Reading Locally, Teaching Globally: How Local Stories Can Inspire Students to Ask Universal Questions
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Abstract: Literature offers what Santayana calls, "rehearsals for rational living," partly through the questions it poses, including those Mark Edmundson raises in *Why Read?*: "Who am I?" "What might I become?" "What is the world in which I find myself?" "How might it be changed for the better?" I engage students with such questions by reading locally—choosing texts set in our backyard. In Colorado, the local connections of Upton Sinclair's forgotten novel, *King Coal* create initial interest; however, the plot and protagonists offer opportunities for students to engage in the imaginative rehearsals required to answer these essential questions.

I first encountered Upton Sinclair's *King Coal* as a graduate student at the University of Kentucky. The novel was integral to the first essay I ever published—a discussion of Sinclair's work alongside *Germinal* (Emile Zola's naturalistic view of miners in France) and *Matewan* (John Sayles' a film about the West Virginia coal wars). The thesis of that essay is irrelevant here, but what does matter and does disturb me is that, despite residing just a few hours from Harlan County—where the battle between local miners and Duke Power had been the subject of the Oscar-winning documentary, *Harlan County, USA*—in a state abutting West Virginia, it never occurred to me to make the connection between the literature of the past and the issues of coal mining in the present. Only when the focus of my teaching shifted from teaching literature to preparing teacher candidates to teach literature did I recognize that it is just these connections—and our ability to help students make them—that is at the heart of the answer to the question that challenges English teachers at all levels: "Why read literature at all?"

The answer to the "Why read?" question is (to overstate the obvious) complicated. The critics who wrestle with this question attack it from any number of perspectives. In the collection *The Edge of the Precipice: Why Read Literature in the Digital Age?*, a diverse group—from Alberto Manguel to J. Hillis Miller—reflect on the relevance of literature in contemporary society. Nicholas Carr expands his answer to the question "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" in *The Shallows*. Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* builds an argument
based on contemporary cognitive psychology called "Theory of Mind." More recently (although with roots as far back as Nietzsche), the notion of "slow reading" has been touted by writers like Thomas Newkirk, in *The Art of Slow Reading: Six Time-Honored Practices for Engagement*, and David Mikics, in *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, as a way to rethink the relationship between the reader and the text. Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mikics explains, "The issue is not books themselves, but how they're being used. The biggest obstacle to humanistic education in the 21st century is that books, whether theory or not, have become tools for making predictable references to big concepts (capitalism, gender, modernity) rather than what they should be, guides to life." He references the work of Mark Edmundson, whose plainly (plaintively?) titled *Why Read?* is invoked frequently in my own classes. Edmundson looks to Emerson and Proust for the kinds of questions he says "matter especially for the young" and that should be "at the core of a liberal arts education" (5). Among those questions: "Who am I?" "What might I become?" "What is the world in which I find myself?" "How might it be changed for the better?" (5). These are questions I failed to ask as a graduate student; however, I try to guide my students towards the answers as a professor.

To be clear, reading as a way to see the world does not preclude the kind of literary study that delves into the aesthetic elements of a text. Louise Rosenblatt, who asserted many of these same points more than three-quarters of a century ago, formulated two types of reading experiences, or "stances." between the reader and the text: the "efferent" (from *effere*, Latin for "carry away") and the "aesthetic. The distinction is understood in terms of why readers read and what they seek to gain from both the experience and the text. In efferent reading, the purpose for reading is to glean bits of information. Rosenblatt describes, "the reader's attention is primarily focused on what will remain as a residue after the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" (23). In such reading, stylistic elements tend to matter less. Aesthetic reading, the kind advocated by Edmundson, Mikics, and Manguel, the aim of reading is more experiential—is more an exploration of the work and oneself, and as such, sensations, images, feelings, ideas, are fused into "a personally lived-through poem or story" (25). Although the efferent and the aesthetic represent two stances, the distance between them is less sharply drawn than it might appear.
Too often, these stances have been interpreted as discrete. The efferent is associated with some kind of manual, a "how to" text whereby a work's value is assessed in terms of what it teaches. A frequent example is a book about whaling. Such a book educates the reader about the process. On the other hand, *Moby Dick* would not be read as a guide to hunting the whale. Yet, to suggest that there is not a connection to be made between the process that is whaling (described in excruciating detail by Melville) and the larger narrative of the *Pequod's* captain and crew is untenable. After all, the bits of information gleaned from an efferent reading are often the kind of "how do we live in this world" answers that align with the questions posed by Mikics and Edmundson and swirling (if unspoken) in the heads of our students. Rosenblatt makes this point explicitly, arguing that "It is more accurate to think of a continuum, a series of gradations between the nonaesthetic and the aesthetic extremes. The reader's stance toward the text . . . may vary in a multiplicity of ways between the two poles" (35). As such, the same text, or particular sections of the same text, can be read differently for different purposes.

