Teaching American Literature Inside the Box: A Narrative-Based Approach to Instruction
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Abstract: In 1863, Gustav Freytag put forward his famous pyramid as a means of illustrating the outline of a typical plot. This relatively simple way of presenting literature's "shape" echoed Aristotle's ideas regarding the unity of action and, in so doing, reinforced the proposition that we can ascribe physical form to abstract constructs. Fast-forward nearly 150 years to a time when theorists agree with nearly complete consensus that narrative worlds are more complicated than either Aristotle's ideas or Freytag's pyramid would suggest, and we discover that old habits die hard. Though texts present readers with elastic, non-linear chronotopes, many secondary-level educators continue to address these works in conversation with students as though they are static, flat, and essentially similar to the real one readers occupy when not immersed in storyworlds. However, teachers can now draw upon the ideas of William Nelles, Marie-Laure Ryan, and others when developing methods to enable readers to explore important story/discourse distinctions. With the help of narrative concepts and visual re-presentations of discourse, we can offer students – especially those whose first language differs from that of the instructor – strategies for mapping a range of classic, surprisingly complex American literary texts and non-literary but highly involved issues and concepts. This essay thus presents the results of efforts to help students demonstrate and deepen their understanding of texts such as

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I. Introduction

During the 2010-2011 academic year, I had the good fortunate of serving as a Fulbright Roving Scholar in Norway. In my tenure as a tongue-tied American, I was able to visit forty secondary schools (or, "videregående skoles") in over thirty-five cities throughout the country. During these visits, I gave numerous presentations – all in English – and while doing so I field-tested lectures and workshops that I hoped (and still hope) would eventually become chapters in a book on incorporating narrative theory into English-education curriculums. More specifically, when delivering my lessons and lectures I employed narrative-theory based teaching techniques that invited the Norwegian students to map literary texts and social and political issues in order that we might discuss these texts/phenomena in their second language without dumbing down the level of discourse. Then, this past fall, I returned to the US and my dual role as an Associate Professor of English and a content-area supervisor of English Education students; in this split-capacity as scholar and pedagogue, I have noted with a now-heightened sense of concern having returned from my time abroad a pronounced kind of stasis, or inertia, that tends to enervate our language-arts curriculum and that threatens to render our secondary-
level English classes inconsequential. But, before getting into the details of this discovery, it is appropriate in this particular context to start with a story.

Earlier this spring semester, I sat hunched in the back of a fifth-grade classroom in a Minneapolis middle-school, where I pecked away at my laptop in an effort to provide one of my student teachers with feedback on her language arts lesson. During a segment of small-group work, I found myself studying the posters, student work, and announcements that paper-mâché’d the walls and windows. Expectedly, I spotted the familiar list of classroom rules, the inspirational prints (including the one with the rock climber hanging from a cliff), the familiar black-and-white, laminated posters of writers, and the almost omnipresent set of literary terms, each one defined in black font against a white background. These terms included, as one might guess, Plot, Setting, Character, Theme, and Point of View. Later that afternoon, again sitting near the back of a classroom – this second time in a central-city high school with larger desks, larger students, and considerably more chaos – I once more studied the learning environment, noting nearly the identical decorations, admonitions, and posters from earlier in the day. There I had yet another opportunity to learn from the walls about Plot, Setting, Character, Theme, and Point of View.

I was not, unfortunately, surprised in the least at having noted the redundancies in decorations and, one might guess, the curricular objectives on my students’ lesson plans. Having taught over the course of the last eighteen years everything from 5th grade to graduate school, and having spent nine of the last ten years of teaching a methods course designed for elementary reading specialists as well as education students training to work as middle and high school English teachers, I have noted repeatedly a striking lack of progression in the American language-arts curriculum. When it comes to learning about various facets of literature in particular and narrative in general, students in the United States are being taught roughly the same literary concepts and interpretive methods in second and third grade as they are senior year of high school and sophomore year of college. Our students thus reside in a critical world that ended prior to the birth of such important theorists Mikhail Bakhtin, James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, and Marie-Laure Ryan, at a time when Gustav Freytag’s pyramid (1863) still reigned supreme and "embedding" was likely banned in most Southern States.

