinds not only helps them to reconceptualize “meaning” and allows for more varied interpretations, but it also encourages the kind of social, economic, historical, and political analysis that I personally value. Feminist, queer, Marxist, and postcolonial theories expose and question ideologies, inequalities, and power relationships explicitly. Such questioning is a large part of reading because it encourages readers to connect texts to their world.

Interpretive Practices

An example of such broadened ways of reading was in our use of a psychoanalytic lens, which, among other things, reminds us that authors and characters are not always conscious of or in control of what they say or mean, and readers are not always in control of how they read. Before reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, our class spent several days reading about and discussing the concepts of the unconscious, the drives that arise from life-and-death instincts, and basic defense mechanisms such as repression, regression, projection, and denial. We analyzed hypothetical and real-life behaviors and tried to connect them with Freudian ideas. We then tried to understand possible psychological reasons for the speaker's feelings in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," Emily's actions in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," the characters' behaviors in the film *The Royal Tennenbaums*, and the relationship between Estha and Rabel in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (which we had read earlier in the year). When students wrote essays about *Frankenstein* using the interpretive practices of psychoanalysis, I no longer got the standard thesis that I had read repeatedly: "The theme of *Frankenstein* is the danger of pursuing knowledge." A claim such as this can be found in any online book notes. Instead, students came up with some of the following arguments:

Throughout *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, there is a constant struggle between Victor and the unconscious projection of his anger and hatred toward his family; this projection is the monster he creates. Feeling abandoned by his parents in favor of a younger sister and brother, and suffering from unresolved Oedipal issues, Victor creates the monster to allow his own Id to act out his repressed hostility.

Victor had to deal with various core issues: low self-esteem (from rejection), a fear of abandonment (after his mother's death), fear of intimacy (with Elizabeth), and an unstable sense of self. . . . [He] brings to life smaller monsters; monsters of the mind that eventually lead him to misery and death.

These students showed a basic understanding of various defense mechanisms and argued that such mechanisms are at work in Victor. They were clearly practicing the psychoanalytic lens, using the theory to frame events and character motivations. As Sheridan D. Blau points out in *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*, in one course stu-

dents will not gain a complete knowledge of complex theories such as psychoanalysis, and their interpretations are going to be "secondhand and superficial" (149). He is right; to say that Victor had "unresolved Oedipal issues" is clearly a generalization. However, the arguments students made were more original, varied, and interesting than those I had typically read in previous years. Instead of reading Victor's creation simply as a result of his desire for knowledge, many students interpreted the monster as a manifestation of his unconscious fears and guilty desires.

Recommended Beginning Texts and Approaches

I used Lois Tyson's *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* to introduce several theories. There are probably hundreds of books that discuss literary theory, but I find this one to be particularly accessible and readable for both teachers and students. In addition to offering an understandable summary of multiple theories, Tyson also provides a sample reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* from each lens, which is helpful since many high school students have read *Gatsby* and can see how the same book can be interpreted so differently.

Deborah Appleman suggests some good and reproducible activities for introducing the concept of multiple interpretations in *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. She also provides summaries of key theoretical concepts and some basic ways to use theory in the high school classroom with many typically required pieces of literature.

A Sample Approach

I introduced Marxist theory with *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, through which Barbara Ehrenreich describes her ethnographic study of living as a low-wage worker. After reading, we focused our attention on her "Evaluation" chapter, which offers her analysis of the causes and perpetuation of poverty, and looked closely at why things are the way they are. This led to a discussion of political economy and social stratification. Statistics about class division in the United States are easily found on the Internet through government census bureau sites and can help make Ehrenreich's arguments even more visible.

Teachers unfamiliar with Marxist theory may not feel comfortable enough with the concepts and terminology to introduce it to students, but reading Tyson's "Marxist Criticism" chapter would be enough to get started. The teacher can learn with the students as questions arise. I also recommend "What Is Marxism? A Bird's-Eye View" by Bertell Ollman, which I used because of its concise explanation of Marxist concepts.