As a classroom teacher, I have found that understanding this continuum is essential to engaging classes of twenty, thirty, forty or more undergraduates with a single text, for it allows readers to find their own way into the text. In her *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, which builds on her 1938 classic *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt posits that most reading hovers near the middle of the continuum. However, in the decades since, many of the critics mentioned above would suggest that reading has become unbalanced towards the efferent while critics of reader response gone wild—even proponents Wayne Booth—who lament that method of criticism done badly, would suggest that it has become unbalanced towards the aesthetic. Addressing this imbalance in either direction requires rethinking both what texts we teach and how we teach them. This point has been argued by critics of both literature and pedagogy from James Britton to Booth, from Wolfgang Iser to Suzanne Langer. What emerges from these debates is the conclusion Rosenblatt has suggested in nearly all her works: that readers must be taught to handle a variety of stances when they engage in a transaction with the text, balancing what the text provides to them and what they bring to the text in terms of their aims for reading and their individual experiences. The thing is, though, any discussion of stances or transactions is moot if students do not read at all.
They’re Just Not That into the Text

The data—qualitative, quantitative, and anecdotal—about reading among adolescents and college students are plentiful and disturbing. Young people are not reading, and there are plentiful reasons for why this is so. It is easy to point to technology or social media, to blame Google, or to conclude that the current generation is the "most cynical" (as does The National Review) or the "dumbest" (see Mark Bauerlein’s The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future). It is harder to gaze into the mirror and blame ourselves as the very ones who choose and teach the texts that students, in response, do not find worth reading. In Reading Like a Writer, Francine Prose describes how the requirement by her professors to be critical was nearly the death knell for all that made her passionate about reading:

I soon realized my love for books was unshared by many of my classmates and professors. . . . That was when literary academia was split into warring camps of deconstructionists, Marxists, feminists, and so forth, all battling for the right to tell students they were reading "texts" in which ideas and politics trumped what the writer had actually written. (8)

Prose and I must have been in graduate school around the same time, when the aim was less to cultivate thoughtful readers and more to create productive critics. This tendency seems to have filtered down to undergraduate programs and through them to secondary classrooms. Students seem unable—or untrained—simply to read, to let the words and the sentences and the story wash over them without jumping quickly to "strong, critical, and often negative" opinions of the writers (10). Prose concludes that students find reading stressful "because of the harsh judgments they [feel] required to make about fictional characters and their creators" (10-11). I could not agree more.

So, where does this view of students and their reading lives leave us? Students have lost what contemporary philosopher Robert Pippin describes as a kind of naïveté. Most poems and novels were created, Pippin contends, for the purpose of bringing pleasure to the reader and not merely as suitable objects of research. He continues, "there is no particular reason to think that every aspect of the teaching of literature or film or art or all
significant writing about the subject should be either an exemplification of how such a theory works or an introduction to what needs to be known in order to become a professor of such an enterprise." Therefore, Pippin honors the naïve reader who gains from the text a knowledge of a different sort, "practical knowledge and self-understanding not available from a third person or more general formulation of such knowledge." Such knowledge is as valuable as the more formalized kind, and he concludes with a plea for honoring naïve reading, teaching, and writing and striving for "an appreciation and discussion not mediated by a theoretical research question recognizable as such by the modern academy." In the continuum of transaction between the reader and the text, in other words, there is room for multiple approaches.

Reading deeply and critically is, of course, a developmental process, and, rather than suggesting one read either naively or through a critical lens, we must value and teach both approaches identified by Rosenblatt. In her "Coda" to Literature as Exploration, she advises that teachers "scrutinize" their behaviors to ensure that "we are not in actuality substituting other aims—things to do about literature—for the experience of literature" (273). The trick is finding the literal "via" in the figurative via media—encouraging students to read with the openness of the generous, naïve reader and to arrive at an initial perception or sense of the text. Then, it is the desire of readers to deepen that understanding or refine those perceptions that will guide them to look more deeply, view the reading experience through a more critical lens, and if they are so moved, "[widen their] circles of interest" (111). The process is one of discovery whereby readers, in deeply questioning the text, will question their own perceptions while probing alternative understandings of a world beyond that text.

