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Tell Me Something You Don't Know: Teaching the Post-1950s American Novella as a Non-Expert

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A few years ago, on a whim, I asked my undergraduate class of American literature survey students what the movie *Paranormal Activity* was about. As I suspected, most students had seen the movie, but I was surprised when most of them gave answers along the lines of "a haunting" or "possession by demons." Students seemed equally surprised when I suggested that while these were definitely issues the movie was concerned with, that it could also be "read" as a story about anger, or as a power struggle between its male and female protagonists.

This incident occasioned a few important questions for my teaching practice: why could students not see past the literal to the movie's central meaning? Why did students – who had moved so quickly to filter the coquette in James's "Daisy Miller" or the psychotic episode in "The Yellow Wallpaper" through the lenses of their own lives – falter when I asked them to consider a text from their own lives through a literary lens? What could I do to extend their recognition of literary patterns into their everyday habits?

Last year – as often happens at small liberal arts colleges like Bethany College in West Virginia, where I was teaching – I was assigned to teach a course outside of my expertise, on the American novella. In preparing for other such courses outside of my immediate fields I had ordered a variety of critical texts to read and reference, but the American novella thwarted most of my attempts to study it. In fact, what scholarly works I could find only covered novellas published through the 1950s. The scholarly publications themselves seemed to peak in the 1970s and then trailed off.

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My position as a non-expert put me in an interesting spot: I could teach the American novella through the 1950s, or I could open up the course to include later novellas to which scholars had not yet devoted time. I suspected that students would embrace the opportunity to read recent texts, and I wondered if I could leverage the surprise of finding popular texts in the classroom to help students interpret popular texts they encountered outside of the classroom.

When I shared the syllabus with the class I announced that we would spend the first half of the course familiarizing ourselves with American classics of the genre, establishing a critical, literary vocabulary, and practicing close reading skills. In the second half of the class, we would mobilize our new knowledge to read and interpret novellas that most scholars have not discussed. The test of whether or not the course succeeded would be the final exam: a paper discussing the meaning of a novella that we would neither read nor discuss as a class.

Two very useful things happened over the course of that semester. First, free from pre-formed scholarly narratives about our more recent texts, students made use of the opportunity to apply – with great independence – what they had learned in the first half of the course to the more popular novellas. Second, I saw drastic improvements in their close reading skills as students saw how they could extend their "literary" reading habits to "non-literary" texts.

### **I. Researching the American Novella: "A New Little Thing"**

There is a lot to not know about the American novella. As any relative layperson who has looked into the study of the genre knows, helpful critical texts are rare. Graham Good's observation that the term "novella" can be difficult to define because "the emphasis on qualities like economy, concentration, or unity can seem to boil down to the idea that

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short fictions are different from novels because they are, well, shorter" (Good 197) is one of the more recent scholarly words on the subject.

A bit more help in defining the genre can be found in Mary Doyle Springer's *Forms of the Modern Novella*, which attempts to break novellas down into sub-categories based on formal gesture, including the "plot of character," "degenerative or pathetic tragedy," "satire," "apologue" and "the example" (Springer 12). Doyle's terms were particularly helpful in the early stages of the course, as they aided students in drawing connections between literary movements and their works (for example, works of Realism or Naturalism are nearly always degenerative tragedies in which the reader knows from the outset that a main character will meet his or her demise).

For broader background, Robert J. Clements's "Anatomy of the Novella" suggests that writer and scholars have had difficulty in defining the novella since the Italian Renaissance, while offering a useful history of the European form (Clements 3). Aside from this, a scattering of encyclopedias such as *The Columbia History of the American Novel* offer brief leads on some novellas, particularly those published before 1950. In great part, as far as I could tell, the study of the American novella seems to have stalled sometime in the late 1970s. The Italian source of the word, meaning "a new little thing" (Abrams 198) still seems apt: the study of American innovations within the genre remains fairly new.