We do not, to be sure, see this lack of progression in other disciplines such as math or science, wherein lessons on the water cycle, for instance, give way to courses on chemistry and ecology or lessons dealing with basic addition and subtraction become the building blocks for
trigonometry and advanced calculus. What is more, the lack of development tied to language arts is no way in keeping with the complexity of texts and topics our students in English and language arts encounter as they get older. Still, a close look at how we often approach language arts instruction in grades from 5-12 suggests that many of the more advanced approaches to literature-centered instruction take the form of longer, more complex books, not more involved, intricate methods for engaging them.

Accordingly, in light of this relatively recent realization, my goal is now to discover and to develop ways to elevate the work that my student teachers and others in secondary-level English classes are doing in their respective lessons on literature. Specifically, I hope to make available to high school and perhaps middle school instructors rigorous and yet student-friendly narrative theory and terminology. Doing so, I strongly believe, will serve to enliven their classroom discussions, eliminate some of the redundancies in language-arts curriculums, and, most importantly, empower their students to demonstrate and deepen their understanding of a wide range of texts, including everything from Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” to sitcoms such as Arrested Development (Fox, 2003-2006) and Community (NBC, 2009-present).

With these goals in mind, I will in this paper focus on a few notably applicable theories central to narrative-based pedagogies, paying particular attention to frame-theory, storyworld theory, and a one-question heuristic that has proven to be remarkably effective when working with English-education students. In so doing, I readily acknowledge that this focus on narrative-based instruction represents yet another instance wherein, to quote James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, "the vortex of narrative theory" has effectively pulled within its "ever-broadening range of subjects for inquiry" those pertaining to pedagogy at levels ranging from fifth grade through higher education and beyond (2). Certainly, this iteration of the narrative turn comes at a time marked by a sense of urgency, when increased emphasis on standardized testing threatens to stultify our pedagogies and prevent the kind of responsiveness that will allow us to keep up with the postmodern world(s) our student readers inhabit, many of which are as spatial as they are linear.

II. Transitioning from Standardized Instruction to Narrative Theory in the English Language Arts Curriculum

Because we as teachers often teach in much the same way that we were taught – regardless of how much the world, the students, and the texts in question have evolved – it is
essential that we begin by isolating the roots of the problem, meaning the reasons that many instructors continue to cover the same concepts using the identical terms and strategies and, in so doing, avoid working into their methodologies more sophisticated techniques. (One can easily find evidence of this propensity when surveying methods textbooks and online teacher resources.) And while torpor in standardized education is certainly as much a side-effect of politics as it is wooden pedagogy, it is likewise tied to inherited, standard assumptions about literature, meaning what it is, exactly, and how it is most effectively taught.

Certainly, with the exception of relatively recent textbooks in keeping with Deborah Appleman's *Critical Encounters* and Tim Gillespie's *Doing Literary Criticism: Helping Students Engage with Challenging Texts*, most English-education resources enjoin students to approach literary texts as if they were *either* a-contextual and a-historical (to enact New Critical readings, in other words) *or* just as likely, to engage them as though the works under investigation faithfully represent recreations of reality, scenarios so veraciously similar to the actual world that one is best served using an anthropological or sociological approach. In the former situation, literature teachers commonly require students to delineate the relationships between and among the point of view, setting, and theme; in the latter, textbooks and teachers invite readers, for instance, to "Consider how the protagonist's race and gender undercut her efforts to get an education and find a job." In both contexts, the focusing questions and prompts often require readers to view texts as *either* essentially separate and distinct from reality or sufficiently, if not fundamentally, similar to it. Importantly, neither theoretical approach – and there are numerous critical methods under each umbrella – insists that students make the all-important story-discourse distinction as delineated by Seymour Chatman in his 1980 edition of *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. In consequence, students almost invariably enter storyworlds (Pavel, Ryan, Herman) without taking into account the many layers of discourse, or, to borrow a term from Gerard Genette, "paratexts" through which they pass (3). And, it should be noted by the teacher, each layer – or diegetic level – in a narrative beyond those paratexts specific to text's publication constitutes tremendous potential for class discussion and student engagement (additionally, those tied to the contexts of its publication can likewise be sources of shared insight). Hence, disregarding all such narrative levels and focusing instead on the story as something other than the innermost frame in a multifocal palimpsests means that students miss most, and in some cases, all of the richness of the text as a dialogic and revelatory event. And, almost as conspicuously, many instructors in these
interpretive communities likewise miss out on opportunities to enable our students to experience
fully – both emotionally and intellectually – the story, discourse, and the interpretive act/event
that includes these entities as well as the students, classroom, and wider, enveloping contexts.

