

Engaging the Civic Self: Teaching American Literature through  
Spectatorship and the Crowd

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the development of a course centering on spectatorship as a means of exploring nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature. The figure of the reporter as spectator in the crowd is a primary tool used to help students better comprehend the central tension of American democracy – the struggle for balance between the rights of the individual and the demands of the community. This tension plays out most clearly in literature in crowd scenes depicting labor strikes, vigilantism, and racial conflicts. My aim is to encourage students to engage with this literature in a more meaningful way, particularly given the relevance of the material within our current political environment of the Occupy movement and labor unrest. Students are challenged to reconsider passive definitions of spectatorship in order to analyze the spectator's role as a key observer and commentator who conveys this tension to the reader. This course is meant to help students better understand the historical contexts of the literature that we read during the course and enable them to see how depictions of the city and crowds reflect and continue to shape our perceptions of spectatorship, reporters, workers, and American democracy.

**Keywords:** spectator; spectatorship; crowd in literature; reporter; labor movement in literature; Dreiser, Theodore; Howells, William Dean; Michelson, Miriam

In the current cultural and political environment of the Occupy movement, labor union strife, and economic upheaval, I've been searching for a way to address these elements in meaningful ways in the literature classroom and make links to their earlier historical contexts through fiction. Rudimentary ideas for this new approach were developed during an early version of the course that I taught a few years ago as a Writing About Literature class at the University of Missouri. While considering how to turn the course into an introductory American literature class, I have refocused the course around the familiar, yet complex, figure of the reporter and the concept of spectatorship which serves as a useful way to make this literature more accessible to students. The spectator becomes a lens through which they can connect with and better understand the tensions that occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most notably in the forms of labor strikes and racial conflicts. My aim is to use this fiction as a springboard for discussions that will also help students make connections to our current situation and thus develop a stronger sense of their civic self.

#### I. Spectatorship: Setting the Context and Defining the Terms

In this course the primary objective is to use the concept of spectatorship to help students analyze how the tensions between the individual and the collective inherent in democracy have played out in American fiction, expanding on Nicolaus Mills's examination of "what happens when the crowds of American literature . . . challenge the hegemony of the pastoral and timeless images traditionally used to define the meaning of America" (13). While this emphasis on nature and the individual has dominated our study of American literature in the undergraduate classroom, I argue for a reassessment of fiction that takes into consideration that the way our country defines itself collectively is as significant as the way we define ourselves individually.

I draw my students' attention towards the growth of American cities and towns and the expansion of the field of journalism as depicted in American fiction in the nineteenth century. In my experience, most of my students have limited experience with the urban environment and are unfamiliar with the origins and evolution of American cities and towns. In a larger context, our rapidly growing population continues to desire spaces further from urban centers, becoming increasingly disconnected to the history of crowds and cities, particularly in conjunction with the growth of the middle class and the progress of the labor movement.

My approach to studying American fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enables students to confront the frictions that writers faced when portraying these issues and promotes dialogue regarding class, race, and gender. Together we explore the following questions: What is the benefit of using the spectator (particularly the reporter figure) to investigate themes involving the city, the crowd, and economic, class, and racial issues in literature at the turn of the century? How is the reporter a unique figure that can help students better connect with and understand this literature in ways not previously explored? My hope is that students will make associations between history and literature and between social change and writing. Our students must develop the valuable communication and analytical skills that will be necessary for their success as future professionals in any field, and by underscoring the important role that writing plays in our society in the development of ideas, students can more easily understand the relevance of their own writing. The spectator can be used as a teaching tool to provide a way for students in the literature classroom to set about the study of American literature from a more approachable vantage point.

By engaging students in active cultural participation with the texts and their historical contexts, they better comprehend their inherent links to history and the way these events have shaped the world we live in today. The impact of this cannot be overlooked in the classroom, as it enables

students to gain a voice as citizens and become more active participants in our current cultural and political environment. This approach also seeks to break down the narrow classroom view sometimes presented of American literary history by representing a diverse group of people and voices, in a fresh new way. The texts examined in this courses work in conversation with each other to offer differing perspectives of cultural controversies and by doing so they invite discussion and complicate students' understanding of American literature in productive ways.