Reading during the Zombie Apocalypse

In my classrooms, I look to introduce students to the lessons and the craftsmanship of literature by reading and thinking critically about "texts" across geographical place and rhetorical space as well as discursive mode and literary genre. These plans unravel if students do not engage with the text on an emotional level, one that leads them to consider and question the various structures they observe first in the texts they read and then in the society they inhabit. Increasingly, engaging students is difficult. They seem dispassionate
about works that have little in common with their immediate frame of reference or that lack some fantastical or dystopian element. If it is not adolescents in angst or zombies facing the apocalypse, then reading becomes little more than an academic exercise in which students approach texts loaded for critical bear at the expense of any passion for story or craft and, I would argue, potential for meaningful personal growth. Literature is our tool for guiding them towards such critical consciousness, and all the traditional talk of period, genre, and literary devices must be in service to that end.

When I am successful, students have the opportunity to rehearse their responses to the kinds of challenges that await them in the real world. Rosenblatt describes as much in *Literature as Exploration*, for "through the medium of literature we participate in imaginary situations, we look on characters living through crises, we explore our world and the world around us" (37). She ascribes two essential traits of literature, "its power to give vicarious experience and its delineation of a great diversity of personalities and conduct," concluding, "Is it not the capacity for imagination—the ability to picture oneself in a variety of situations and to envisage alternative modes of behavior and their consequences—the thing that gives the wise man his advantage" (189-190). This power of literature is realized through the discussion and reflection that must be at the heart of our teaching. Through such engagement, students have the opportunity to imagine situations they might face and to rehearse possible responses to such situations—the kind that compel them to think critically and respond in meaningful ways to issues of social, economic, and political justice in their lives inside and outside the classroom. However, to paraphrase myself, any potential for imaginative rehearsal is pointless if students do not read. Which brings me back to using *King Coal* in my Colorado classroom.

**April 20 in the State of Colorado**

The local connection of the Colorado-based narrative and the novelty for students of seeing places they know in the pages of "some boring old novel" build quite a bit of good will and create some initial interest in *King Coal*. However, it falls to the novel's plot and protagonists to maintain that interest and serve the purpose of exploiting literature's ability to place students, as cited above, "in a variety of situations and to envisage alternative modes of behavior and their consequences" (189-190). Through this novel, geographically
near but in narrative ostensibly remote from their immediate lives, I want students to use *King Coal* to shape their lives—to allow them to rehearse imaginatively the kinds of questions that will confront them in the world inside and outside the classrooms, questions that ask them to think deeply, consider critically, and respond meaningfully. Our students are, Edmundson describes, "Immersed in preprofessionalism [and] swimming in entertainment," and they need texts that compel them "to call everything they've valued into question, to look at new ways of life, and to risk everything" (16). *King Coal* suits these purposes perfectly. It offers a protagonist with whom students can identify and who is asked to make choices that, if specific in terms of the narrative, are universal in terms of the challenges they represent.

Published in 1917, *King Coal* was written in response to the Ludlow Massacre, which occurred April 20, 1914 in Ludlow, Colorado. The massacre has been called "the culminating act of perhaps the most violent struggle between corporate power and laboring men in American history" (Zinn, 79). Perhaps, prior to 1992, that terrible event was acknowledged in Colorado; however, in that year, the Columbine school shootings became the event that defines April 20 for Coloradans. Although the reasons for recalling these two tragedies are different, both have framed the history of this state and our nation. Yet, beyond these significant local and national connections, *King Coal* possesses many of the essentials Rosenblatt, Edmundson, and others ascribe to literature. Needless to say, the local connection appeals to students, many of whom are unfamiliar with the events of the massacre. Although the names of the towns are changed in the novel, they can locate the fictional "San Pedro" or "Western City" on the maps that, as hikers, skiers, snowboarders, and mountain bikers, they know so well. They have visited or driven through former mining towns like Leadville, Idaho Springs, Cripple Creek, Salida, or Trinidad, where the geography—from the scarred hills to the familiar western main streets—reflects a prosperous past. At the same time, the region is dotted with ghost towns—Animas Forks, St. Elmo, Teller City—with remnants of homes, saloons, and general stores like those described in the novel.
Reading Locally

The notion of reading locally is one I have employed throughout my career in the many places I have lived and taught. For texts that encourage the kind of experience I seek to create with and for students, I look not to some netherworld or middle earth or post-apocalyptic America but rather to the students' own backyard. When I taught in South Texas, works like Americo Paredes' *George Washington Gomez* or Norma Elia Cantu's *Canicula* served this purpose. When I was at Michigan State, there was Harriette Arnow's neglected but lovely novel, *The Dollmaker*. In Colorado, I have rediscovered *King Coal*.