## **II. Constructing the Course**

In order to begin with something I did know, I decided to use the many American survey courses I'd taught as my model for teaching the novella. Moving chronologically from earliest to most recent, my first move was to structure the course around literary movements. From there, I worked in a series of basic literary terms intended to assist the class of mostly non-majors gain their literary footing.

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From this point, we read at the pace of about a book per week. The first half of the semester included texts published before 1950, including Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Larsen's *Passing* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. As we moved in the direction of the contemporary, we shifted around mid-semester to texts published post-1950, including Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Matheson's *I am Legend*, Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, King's *The Mist* and Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. Not all of these texts, of course, qualify as understudied: of this group, both Hemingway and Cisneros have received the bulk of scholarly attention.

Class discussion centered, about once every third class, on a series of homework discussion questions. Throughout the semester, students were required to come prepared with typed answers to questions on at least eight of the novellas we studied. We devoted other class days to lecture, introduction of terms and historical situations, and general discussion.

### **III. Close Reading in the First Half of the Semester**

Midway through the semester students were required to write a three-page close reading assignment with a thesis arguing for what either Crane's or James's novella was about. The assignment, in part, read like this:

Your goal in this paper will be to explain what the novella you choose is "about," which is not the same thing as describing the plot. For example, someone might say that the movie *E.T.* is about an alien befriended by a little boy: but this is just a plot summary (and not a very good one, either). A better claim would be that the movie is about reconciling differences between cultures: the little boy is innocent and so therefore accepts a stranger from another

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culture while other, corrupted adults try to stop him. Or another reading might claim that "E.T." is about the fact that our idea of "home" is a place that can't really be gone back to once you leave it (both E.T. and the boy return home at the movie's end, but neither of them have the same notion of "home" that they did at the movie's beginning). In other words, your paper should make an argument that the book is about something that's not immediately obvious upon first reading of the book.

By discouraging plot summary and encouraging students to create meanings for the texts we had discussed in class, I hoped to prepare students for the second half of the semester and the course's final exam.

Student performance on this first close reading assignment was similar to close reading first performances I had seen in other, similar courses. What struck me about these particular essays was the all-or-nothing manner in which students were able to answer the question. Of sixteen students, nearly a third of them wrote essays that failed to make a claim concerning an interpretation of the novella they chose. Interestingly, many of these same students had performed well on tests covering literary terms and subject matter. I wondered if I could improve this by the end of the course by shifting more of the responsibility for interpreting texts away from literary scholars, and myself, and onto the students.

#### **IV. Outside the Parlor: Canon and Reader Responsibility**

As we began the second half of our reading I let the class know what I was doing: I was purposefully moving many of our readings outside of the established literary canon. Doing this, I reminded them, didn't mean that our conversation about literary characteristics had ended: in fact, it only meant that we had more responsibility to identify them.

In discussing this responsibility, I introduced the "canonization of the junior branch" as Neil Randall helpfully dissects it in his essay

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"Determining Literariness in Interactive Fiction." In seeking to define the literary, Randall invokes the Russian formalists Viktor Shklovskij and Victor Erlich. Students often have trouble digesting ideas about the formation of the canon, but Shklovskij's theory that popular literature lingers outside the canon in the "junior branch" until an argument about the nature of the canon assigns it a place in the upper ranks seemed to resonate strongly with them. Erlich builds on Shklovskij's theory, stating that "products of popular culture, leading a precarious existence on the periphery of literature, are thus admitted into the parlor, raised to the status of bona fide literary art" (Randall 185). If we understood that we were reading "outside the parlor," I suggested, and we did so with an eye to the literary, then we could position ourselves as participants in the discussion concerning what texts are admitted into the canon and why. Students were very interested in this conversation, and very good at it. After all, college sophomores and juniors at this time – non-English majors included – have grown up reading both *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*. In other words, they have come of age surrounded by and invested in public discussions about what makes a text good and how we could define what "good" means.