Once students had a basic understanding of alienation, exploitation, false consciousness, capital, the labor theory of value, and commodification, they read, discussed, and wrote about B. Traven's short story "Assembly Line," which explains Marxist ideas quite well through the characters. A capitalist, Winthrop, attempts to make a good business deal by exploiting a local Indian artisan. To get the artist to mass produce his baskets so that Winthrop can resell them in the United States for a massive profit, Winthrop tries to swindle the Indian into accepting a deal that reflects Winthrop's misunderstanding of the artist's personal connection with his work and of the artist's life in general. Showing a good understanding of Marxist alienation, one student wrote,

The American obviously views the Indian as a commodity because he sees the Indian in terms of decimals and dollars when the Indian looks at himself and what he does in terms of art, beauty, and originality. The Indian is aware that making the baskets at such hasty speeds would result in alienation because it would have a terrible effect on his aura, his body, and his mind. It is not the profit of the baskets, but the act of creating them that makes them special. The Indian made it clear that it was creativity that made the baskets so charming and without time, he would not be able to make them so inventive. He would lose his connection to his work. Selling what he sees as his obligation to make the baskets remarkable would be like selling his soul.

This student understood the Marxist idea that in capitalism, the worker's connection to his or her product is severed, and she or he becomes commodified in a way that is parallel to "selling his soul." She has also read the text in a way that will help her to understand the capitalist society in which she lives.

After much class discussion and once students seemed to feel comfortable with the theory, we viewed the film *John Q*—which highlights the inequality of health care—and students wrote a

short Marxist interpretation paper. Students were quite familiar with this film starring Denzel Washington, and most had seen it before but reported that they had "missed" all but the plot. With this new lens, they were able to construct new meaning, as evident in the following paper excerpt:

The more interesting part of this medical issue is that the family isn't on welfare because both parents have jobs. They don't have the greatest jobs, nor are they being paid enough to get by, but they aren't considered "poor" by the government because they both work. The financial aid services will therefore not support the surgery Mikey needs, and John's insurance coverage isn't enough because the company cut it along with his hours. He wanted to work full time, but when he applied for second jobs he kept getting told that he was "overqualified." This part of the film exposes a huge issue within Capitalist society, because it is set up so people stay poor. There are so many people living just above the poverty level, which is ridiculously low to begin with and there would be a lot more people living in poverty if the "threshold" was more realistic. It's not so easy to just "get help" or take advantage of the government programs offered. John had to wait in countless lines and fill out so much paperwork, then wait while his son was dying. And he didn't get help anyway! I realize now that when people say that it's poor people's fault that they are poor and that there is too much government money being spent on them that they are wrong.

This student reconsidered prevalent myths about welfare and about why people are poor. She realized that many people living in poverty do work and still don't make a living wage, and she was on her way to understanding that poverty is a systemic requirement of capitalism.

Once students could raise questions a Marxist might ask, we examined Marx's political ideas by reading sections of *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels). In groups, students then rewrote the end of Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* as Marxists, based on an activity adapted from Bill Bigelow. The story's end portrays the animals being overtaken and defeated by the Once-ler, the capitalist who at the end grows a conscience and decides to become an environmentalist. Students decided what a Marxist might criticize about this ending and changed it accordingly. The following is an example:

The Lorax decided it was time for a stand
So he round-up the creatures from Ohsnapsmittle
Land.

They all reunited and stacked up real tall,
They were determined and ready to conquer it all.
With a seven foot tower of Barbaloots and such,
They attacked the Once-ler shouting "We've Had
Enough!"

They bashed and they bonkled the Once-ler's
employees,

All to save the Truffula Trees.

The fight was tough and hard to endure,
But there lay the Once-ler knocked out on the floor.

The land would soon look like it had before,

For the Thneed-making factory was no more.

The Lorax smiled at his army of friends,

Speaking of living as one till the end.