The concept of spectatorship is tied to journalism in many of the texts that we analyze. Due to the explosion of periodical literature and the significant increase in the number of newspapers and journals produced and read, reporters and editors became a dominant influence on civic life in the nineteenth century. Their impact on the literature of their time can be seen in both their participation in the production of fiction (as reporter-novelists) and through the depiction of reporters and editors as fictional characters.

In order to build a foundation to discuss these reporter characters and other fictional spectators, students are asked to consider what it means to be a spectator. In a general sense, a spectator might be commonly thought of as an onlooker who watches from the outside. I ask students to challenge this passive definition of spectatorship, using Dennis Kennedy's commentary on the spectator and modernity to help them establish a clear delineation between the associated term "audience" and "spectator" – the former being merely a group of observers of a performance and the latter being an active participant (5). In addition to Kennedy's critical commentary, Amy Louise Wood's use of the term "witnessing" in relation to spectatorship also provides a useful framework for my students to understand the role of the spectator in significant and extraordinary events. According to her definition, a person is a witness when his or her spectatorship "can establish the true course of meaning of an event or action or when it can confer significance or value on an event"

and a witness plays "a public role, one that bestows a particular kind of social authority on the individual, at the same time that it connects the individual to a larger community of fellow witnesses" (Wood 4). In contrast to the social responsibility of the witness, we consider the *flâneur* figure, a detached, often indifferent, urban spectator who looks upon the city as an entertaining spectacle. Dana Brand's book on the spectator as *flâneur* defines the character as one who "without any set purpose, strolls through and observes the life of a city or town" and notes that it was often applied to French writers and journalists who wrote sketches of urban life for Paris newspapers (6). My students learn to employ these terms – spectator, observer, witness, and *flâneur* – as we examine the role these characters play in crowd scenes and how they contribute to the authors' social and political agendas.

## II. Organizing the course: Readings on Spectatorship, the Crowd, and the Labor Movement in American Literature

Throughout the course, students work their way through three units, beginning with "The Spectator in the Labyrinth: Finding Identity in the Urban Jungle." In this section, students examine Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," poetry by Walt Whitman, and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" in order to build a knowledge of the language necessary to discuss fiction in terms of spectatorship. Through these texts we explore the notion of individuality versus anonymity within the concept of identity and the crowd. Additionally, we investigate the development of the *flâneur* as a detached observer who views the city as a spectacle and a text to be read.

The second unit, "Spectatorship & Violence: Reporting the Crowd," encourages students to analyze the complicated role of the reporter as a spectator of violence and as a mediator between the individual and the crowd. Here we apply our spectator terms with all of their multiple meanings, viewing the reporter as both observer and participant, detached

and complicit. Theodore Dreiser's lynching narrative "Nigger Jeff" (1901) introduces us to reporter Elmer Davies and his problematic role as outsider when he is described as a *hired* spectator. This seemingly contradictory term applies to the female reporter, Rhoda Massey, in Miriam Michelson's story "Honors are Easy" (1905) as well. Students reflect on the implications of the characters' status as hired spectators who are paid to produce an account of the events and how, to varying degrees, the spectators in these scenes convey the authors' views on vigilantism as an action that defies legitimate legal and democratic processes.