Focusing on the nested frames, or embedded layers, of a narrative world and, in
particular, the sometimes fine distinction between the inset storyworld and the extra-diegetic
strata associated with the narrative’s discourse allows students to comprehend not only what
the story means but, as importantly, how it does so. To this end, I invite students in my
American literature survey courses to return repeatedly throughout a discussion to the question,
"Who knows what when?" This question, when directed by readers at events in the narrative as
well as individual statements or even single words or phrases, allows the reader to build on their
familiarity with such elements as plot, setting, and point of view while helping them identify the
spatial, layered aspect of the text. In essence, posing and pursuing this inquiry spatializes the
text and the entire dynamic event connected with it. Doing so, moreover, provides a means of
pushing back from the work – almost literally getting some perspective on it as a time/space, or
chronotope (Bakhtin 84-85) – and gaining a more objective out-look on the narrative world and
all of its layers, or frames, as understood in the broadest sense by Brian Richardson and other
theorists whose work is included in Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and
Frames.

Undeniably, most teaching techniques work against this effort to gain perspective. Many
elementary-education reading specialists train teachers, for instance, to model proficient reading
for their students by repeatedly pausing and posing the seemingly similar but essentially
different question, "What will happen next?" (Radinsky and Padak, Bauman, Beers and Howell,
Forsten, et al., and Frank et al.). This predictive line of inquiry tends to situate the reader
squarely within the story (as opposed to the narrative), looking either from within the
consciousness of a participant narrator or from a focalized view only slightly above or behind it;
either way, the reader is – when following the teacher’s example – willing herself to wear
blinders and remain immersed within the seemingly open-ended time/space of the participant,
naïve characters. "Who knows what when?", in contrast, insists readers are both inside and
above, or outside of, the primary diegetic level simultaneously. Hence, readers experience the
kinds of emotional experiences (mainly suspense and empathy) common to fiction and the
intellectual thrills that attend making interpretive connections and seeking insights through
analysis from a place within a wider, enveloping frame; the latter are the kinds of connections
commonly lost on the characters, the narrator, the implied author, and, unfortunately, the traditionally-trained student-reader.

As a case in point, we can look at how teachers and educational texts commonly handle the teaching of two classic 19th-century American literature texts, Washington Irving’s "Rip Van Winkle" and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Orthodox methods regularly reduce the texts to a supremely simple, often didactic children’s stories with little, if anything, in the way of narrative complexity. Not surprisingly, students experience these works in much the same way and, in turn, write them off as a familiar, predictable tales with little in the way of historical relevance or intellectual density.

III. May the Conventional Study Guides and On-Line Resources RIP

Here are a few standard questions taken from an on-line teacher’s resource page for "Rip Van Winkle." Versions of these questions – and, in many instances, these exact prompts in this particular order – can be found in numerous places on the internet. Almost without exception, each set of questions guides the reader toward a particular interpretation, one that sets aside any consideration of the many and highly instructive frames that encase and inform the inset-story and, by extension, the overriding interpretation.

1. Even though he was a failure as a farmer, Rip Van Winkle was a success as a human being. What were the most praiseworthy qualities that he possessed?

2. In what way does Irving’s portrayal of Dame Van Winkle help to illumine Rip’s character? […]

5. When Rip returns to his village, he learns that Dame Van Winkle has died and that his fellow Americans liberated themselves from English rule in a revolutionary war. What do the war and the death of Rip’s wife have in common in terms of how Rip will live the rest of his life?