When I asked how they might define "good," they listed a variety of characteristics: "keeps you on the edge of your seat," "round, believable, relatable characters," and "a moving plot." Then, I asked them what role they thought language played in their categorizations. We had already established that sometimes conventions in language change between periods, movements or individual styles: the language of Crane's novella was strikingly different from, say, Hemingway's. However, didn't language also play a role in making a text good or bad? How did it do that?

Someone pointed the text from the first part of the semester that had given many students the most difficulty: *The Turn of the Screw*. Most students found James's prose to be dense and difficult to follow. Following

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through with Randall's analysis, I reminded them that this feeling of surprise, or "strangeness" was in fact part of what qualifies a work as literary. I read them Fredric Jameson's statement that a literary work "attracts attention to itself, and such attention results in a renewed perception of the very material quality of language itself" (185). Might we, as we moved on, look for this strangeness in the texts we read?

### **V. Strange Language: Trout Fishing in America**

Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* represented the first true test of my experiment in giving students the bulk of our interpretive responsibility. On the afternoon we discussed the first half of the book, students were buzzing as I walked into the classroom. They'd had a variety of experiences with and reactions to the reading assignment, and most of them were claiming that the book was "crazy," "hilarious," or "just didn't make any sense." Yet when I asked them what they thought it was about, no one said a word.

I began, then, by taking out my copy and reading from the section entitled "Trout Death by Port Wine." After we'd read the section, in which a trout "dies happy" after being forced to have a drink of wine (Brautigan 32), I asked them what they thought. "Craziness," someone said. I agreed – there were definitely crazy elements, but another word for that might be "playful." Was there anything serious going on in this section? "Death," someone else said. This was true, too. We made a list of both the playful and the serious characteristics from this section on the board: this section was playful in terms of language and its absurd list of books, and also serious in terms of its straightforward narrative and meditation on nature and what is natural. A brief conversation of how we might define Postmodernism stemmed naturally from this listing activity.

Then I assigned each student a different section of what we'd read thus far, asking them to review their sections for both the playful and the

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serious before presenting their findings to the class. Directing them to work on their own without the ability to rely on their more talkative or interested peers led to some great findings: without prompting, students were able to identify Brautigan's use of the recipe and – most notably – the tombstone epitaph as situations in which the language was playful, but playing off serious forms. In most discussion situations, I find that I need to lead conversations about the form of a text myself. Yet given the responsibility to do so, students brought us to this point themselves.

On our last day discussing the novella, I announced that we would be visiting the library. I'd made a list of texts from the library that students researching *Trout Fishing* might check out. The list included just one book and a single article on Brautigan's work, one biography of Brautigan, a few books on the novel, a few anthologies with information about historical periods, and a few books and articles about figures from *Trout Fishing* such as Ben Franklin. Then I handed each of them a slip of paper with a feature of the novella that we'd identified earlier: interest in nature, historical figures, repetition of the phrase "Trout Fishing in America," and class struggle all made the list. Given their topic and information they could glean from texts on the list, I asked students to spend the hour creating a thesis about what *Trout Fishing in America* was about. Despite some groaning about this admittedly difficult assignment, students performed amazingly well. By the end of the hour – sometimes with several visits to me to check their claims – all of the students had returned a thesis to me. Some were merely competent, but more than a few really merged research with their own ideas about what the novella – that they had previously found incomprehensible – was doing. To be certain, all of these thesis statements were in the "working" stage, but the best ones demonstrated the ability to post concise arguments based on a variety of readings about a primary text.

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## **VI. Literary Lineage: *I am Legend* and *The Mist***

Coming off *Trout Fishing in America*, many students noted that *The Mist* was a relief to them in terms of its use of clear language and its direct, accessible plot structure. Pressing on our earlier conversation about what makes texts literary, I asked them if they thought that novellas such as *The Mist* and *I am Legend* struck them as such. While students generally agreed that these texts didn't fit the bill in terms of strangeness of language, they were quick to react to my question about how these novellas seemed to fit into the literary lineage of the American novella.