Although Sinclair's novel is pretty much forgotten in the academy, the events it depicts have not lost their currency. In 2009 and again in 2014, *The New Yorker* featured articles about the Ludlow Massacre. In 2009, the occasion for Caleb Crain's article "There Was Blood: The Ludlow Massacre Revisited" was the publication of a new account of "the deadliest labor struggle in American history," namely Thomas G. Andrews' *Killing for Coal*. In 2014, Ben Mauk argued, in "The Ludlow Massacre Still Matters,"

Although it is less well-remembered today than other dark episodes in American labor history, such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that claimed a hundred and forty-six lives, the Ludlow massacre—which Wallace Stegner once called "one of the bleakest and blackest episodes of American labor history"—changed the nation's attitude toward labor and capital for the next several decades. Its memory continues to reverberate in contemporary political discourse.

In fact, when I last taught the novel in 2015, Colorado news was filled with images of a yellow Animas River polluted by mine waste from an EPA cleanup gone wrong. At the same time, national news was buzzing about the conviction of Donald Blankenship, former C.E.O. of coal giant Massey Energy, on federal charges of conspiring to violate mine safety relating to the 2010 Upper Big Branch explosion that killed 29 people. Even without these eerily relevant examples in the news, there seems to be an endless supply of current issues involving environmental contamination (for example, Flint's water crisis) or corporate greed (think of Martin Shkreli and Turing Pharmaceuiticals). Such contemporaneous coverage not
only keeps "dated" texts current by illustrating often sweeping and long-lasting implications, but it also offers all manner, modes, and genres of contextualizing content to supplement the central literary text.

To be sure, the details of *King Coal* veer from the particulars of the massacre; however, Sinclair proleptically offers evidence regarding the factual elements in a postscript to the story. In noting that, "From previous experiences the writer has learned that many people, reading a novel such as *King Coal*, desire to be informed as to whether it is true to fact," Sinclair answers a question familiar to any teacher of young adults: "Did this really happen?" (224). His answer in the postscript runs nearly a dozen pages and includes excerpts from testimony before Congress as well as primary documents and "articles by different writers to be found in the files of *Everybody’s Magazine*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, the *Survey*, *Harper’s Weekly*, and *Collier’s Weekly*, all during the year 1914" (224). Sinclair explains to readers,

The writer has avoided naming a definite place, for the reason that such conditions are to be found as far apart as West Virginia, Alabama, Michigan, Minnesota, and Colorado. Most of the details of his picture were gathered in the last-named state, which the writer visited on three occasions during and just after the great coal-strike of 1913-14. The book gives a true picture of conditions and events observed by him at this time. Practically all the characters are real persons, and every incident which has social significance is not merely a true incident, but a typical one. (224)

"A true picture" is always a problematic description, but, briefly etched, the facts are the following: the Ludlow Massacre was the most violent event of the southern Colorado Coal Strike, which lasted from September 1913 through December 1914. Among the miners' demands were a ten-percent pay raise, the enforcement of an eight-hour working day, and the right to live and trade outside the company-owned town. Many of these rights were required already by Colorado law, but they were unenforced. The striking miners were evicted from their company-owned homes and settled into makeshift tent cities surrounding the mines. Ludlow was the largest of these camps. The mines at issue belonged to the
Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel & Iron Company and the company hired camp guards, supported militias, and paid the salaries of the Colorado National Guard during the strike. On April 20, 1914, the tent cities were attacked by these forces. Ludlow was the bloodiest confrontation, accounting for some two dozen deaths, including two women and eleven children discovered among the ruins of an infirmary in the burned-down camp. The massacre led to ten days of violence between miners and the Colorado National Guard and resulted in close to 100 deaths. In the aftermath, Mauk explains in The New Yorker, the public was galvanized: "To many Americans, the massacre exposed the consequences of unchecked corporate might, and it roused the conscience of a country that had previously demonstrated impassive ambivalence toward organized labor." The lessons, as it turns out, are remarkably current—in and beyond the Centennial State.