This group understood the general Marxist goal of revolution and the reason for it. From a revolutionary perspective, they were unhappy that the oppressed should wait around for the capitalist to reform his ways and give up his profit, as this would not be likely. Instead, they had the Lorax and other animals use their power in numbers to attack the oppressor and live "as one till the end."

This creative exercise, which was essentially about shifting power relations, led us into the connection between the politics of class and the politics of gender. After we learned about feminist theories, students wrote a full-length paper reading Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* from a Marxist-feminist perspective. This placed two theories of power in dialogue with each other and emphasized the relationship between discourses, helping students to recognize that each does not exist in isolation.

A Broad Understanding and Use of Text

I always want students to learn that a text is not just a book or play, and this broadened notion of text is important when working with theory. The students did structuralist readings of Impressionist paintings and advertisements, cultural readings of school events, Marxist readings of schooling practices, postcolonial readings of Disney's *The Lion King*, and semiotic readings of *The Simpsons* episodes.

I also asked them to "read" popular toys and other cultural artifacts in their political, historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts, which nicely combined several theoretical lenses. After

researching and discussing their artifacts, they were able to develop claims such as the following:

With clever advertising, anything can sell, even a soft drink that can rust iron and is used to clean blood off a highway after a major accident. . . . With the introduction of TAB by the Coca-Cola company in 1963, artificial sweeteners replaced high-density sugars in soda, ushering forth a new era of weight-consciousness into the American spectrum. "Diet" has now become so heavily integrated into the consumer universe, it transcends the very idea of health-consciousness and replaces it with culture-consciousness.

GI Joe action figures promote blind patriotism, hatred, and violence along with racism and sexism. In GI Joe stories, the world is deemed in black and white; there is right and there is wrong. This ideology itself is dangerous one. . . . The good characters are mostly young white males, with few African Americans but no females. . . . The bad guys are almost always non-white and sometimes are described as having stereotypically feminine characteristics. . . . To be a hero, then, one should be male, join the army, and fight the evil enemy. Meanwhile, the freedoms that GI Joe seeks to protect are being compromised in China by the company that makes "The Real American Hero."

These students broadened the contexts through which they read everyday objects to explore their larger significance in our world. Instead of passively viewing these objects as simply toys or beverages, they were able to see the ways the artifacts shape our lives and culture by reinforcing gender roles, encouraging patriotism and nationalism, feeding addictions, and manipulating false ideologies.

Students also did feminist readings of fairy tales and their storybook illustrations using *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* edited by Jack Zipes. Although initially resistant to the idea that these "innocent" stories can perpetuate and perhaps even help create ideologies about traditional gender roles, many began to see how this is so when they read the tales through a feminist lens. The following student-paper excerpts resulted from students' analysis of three versions of "Little Red Riding Hood":

Traditional gender roles and biological essentialism are blatantly evident in "Little Red Riding

Cap" from the start of the story. The female characters (Little Red Cap, her mother and her grandmother) are all described stereotypically, making women appear uneducated, sexual objects who are asking to be taken advantage of. Little Red is introduced immediately as a "sweet little maiden," automatically labeling her as a "good girl." . . . Little Red and her grandmother are too weak to possibly fight back against the wolf. In addition, Red is immensely stupid and has a false sense of security. She is unable to perceive or prevent the obvious danger surrounding her, and even gives the wolf directions to her grandmother's house.

The most ridiculous part of the story was not actually the story itself, but the moral that appears at the end. It states that if a girl is pretty and innocent, she should be very aware of the people around her, because it will be her own fault if a man wants her sexually and decides to take advantage. Although not directly stated, this moral can be related to rape. It once again makes women out to be objects of lust, and that their sex appeal will only get them into trouble. It blames everything on women, making their looks culpable for men's actions.

The students above were able to use a feminist lens to read this fairy tale in terms of the ideologies it perpetuates through gender roles. They not only *noticed* the power relationship between the wolf and Red Riding Hood, they were also able to read it as being constructed primarily by the characters' stereotypical "masculine" and "feminine" traits.