6. Although "Rip Van Winkle" is a fictional tale, it presents truths that can teach the reader. Write an essay that focuses on the truths presented in the short story. ("Cummings Study Guide")

Focusing on how Rip was an alleged "success as a human being" and on the implicitly problematic, unappealing nature of Dame Van Winkle’s character (in contrast to Rip’s more "praiseworthy" one), discourages readers from analyzing the characters in their actual narrative contexts. This, in turn, tends to prevent thoughtful readings of the scene involving Rip’s return to
town after the Revolution. Guided (and perhaps goaded) by these kinds of questions that ignore the narrative's complexity, readers tend to conflate the war with Rip's wife and, in so doing, search for transcendent truths that they can extrapolate from the scene, truths they can and are encouraged to apply to their own lives, as indicated by these prompts:

3. Write a short essay (or a paragraph or two) that uses personification and/or other figures of speech to invest with a personality the natural surroundings where you live, as Irving did in "Rip Van Winkle."

4. If you fell asleep today and awakened 20 years from now, what questions would you ask the first person you saw?

But these guides and the search for meaning outside the text that they encourage an accurate reading by insisting one move her attention away from the text so as to draw upon personal schema when trying to understand it. Accordingly, students are not likely to realize that the putatively axiomatic interpretation of the scene when Rip returns to the village after the American Revolution misses the mark. Suggesting that one can easily detect the nub of the theme when studying this scene – having been primed to do so by the above questions and writing activities – the summary thus states,

At this point in the story, Irving's main theme begins to emerge: Although wrenching, radical changes are sometimes necessary to move society forward, such changes must not eradicate old ways and traditions entirely. Real, lasting change is an amalgam of the old and new. New builds on the foundations of the old. There must be continuity. [And this is represented by Hudson], an Englishman, yes, but his association with his overthrown country does not mean the values he represents must die with the revolution. ("Cummings Study").

This is a tenable interpretation if one sets aside any consideration of the discourse and, by extension, the many intersecting, overlapping contexts, or narrative levels. However, paying attention to these interpretive layers, or frames (as opposed to the above questions and prompts) results in a more interesting, engaging, and precise reading, one that reveals that everything – politics, culture, and, most notably, the people – has changed not for the better but instead for the worse as result of the Revolution. Further, this narrative-based methodology – as opposed to the implicit conventional one tied to the "study guide" – likewise facilitates interpretive experiences that, while accentuating the text’s surprising multifariousness, empower rather than insult student readers as critics. Here is how—
The diegetic tale tied to the character of Rip Van Winkle that takes place in a small East-coast village between 1756 and sometime shortly after 1776 occupies a place within a set of concentric contexts that should inform and deepen one’s analysis. Moving from the inside out, we have

(1). The world of Knickerbocker,
(2). The realm of the narrator who found the Knickerbocker papers,
(3). The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon (a close look at the diction and tone of the text suggests that 2 and 3 are not the same),
(4). the level of Washington Irving, a popular figure with a public persona at odds with his private one and a man as in love with British authors – especially Sir Walter Scott – and smitten by all things quaint, arcane, and Old World.
(5). Next we have the 19th-century critics searching for a first, best truly American writer who set his American stories against an American backdrop and wrote them for American readers to celebrate American history and American culture.
(6). These critics thus establish the context, or frame of reference, for subsequent readers and, most notably, for those teachers inclined to promote a narrow and very American reading of the inset, intra-diegetic story.

Finally, there is the outermost frame, one that potentially envelopes close readers and teachers/critics who consider all of the above when interrogating not only this story but the many and illustrative subsequent interpretive events. These readers might likely approach the scene in question involving Rip and his return to town by asking, “Who knows what when?” It reads,