When I asked what this lineage was, one student pointed to *The Turn of the Screw*. When we'd first read this book we'd talked about the nature of horror and, as this student suggested, both Matheson's and King's novellas followed in this trend. Other students pointed to Springer's forms of the novella, suggesting that both *I am Legend* and *The Mist* fit into the apologue category in the way that they both seemed to enforce a thesis about the dangers of "messaging with science." I was particularly pleased when some students argued that all of the horror novellas fit into the category of degenerative tragedy because readers understood in the opening pages that many – if not all – of the main characters were going to die. Conversation on this topic required very little direction: for the most part, students seemed to have gained confidence in asserting their own ideas, and with using the literary terms set out at the beginning of the course.

## **VII. Final Exam: Essay on *Shoplifting at American Apparel***

The course's final exam asked students to read Tao Lin's novella *Shoplifting at American Apparel* on their own, without the aid of classroom discussion, and then make a claim for the book's meaning in the form of a brief close reading essay. I chose Lin's novella for its brevity (it's barely over 100 pages), its recent publication (in 2009, by Melville House's "The

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Contemporary Art of the Novella" series), and its subject matter, which dealt with young characters who spend time in bars and clubs, worry about their futures and, of course, break a variety of laws including the one against shoplifting. A great portion of the book takes place in the form of instant messages or texts. Further, the novella has no immediately discernable plot. It was my hope that this text might not only seem particularly contemporary to students, but that it might also remind them that a course in literature prepares them to make meaning from texts that might otherwise seem meaningless.

Most students started reading Lin's novella after the break between coursework and exams and so aside from the few students who dropped by my office to talk about their ideas I wasn't able to see their immediate reactions to the text. Those who did stop by had great ideas that they spoke about tentatively, and they seemed somewhat surprised when I approved of their thesis statements. Several of these students were straightforward with me about how exciting they found making a claim on their own, on a text that didn't clearly make a claim for itself.

When the final exams came in, I was very pleased: not every paper was perfect or even nearly so, but every student in the class successfully made a claim for what *Shoplifting at American Apparel* is about, and then backed up their assertions with examples from the text. The overall grades for these papers averaged a full letter grade higher than the ones at midterm. Certainly, student performance on the final exam was bolstered by their experience with the exam format at midterm, and from the obvious benefit of having spent another eight weeks in the classroom reading and discussing novellas. Yet in similar courses with similar assignment structures – such as my American literature survey – student performance did not seem drastically improved in the second half of the semester. I believe that part of the improved student ability to make meaning

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stemmed from encouraging them to do so with texts that they identified as "non-literary."

Literature is, of course, valuable in its own right, and I believe that both majors and non-majors benefit from being exposed not only to a variety of texts, but also to someone who genuinely enjoys them. If, though, part of the reason to teach literature courses to students outside of the English major is to teach them interpretive skills, then it makes sense to spend a considerable amount of class time on texts that they might encounter on their own. Further, I think there's an argument to be made for spending time in lower-level courses on texts that, like the American novella, defy our attempts to research them very seriously before we enter the classroom. When we enter the class without significant background we arrive more likely to seriously entertain student claims. We're also better able to direct these students into learning to take up and understand a wide array of strong positions that good discussions of literature require. In turn, students benefit from being encouraged to think "outside the classroom" through the reading of non-traditional texts.

Finally, as colleges and universities move toward hiring generalists to fulfill a variety of teaching and departmental needs, it's important that English faculty establish strategies for working within these trends. We can't all be experts on everything, but we can try. In cases, however, where we encounter new territories we can open up our classrooms as places to lead students in experiments with argument that will help them outside of the classroom, which is ultimately where, at the end of their time with us, they're going.

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