Were Sinclair's novel simply a retelling of the events of Ludlow, its value for my particular purposes would be reduced and its overall interest to anyone outside Colorado far less significant. It is the two main characters, Hal Warner and Mary Burke, as well as some of the minor characters from Hal's peer group, who inspire the transaction with the text that I seek. Through these characters, students examine the kinds of potent questions that they are often hesitant to ask, especially those, as Edmundson notes, that deal with "how to navigate life, what to be, what to do" (28). Although the novel is almost a century old, students identify with Hal, who could be a student sitting alongside the others in our classrooms. The son of a coal magnate himself, Hal assumes the alias Joe Smith, leaves his posh life as a college student, and ventures into the coal fields of Colorado on "a lark" (6). To a camp boss, Hal describes himself as "a college boy" who "wanted to see life and shift for myself a while" (6). Hal's flip responses are only part of what motivates him to take a job at the North Valley mine and endure both the back-breaking work of coal mining and multiple beatings he receives as an outsider and rabble-rouser. He seeks an authentic experience against which he can measure the learning he receives in the college classroom. During a part-conversation, part-confrontation with a camp marshal, Hal responds to the question, "And this is your idea of a vacation?" with "No, it isn't a vacation; it's a summer-course in practical sociology," adding,
All last year we let the professors of political economy hand out their theories to us. But somehow the theories didn't seem to correspond with the facts. I said to myself, 'I've got to check them up.' You know the phrases, perhaps—individualism, laissez faire, freedom of contract, the right of every man to work for whom he pleases. And here you see how the theories work out—a camp-marshall with a cruel smile on his face and a gun on his hip, breaking the laws faster than a governor can sign them. (92)

In this desire for authentic experience, Hal is not unlike our students when they pursue for themselves real world applications of in-class learning. Likewise, his confrontations with an older brother who dismisses both Hal's desire to understand the world and his youthful (and not atypical) attraction to radical ideas are not unfamiliar to students who can empathize with Hal when he explains, "I have to try things out for myself. You see, I've got a brother at home, and when I think about going in for revolution, I have imaginary arguments with him. I want to be able to say 'I didn't swallow anybody's theories; I tried it for myself, and this is what happened'" (52). The moment is familiar: what adolescent, after all, has not bristled at being reminded of and dismissed for their inexperience by someone older?

It is not only the novel's protagonist with whom students can identify. Over the course of the novel, Hal is compelled to make choices that, if specific in terms of the narrative, are universal in the challenges they represent. Important for both Hal and our students are the lessons he learns as he evolves from callow college student on a lark to an advocate for the working class. Chief among those lessons is not to believe what he has been taught in college. In other words, through his real-world experiences, Hal is becoming a critical thinker about the world he encounters inside and outside the classroom, learning to question perceived wisdom and arrive at conclusions based on his own empirical research. For example, in his college economics classes and from his wealthy family, Hal has been taught that private ownership is the basis of American progress and prosperity and essential to economic growth. However, in the coal mines, Hal learns a contradictory lesson, one that includes exploited workers and their starving, struggling families. At Harrigan College, Hal's professors celebrated American capitalism:

91
All through the previous year at college Hal had listened to lectures upon political economy, filled with the praises of a thing called "Private Ownership." This Private Ownership developed initiative and economy; it kept the wheels of industry a-roll, it kept fat the pay-rolls of college faculties; it accorded itself with the sacred laws of supply and demand, it was the basis of the progress and prosperity wherewith America had been blessed. (114)

In the coal camps, the face of capitalism is a vastly different one from that described by his professors. What he sees and experiences in the world beyond the Harrigan campus challenges all that he studied in its classrooms:

And here suddenly Hal found himself face to face with the reality of it; he saw its wolfish eyes glaring into his own, he felt its smoking hot breath in his face, he saw its gleaming fangs and claw-like fingers, dripping with the blood of men and women and children. Private Ownership of coal-mines! Private Ownership of sealed-up entrances and non-existent escape-ways! Private Ownership of fans which did not start, of sprinklers which did not sprinkle. Private Ownership of clubs and revolvers, and of thugs and ex-convicts to use them, driving away rescuers and shutting up agonised [sic] widows and orphans in their homes! Oh, the serene and well-fed priests of Private Ownership, chanting in academic halls the praises of the bloody Demon! (114-115)

Hal's first-hand education in the coal camps offers a counterpoint to the theories he studies at college, calling into question not only the content of a single course but the entirety of his college curricula.

It is not only the ideas from the classrooms that must be measured and challenged. Like Hal, how students think is shaped by multiple forces. In *Why Read?* Edmundson notes that we are socialized, educated, and guided by many Virgils, from teachers to parents, from priests to peers. A student must be prepared to articulate what he believes—or has been told to believe while growing up—and be willing "to tell himself who he is and has
been, and possibly, why that will no longer quite do” (34). In effect, students must be ready to grow up a second time. In *King Coal*, Hal's advocacy of the North Valley miners and their cause places him in direct conflict with his father and brother, who dismiss the changes in his politics as youthful passion. But especially important to young adults, the changes in Hal place him in direct conflict with his peers, including his fiancée, Jessie. He tries to explain to her why he feels compelled to stay in North Valley: "I have a duty to do here. Can't you understand, dear? All my life, I've been living on the labour of coal-miners, and I've never taken the trouble to go near them, to see how my money was got! . . . They toil, and we live on their toil, and take it as a matter of course" (157). Now that he has seen their plight up close, Hal cannot return to the life he lived before: "I know that these working people are oppressed; I know it, because I have been one of them! And I know that such men as Peter Harrigan, and even my own brother, are to blame! And they've got to be faced by someone—they've got to be made to see! I've come to see it clearly this summer—that's the job I have to do!" (157). Jesse's response, "But what can one do about it, Hal?" while seemingly cold at first glance, also rings familiar to students who often turn away from engagement in public life out of a similar sense of futility (157).