There was, as usual, a crowd of folk about the door, but none whom Rip recollected. The very character of the people seemed changed. There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquility. He looked in vain for the sage Nicholas Vedder, with his broad face, double chin, and fair long pipe, uttering clouds of tobacco smoke instead of idle speeches; or Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, doling forth the contents of an ancient newspaper. In place of these, a lean, bilious-looking fellow, with his pockets full of handbills, was haranguing vehemently about rights of citizens—election—members of Congress—liberty—Bunker’s Hill—heroes of ’76—and other words, that were a perfect Babylonish jargon to the bewildered Van Winkle.
It is essential for students to note the diction, the point of view, and, most importantly, the tone in this passage. Told initially from a focalized perspective within the frame – or the inset level – of the implied narrator who knows nothing of the existence of Irving, the critics or the subsequent readers, the viewpoint shifts subtly by way of free indirect discourse to Rip’s perspective. The opening statement, "There was," and the aside, "as usual," plucks like a string the line or frame linked to the narrator. But then the statement, "The very character of the people seemed changed" clearly belongs to Rip. Jumping out, or up, again in the next line to another level in the set of nested frames, the reader watches him in the time/space of the scene searching in the present for familiar, friendly faces. Instead of finding them he finds what the reader understands and Rip does not as their American counterpart, embodied in one person, "a lean, bilious-looking fellow, with his pockets full of handbills" who is "...haranguing vehemently about" a series of what the syntax reveals to the reader (though not Rip, of course, or even the narrator) are a series of talking points put in the mouths of those who, like Rip, do not likely understand them, as they are "perfect Babylonish jargon." Trapped not only in the past but also deep within the center of the layered discourse and at the center of a Russian-doll-like storyworld, Rip remains "bewildered" and oblivious about the significance of what has happened while he was away.

Interestingly, so do most readers, especially those who fail to consider when navigating this storyworld the actual words used as well as the enveloping, influential realms specific to (1) Washington Irving the expatriate, (2) the 19th-century critics in search of an American author, and (3) the many teachers and pedagogues living downstream from these individuals. But, as Richard J. Gerrig makes clear in Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading, this need not be the case. Readers can and should be able to experience the immediacy of the story and the layered complexity of the narrative. Due, in part, to the "impressive range of demands authors can put on readers’ ability to monitor who possesses what information at what times," we discover to our dismay that once we begin to read for these "knowledge dissociations" that "authors can multiply layers without making any purposeful effort to confound the reader (Gerrig 144-145). Put another way, there is a paradox at work here: learning to recognize narrative levels – though it may seem to require higher-order cognitive skills – actually makes interpreting texts easier rather than more difficult; and, further, it makes reading more enjoyable because one comes to appreciate when prompted to do so the
privileged place she enjoys in relation to the other agents in the narrative, most of whom are relatively oblivious.

IV. Adventures in Teaching *Huckleberry Finn* with Narrative Theory

First among Catholic, second among public, and third among independent schools, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* remains one of the most commonly assigned texts in the American cannon (Applebee 310). Yet despite this popularity and durability, Twain's *Huck Finn* – not unlike Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" – is exceedingly difficult text to teach well for a number of reasons, not the least of which are these: first, students have often already absorbed facile, under-theorized interpretations as though through cultural osmosis; second, teachers (and the materials that guide them) generally approach this work as though it is a playful yet benign bildungsroman that speaks (through Huck) metonymically – and through the story allegorically – to issues of race and class in the 19th-century; and, third, many instructors and students alike imaginatively navigate the world of Huck and Jim without simultaneously appreciating it as an elaborate and highly dynamic set of nested frames, frames that, again, reach from the realm of characters out to that of the contemporary reader. In consequence, most miss a tremendous opportunity to meet Samuel Clemens nearly face to face on a level above or outside those of Huck, Mark Twain, and subsequent readers and critics.