In the third unit, "'Real' Life in the City: Spectators Working For Change & the Labor Movement at the Turn of the Century," we consider how reform was promoted and reflected in the literature of the turn of the century by examining two novels by William Dean Howells and Theodore Dreiser. Critical readings lead us into discussions of the "unreal" or alien aspects of the city, including the effects of immigration, labor strikes, violence, and class warfare. We focus primarily on the labor issues of the late nineteenth century, and the roles that the novels' main characters play as spectators. Many writers were exploring labor unrest during this period as it was becoming more prevalent in the cities in the form of strikes and urban disorder. When I taught an early version of this course, my students contemplated the novels within the context of these anxieties, and in class discussions they made perceptive arguments about how Howells and Dreiser counter the "wicked city" stereotype by providing readers with a greater sense of awareness of the issue, opening up possibilities for real change. Upon learning that it was during the aftermath of the Haymarket Affair of the 1880's when Howells took up the labor issue in his 1890 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, students remarked on the effects that experience had on shaping the transit strike as the central moment of crisis in the narrative. The spectator character Basil March, the editor of the literary magazine *Every Other Week*, finds himself in the middle of the labor debate between the socialist, pro-labor Lindau and the capitalist

Dryfoos who financially supports the periodical. We had productive discussions about the ways in which, through his struggles, March gradually progresses from distant observer to a more active advocate for social change.

We then compared and contrasted Howells's treatment of labor unrest to Hurstwood's involvement in the Brooklyn transit strike as a scab in *Sister Carrie* (1900). Again, students drew on background research on Dreiser's experience with the labor movement when analyzing the novel, taking into consideration his coverage of the 1894 street car strikes for the *Toledo Blade*. These examples helped students to establish a link between journalism and creative writing, which further emphasized the significant role of writing within the context of social change.

### III. Archival Research and Turning Students into Spectator-Reporters

In the updated version of this course, I've added a major research project which requires students to do archival work in the library on the labor movement in the nineteenth century. Students are asked to find at least two or three articles from nineteenth century newspapers or magazines that focus on labor issues, strikes, and union organizations. By putting themselves into the position of a spectator-reporter, students use the news reports to construct a picture of how the event was portrayed. They will determine whether there is one dominant perspective of the event in their sources or if there are a variety of perspectives presented. Students will consider what attitude(s) toward the city, workers, and unions they find in their sources and what kind of people were involved. Were they depicted sympathetically or antagonistically? Was a certain class, gender, or ethnic group of people portrayed in stereotypical terms or were they presented objectively? In what ways do these narratives contribute to the real and fictional perception of workers and the labor movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What about now? After collecting their data, students will put together a

portfolio, synthesizing their sources and considering the impact the news reports might have had on readers during the time period of the event. A written summary and response to each of the articles from their archival work will also be included.

Once this research is complete, students will create a corresponding creative piece based on the knowledge they have gained as a spectator-reporter. For the creative piece, students can choose to be a character or the narrator and they will construct a short fictional work based on the event they researched. Not only will this project enable students to see how the journalistic and creative work of some of the authors we study in this course overlaps, but it will also allow them to experience both types of writing first-hand in order to further underscore the reciprocal influence of real-life events and fiction. This project is meant to help students better understand the historical contexts of the literature that we read during the course and enable them to see how depictions of the city and crowds reflect and continue to shape our perceptions of spectatorship, reporters, workers, and American democracy.

#### IV. Goals and Outcomes

This course encourages students to use the historical and social contexts of the works to build meaning from and about these literary texts. By emphasizing spectatorship, journalism, the rapid growth of American cities, and the parallel expansion of the middle class, I shift the focus towards these key events in our country's history and help students consider the significance of their depictions in American fiction. Literature of the crowd is made more accessible to students by creating a more cohesive understanding of the upsurge of conflict and hostility that transpired during the nineteenth century in labor strikes and racial conflicts. Significantly, these tensions made clear the friction between the rights of the individual and the demands of the community in American democracy, which is still present today.

By promoting this approach to studying American literature, students are better equipped to comprehend the political issues at play during the turn of the century and more clearly associate those concerns with the economic and cultural situations of our own time period. This approach also endeavors to bring a more diverse set of voices and ideas into the classroom in hopes that by doing so students will be empowered to add their own perspectives to the discussion, creating a more comprehensive understanding of American literature at the critical turning point of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Works Cited

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