Similarly, Hal's friends have little time for their newly radicalized "class" mate. He tries to explain to Percy Harrigan, whose father owns the North Valley mine, the things he has seen:

"Percy," he continued, "you remember how you used to jump on me last year at college, because I listened to 'muck-rakers.' You saw fit to take personal offence at it. You knew that their tales couldn't be true. But I wanted to see for myself, so I went to work in a coal-mine. I saw the explosion; I saw this man, Jeff Cotton, driving women and children away from the pit-mouth with blows and curses. I set out to help the men in the mine, and the marshal rushed me out of camp. He told me that if I didn't go about my business, something would happen to me on a dark night." (142)

Percy is unmoved, remarking only, "I wish you'd go somewhere else to do your sociology" (142). These confrontations with friends and family offer multiple opportunities for
imaginative rehearsal, especially for our students who are, on the one hand, often beholden to the good opinions of their own circle and on the other, experiencing the meaningful moments of change and growth that we associate with young adulthood.

Much like many of our students, Hal is a complicated character. There is no doubt that he is passionate about the miners' plight, a fact he tries to make clear to his fiancée. He becomes the miners' voice as well as an arm of the union. In the miners' demand for a "check weighman," a worker chosen by the miners to verify the weight of each miner's haul, Hal takes center stage. Even so, he remains between two worlds, ultimately not at home in or fully committed to either. This conflicted nature appeals to students who fluctuate between frustration with and admiration for Hal. For example, despite the violence he witnesses and the beatings he, himself, endures, the notion that his coal camp experience is a "lark" lingers. Sinclair describes Hal's response to becoming a covert union operative in enthusiastic terms:

> Hal was now started upon a new career, more full of excitements than that of stableman or buddy, with perils greater than those of falling rock or the hind feet of mules in the stomach. The inertia which overwork produces had not had time to become a disease with him; youth was on his side, with its zest for more and yet more experience. He found it thrilling to be a conspirator, to carry about with him secrets as dark and mysterious as the passages of the mine in which he worked. (53)

Yet, what is an adventure for Hal is a matter of life and death for the miners. Throughout the novel, Hal's noble intentions are often vitiated by the fact that he remains an outsider. At other moments, he is so deeply enmeshed in the events of the camp and the lives of the miners that he feels cut off from the world he left behind:

> Hal had come here, as one goes upon the deck of a ship in mid-ocean, to see the storm. In this ocean of social misery, of ignorance and despair, one saw upturned, tortured faces, writhing limbs and clutching hands; in one's ears was a storm of lamentation, upon one's cheek a spray of blood and tears. Hal
found himself so deep in this ocean that he could no longer find consolation in the thought that he could escape whenever he wanted to: that he could say to himself, It is sad, it is terrible—but thank God, I can get out of it when I choose! I can go back into the warm and well-lighted saloon and tell the other passengers how picturesque it is. . . . (41)

It is equally easy to indict Hal as a spoiled kind of "voluntourist" or to defend him as a true-believer in the cause. Choosing a side, however, is less important than discussing with students Hal's motivation. These moments when, as Rosenblatt describes, "we look on characters living through crises" underscore the value of literary study (37). In weighing in on Hal and his choices, students are rehearsing their own lives, imagining their own responses in situations where what they experience in the world differs from what they have been taught or when their allegiances and loyalties shift or are challenged.

Writing about the role and the value of art in The Life of Reason, George Santayana noted that "art in general is a rehearsal of rational living, and recasts in idea a world which we have no present means of recasting in reality. Yet, this rehearsal reveals the glories of a possible performance better than do the miserable experiments until now executed on the reality." One of the difficult realities King Coal allows students to rehearse is disappointment, for despite Hal's work to advocate for the workers, to unite the disparate groups into a fledging union, and to organize a strike against the coal operators—activities that have left him literally and figuratively bloodied and beaten—in King Coal unlike in Ludlow, there will be no strike. The organizers of the larger union explain that that the timing for a strike in North Valley is not right and will only harm their effort. "You're new at this game," they advise Hal. "It would be lost as soon as it was begun." Hal's lessons about the realities of political economy are delivered not by professors at his college but by the union men who are forced to be pragmatic. Sinclair writes,