Two passages in particular from the novel offer glimpses into the layered nature of the novel and how a narrative-based approach to teaching it can work; they likewise represent those places most commonly misunderstood or underappreciated as a consequence of focusing primarily – if not exclusively – on the story rather than more broadly on the discourse. The first comes in between paratexts, at the point when most readers are passing unawares through layers or, "Thresholds of Interpretations," to borrow once more from Genette, like one might walk through a series of doors into an labyrinth. First, the reader encounters a title that conjures up a specific genre, that of adventures; next a parenthetical "(Tom Sawyer's Comrade)" embeds this adventure story within the wider context of a prior one; on the heels of this comes the "Scene: Mississippi Valley" and the "Time: Forty Fifty Years Ago." In this direct and yet equivocal manner, Samuel Clemens leads the reader right into a seemingly real place in an inexact, literary time. In essence, he has walked readers into the recesses of the time/space of a story as well as a narrative. As though speaking in code, he then introduces the author of the story, "Mark Twain," and that of the enveloping narrative/discourse, "Samuel Clemens," the
former in bold, foregrounded font and the latter underneath it in smaller type. In truth, Samuel Clemens has by the end of the title page, made available to readers a wonderfully involved series of stacked stories, at the center of which sits the extraordinarily naïve Huck, speaking from his place within both the storyworld and the narrative to the implied reader, or "receiver" – meaning, the "narrator's fictional immediate addressee" (Jahn 443).

One remarkable and almost postmodern aspect Huck Finn pertains to the specifics of this "diegetic narration," wherein "narration is the verbal storytelling act of a narrator" (Ryan 13). As I make sure to point out to my students, inset, embedded speakers are not supposed to be cognizant of their limited perspective. They are not supposed to know, in other words, that they are in a story being authored by someone else. But Huck, it would appear, does. He is American literature's answers to Tristram Shandy. He acknowledges at the outset that he lives in a narrative, stating, "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but that ain't no matter. The book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth mainly." Ironically, even this manifestly transparent, metadiscourse statement (Bal and Tavor 41-42) constitutes a kind of red herring, a bit of misdirection that turns the reader's attention both outward and inward at once. In this regard, it tricks the reader into pushing back from the inset story just far enough to notice Twain but not sufficiently distant from the time/space of this narrative event to note Clemens, the novel's puppeteer occupying an (ad)vantage point outside the boundary containing the focalizing speaker and (circum)inscribed reader (Ryan, "Stacks, Frames" 873).

To help students become aware of their place(s) in the narrative versus that of Huck and others, one can simply pose the question, "Who knows what when?" After identifying the characters/agents in the larger interpretive narrative, meaning the complete set of "stacks," "nested frames" (Ryan 873-880), concentric structures, or embedded narratives (Bal and Tavor, 35) – depending upon your metaphorical preference – one can call attention to "The Notice" and any number of other places in the discourse wherein a reader can detect evidence of these frames and their respective boundaries. It states, "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be persecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. By Order of the Author." This warning, it should be noted, comes after the title page and prior to the frame containing Twain's "story" of Huckleberry Finn; in other words, Twain the implicit author (Booth) and Huck the diegetic character do not know of this warning. Ironically, those readers who unwittingly occupy the inset narrative
time/space inside Clemens's location and above or outside Huck's are not likely to realize that they reside in a violent, grave place where the stakes for getting an interpretation correct are extraordinarily high. Huck cannot be expected to know this, nor should Twain, given his place in the set of nested frames that constitutes the narrative. But other readers can and should, and perspective comes from close reading and from an awareness of one's privileged place both inside and outside/above the narrative's concentric stacks or frames.

Two teaching techniques can help students become aware of where they are in the narrative and how this location in the text's time/space(s) provides them an (ad)vantage point from which they can see/understand what is lost on Huck, the implied author (Twain, in this instance), and customary readers and critics (including, most famously, Hemingway). The first involves helping students to map the narrative in a manner that accounts for the many intersecting, often overlapping, frames. There are numerous examples of this kind of literary cartography, including the original (or, at least, most famous) by Chatman that begins with the "real author," transitions to and thru the "narrator" and ends with the "real reader," (as cited in Shaw 151); several more involved versions designed by Ryan, a few others in more cognitive narratological vein by Jahn, and, most recently, those included in a book edited by David Hyerle dedicated to this type of undertaking. And although each of these methods for mapping can be useful when helping students visualize and thus truly comprehend narratives, from my experience it works best to introduce and model the idea of tracing the various boundaries and then, in turn, allowing the students to design their own illustrations, most of which end up being far superior to my own and, in many instances, even some of the ones noted above, at least in terms of their value for the students).