A Democratic Community

Critical to the kind of classroom that allows students to struggle with theory is a democratic environment. The students had to be willing to listen and speak; they had to be comfortable enough to and be allowed to voice their opposition so they could develop their understanding, hear other people's experiences, and begin to think about their positions and ideologies.

All of us, including high school students, have internalized ideologies that cause us to react intensely to ideas that challenge what we "know." But learning happens when we are uncomfortable, so it is important to push students to question their current understandings and assumptions. For example, few of my male students and only some female students readily acknowledged feminist

concerns even after learning that feminisms are much more complicated than they thought. Many of them objected to reading anything from a feminist perspective because they didn't agree with it and thought they would be "over-analyzing"—which is initially a common sentiment when students are introduced to ways of reading that are different from what they have done throughout most of their school lives. Because they did struggle with theories to which they were opposed in a safe classroom community, some of them ended up saying things such as, "I still don't agree, but I can see where they are coming from." That's a vast difference from where they started. Theory provides the *potential* to help students imagine and consider other ideas, to hear other voices even when they don't agree.

This doesn't always work. It is not easy to convince a student with deeply internalized capitalist ideologies to even consider Marxist ideas—or for a devout Christian to accept postcolonial theory—for obvious reasons. Students will often be quite resistant to what I am suggesting, as virtually every interpretive practice has the potential to upset someone's worldview. This is to be expected and provides more reason to introduce theory. Students' attempts to argue about ideologies can lead to important learning opportunities. In their struggle with new ideas and the possibility of multiple interpretations, students can get involved with *thinking about* and *becoming aware of* their perspectives and positions, and they can end up at least challenging some ideology that they had passively adopted throughout the years. It is commonly argued that New Criticism was adopted partly for its apolitical approach (Eagleton; Ohmann), facilitating neat and safe classroom discussions. But other critical theories do not try to deny that literature and the interpretation of it *are* political.

Students' Responses

I have not discovered the best way to approach teaching literary theories, and I do not suggest that doing so will miraculously transform all students into engaged, critical readers. As I have indicated,

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students did resist because they didn't agree with a particular theory or they found a theory boring or too difficult. I tried to deal with these problems as they came. Currently, I am thinking about ways to teach theoretical approaches without indirectly leading students to believe that each theory is separate from the others. I want them to see the overlap and be able to combine, for example, the ideas of Marxism, feminisms, and postcolonialism to examine general issues of ideology and power in a text.

After participating in the theory-based course, students repeatedly described themselves as "more open-minded," "intellectual," and "critical" thinkers. One wrote, "This approach forced me to always be *thinking* which is something very different from the way I previously read a text in English classes." Being exposed to theory allowed many students to recognize their experiences as *their* experiences (not everyone's experiences) and got most of them to at least question what they normally accept as "just the way things are." After taking the course, one student realized that reading is not about getting a single, "correct" interpretation, and that a reader's positions, subjectivities, and ideologies affect the way she reads not only written texts but also the world: "It [theory] allowed me to see that it is not an issue of being right or wrong, but it's how different people see things in different ways." This is another result of using literary theory; students can no longer see a text as existing in a vacuum. Another student wrote, "I look closer now at relationships, human behavior, sexuality, pop culture, and our society as a whole." She came to see everything around her as a text to be read, as something from which we can learn. I was even told by some students that I had ruined the senior trip to Disneyland since they were "analyzing the place the whole time." Another student finished her reflection by saying, "I have become a more knowledgeable and

more understanding person because of this course, and that is more important than any grade I will receive."

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

One way that Troise broadened students' interpretive lenses was to introduce psychoanalysis. "Id, Ego, and Superego in Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat*" uses a well-known piece of children's literature as a primer to teach students how to analyze a literary work using the literary tools of plot, theme, characterization, and psychoanalytical criticism. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=800