He looked at the two labor leaders, and recalled the picture of such a person which he had brought with him to North Valley—a hot headed and fiery agitator, luring honest workingmen from their jobs. But here was the situation exactly reversed! Here was he in a blaze of excitement—and two labor
leaders turning the fire-hose on him! They sat quiet and business-like, pronouncing a doom upon the slaves of North Valley. Back to their black dungeons with them!" (199)

In *King Coal*, there are no easy answers, no tidy endings, and often no victory for the good guy. It is as participants in such a reality that students will have to make choices about how they will live.

**Girl Power**

As it turns out, engaging students in Hal's story becomes pretty much effortless even despite Sinclair's turgid prose, heavy-handed socialism, and sometimes disturbing depictions of the ethnic array of miners. Yet, for students acquainted with the ethnographic experiments of Rebekah Nathan (*My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*) or Kevin Roose (*The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University*) or who watch CBS's reality series *Undercover Boss*, the idea of a covert operation is familiar territory. What is surprising is how, despite the particularly un-lifelike characterization of the less relatable Mary, it is she whom the students come to celebrate. A 1917 review of *King Coal* in *The Dial* dismissed the love triangle of Hal, "the debutante" Jessie, and Mary (whom the reviewer calls, "almost destitute of the faculty of individual human characterization") as nothing more than a generic convention that "compl[ies] with the Rules of Order for the conduct of novels" (Wyatt 588). Despite what seems to be Sinclair's own intentions, Mary exceeds the banality of the "Celtic Madonna" in a faded calico dress to emerge as a passionate and committed leader of the miners.

Although both Sinclair and Hal might seek to reduce Mary to a "miracle of Nature," a wild rose blooming in a coal camp, students see much more (15). Mary evolves from a harsh critic of the members of her own mining community to their advocate and, ultimately, their champion. Mary also offers a glimpse into the situation of women in the camp, burdened with broods of children and sexually exploited by the camp bosses. Trapped in the poverty and despair of the mine camp among men she describes as cowards and drunks, Mary lives a life as different as possible from Hal's fiancée, Jessie. Nonetheless, the two women voice similar frustrations. Mired in "corroding despair," Mary tells Hal, "How
could things ever be changed? The bosses were mean-hearted, and the men were cowards and traitors. That left nobody but God to do the changing—and God had left things as they were for such a long time!" (60). Like Jessie, she sees no hope for change. Mary also reveals another side to Hal's naiveté, for his attentions to her lead to an attachment he is not sure he wants but realizes he did encourage: "he had had a definite sentimental impulse; and he had been a cad—he should have known all along that all this girl's discontent, all the longing of her starved soul, would become centered upon him, who was so 'different, who had had opportunity, who made her think of the 'poetry-books'!" (55). A mining-camp romance with Mary would be another "lark" for Hal, until he realizes the implications of his actions. Seeking to divert Mary's attentions, Hal recruits her into the miner's fledging union, despite the fact that women were excluded from miners' committees. In joining the struggle, Mary finds both her voice and her place in the larger world. Herein lies the irony of King Coal and from it emerges students’ conclusion that Mary Burke is the novel's hero.

Hal's final choices give students much to consider. Reviewing his time in North Valley, he realizes that "the grim truth about his summer's experience" was defeat. Although his activities had caused the coal bosses "a momentary chagrin" he knows that the wheels of industry will grind again at the expense of the workers, who will be exactly where they were before he arrived (219). In the scene that closes the novel's antepenultimate chapter, Hal's anger fuels his big plans for the future:

He resolved suddenly that he would not go back to Western City; he would stay here, and get an honest lawyer to come, and set out to punish the men who were guilty of this outrage. He would test out the law to the limit; if necessary, he would begin a political fight, to put an end to coal-company rule in this community. He would find someone to write up these conditions, he would raise the money and publish a paper to make them known! Before his surging wrath had spent itself, Hal Warner had actually come out as a candidate for governor, and was overturning the Republican machine. . . . (219)
Students share Hal's anger and understand his passion and devotion to the miner's cause. Which is why the first line of the penultimate chapter so disappoints, "In the end, of course, Hal had to come down to practical matters" (219). When summer wanes and his old life beckons, Hal chooses to leave North Valley as the only way to "escape from his adventure with any portion of his self-possession." After all the he has seen, what he describes as the "uncovered horrors, sights for the eyes and stenches for the nostrils that caused him to turn sick!", what Hal chooses to do is have a bath (209).

Hal had a bath, the first real one in a long time.... He had a shave; he trimmed his finger-nails, and brushed his hair, and dressed himself as a gentleman. In spite of himself he found his cheerfulness partly restored. A strange and wonderful sensation—to be dressed once more as a gentleman.

(221)

Oh, he resolves to "help a little" some of the miners he has met by giving them money, but in washing off the grime of the coal camp, Hal seems to have washed off his passion for their cause and his concern for injustice. Ultimately, it is not Hal who has changed but Mary. It is she who will give up her world, not for a better one but for a larger one.

Mary's actions, her choices, and her evolution remind students of the human capacity to change. As the novel progresses, readers watch as the future she imagines and desires for herself transforms completely. Earlier in the novel, after confessing her love for Hal/"Joe Smith," Mary pleads with him to take her away from the camps,

"Take me away and give me a chance, Joe! I'll ask nothing, I'll never stand in your way; I'll work for ye, I'll cook and wash and do everything for ye, I'll wear my fingers to the bone! Or I'll go out and work at some job, and earn my share. And I'll make ye this promise—if ever ye get tired and want to leave me, ye'll not hear a word of complaint!" (44)

Here, Mary is willing, in effect, to enslave herself, albeit to a different master. The circumstances in which she would serve might be different, they might be better, but she
would remain under another's control. By the novel's final chapters, when Mary has become a voice for the miners, her attitude towards Hal/Joe has changed, "I tell ye fair and true, I love ye as much as ever. I can say it, because I'd not have ye now. . . ." She sees a new future for herself in fighting for the rights of the working man,

"Now," concluded Mary, with clenched hands, and a voice that corresponded, "now, I've had it out. I'm no slave; I've just as good a right to life as any lady. I know I'll never have it, of course; I'll never wear good clothes, nor live in a decent home, nor have the man I want; but I'll know that I've done somethin' to help free the workin' people from the shame that's put on them. That's what the strike done for me, Joe! The strike showed me the way. We're beat this time, but somehow it hasn't made the difference ye might think. I'm goin' to make more strikes before I quit, and they won't all of them be beat!" (217)

Her passion and commitment to action stand in sharp counterpoint to Hal's disappointing departure. And, although it is Hal, the college sophomore engaged in a summer of service learning, who brings students into the story of the Colorado coal wars, it is Mary who will lead them out of that local story and into the larger world where, it is my hope, they will choose to act.

Making Questions Cool Again

Earlier, I cited Mark Edmundson's observation that, "Beneath that veneer of cool, students are full of potent questions; they want to know how to navigate life, what to be, what to do" (28). Hence, the new paradigm of education by inquiry question—one I embrace and endorse passionately—can go a long way to making questions cool again. The challenge is not merely choosing the right questions but finding a text that will at once engage students with those questions and provide experiences that can inform their answers. *King Coal*, by virtue of its local connections, its contemporary relevance, and the broad questions raised in the narrative, serves this purpose in Colorado. As I suggested earlier, there is likely a similar text for any city, state, or region. The local connection—established through familiar names and places or regional idiosyncrasies and insider
insights—goes a long way to cultivating student interest and making the introduction of broader, global implications and questions especially meaningful. For my students in Colorado, Hal's internal monologue towards the end of *King Coal* offers the kind of compelling questions that are now and will remain ever relevant to their lives long after the last page and long after they leave our state:

How far shall a man go in relieving the starvation about him, before he can enjoy his meals in a well-appointed club? What casuist will work out this problem—telling him the percentage he shall relieve of the starvation he happens personally to know about, the percentage of that which he sees on the streets, the percentage of that about which he reads in government reports on the rise in the cost of living? To what extent is he permitted to close his eyes, as he walks along the streets on his way to the club? To what extent is he permitted to avoid reading government reports before going out to dinner-dances with his fiancée? (213-214)

Hal concludes these musings by noting that these are the problems that remain unanswered by "the wise men of the academies and the holy men of the churches." He leaves North Valley having tried, on his own, to "work out the formulas" using his own "crude mental arithmetic," but there is no satisfaction for him in the results of his calculations (214). Whereas these questions are where Hal ends his adventure, they are the beginning of the adventure for students. With the events of the novel as a starting point, *King Coal* asks them to think hard about the kinds of choices they imagine they would make in similar situations. How might they answer Hal's compelling "inquiry questions." These considerations prepare them for the real dilemmas that await them in their lives, offering Santayana's "rehearsal of rational living." Thanks to Hal's miserable experiment in reality, students get a chance to imagine their own lives; although they might have made some bad choices, literature allows them the opportunity to take a mulligan.
Works Cited


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