The second teaching technique, which builds on the first, entails putting the one-question heuristic to students, asking simply, "In this scene, given the construction of the narrative and in light of what has happened in the narrative to this point in the plot, who knows what?" Looking at their maps that locate the least knowledgeable participants involved in the interpretive event on an innermost level and the more perceptive ones on the outside, students can literally see how the narrative works. They can, in turn, begin to comprehend more fully such concepts as irony and theme, as the former is something literally outside the purview of the characters and even many of the first-time reader and initial reviewers.

Pressed for space here (so to speak), I will not go into an exhaustive reading of that most famous and illuminating scene when Huck wrestles with what is commonly understood as
his crucible moment in Chapter 31 regarding whether to send the letter Tom Sawyer to tell Miss Watson where Jim was and what he had done. Suffice it to say, most readings of this – save for a particularly perceptive one propounded by Sacvan Bercovitch – originate in and conclude at a place squarely situated within the narrative rather than from a place above it. They fail to account, in essence, for the extra-diegetic author (Samuel Clemens), his warning, the historical context or, interestingly, the actual tone, characterization, and substance of the story. As my students often discover with the aid of their illustrations and our shared line of inquiry, Huck does not, and perhaps cannot, know that he is an ignorant, racist product of an ignorant, racist society; he does not therefore realize that his choice to tear up the letter and "go to hell" reveals that he believes in his heart that he is doing the wrong thing, not the right thing. He believes that society is right, that the laws are good and just, and that he is bad. He likewise believes, even at this stage in the novel – my students have noted with exasperation – that Jim deserves to be enslaved because he is black.

Readers occupying a place squarely within the narrative – meaning those students who negotiate the novel without the advantage of a spatial perspective – must (and commonly do) perform interpretive gymnastics to save the character of Huck from himself, often arguing that his decision demonstrates his essential goodness. To defend this interpretation, one must ignore nearly everything Huck has done to that stage in the plot and nearly everything he will do after this alleged turning point, including aiding and abetting Tom Sawyer's unspeakably gratuitous torturing of Jim on the Phelp's farm. To counter and complicate this customary reading, one simply needs to help students to step back and view the event within its cultural, historical, interpretive, and diegetic contexts, or frames. From this position, readers can resist Twain's Siren-like, syntactical charms that come through the consciousness and endearing dialect of Huck.

Not surprising, given how well the simple question and the more involved and yet complimentary task of mapping can work when it comes to analyzing and discussing literary works that camouflage their structures, these same strategies function exceedingly well when with narratives explicitly built around a frame or frames. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Joel Chandler Harris' *The Uncle Remus Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings Trilogy* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* all represent good examples of such texts that lend themselves well to these narrative-based teaching techniques, the latter by Ellison being one of the best.
Asking, for instance, throughout the reading of *Invisible Man* (1952) "Who knows what when?" while insisting students sketch the various time/spaces helps readers to separate the homodiegetic speaker from the protagonist (who resides in the relatively recent past specific to the time/space of the narration); it likewise allows students to identify the implied author of the "Introduction" for the 1980 edition and to separate him from the author of the original 1952 edition. This awareness of one's place in the context of the unfolding interpretive event enables readers to develop analyses and arrive at understandings before the characters, the narrator, and even, in some instances, the author of the first edition does. For example, the reader who is emotionally invested in the unfolding experience of reading – if she is likewise a critic with objective perspective – will experience tension in the middle third of the story regarding what is concealed within the briefcase that the unnamed protagonist lugs through the story-world, while the critic/reader will know what it is and what it means long before both the primary character/protagonist and even before (or better than) the subsequent narrator. It is on a lower-frequency, after all, that the implied author speaks to the implied reader, who resides both in and outside the narrative frame. It is a frequency too low, it would seem, to be heard by the characters, or the receiver.

But, surely, some of the thorniest and yet most rewarding texts to teach are those that conceal their outermost frames, something *The Adventures of Huckleberry* does artfully (yet obviously). One such commonly taught and subtle work is Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In the narrative's exposition, the speaker establishes the scene using a blend of free indirect discourse, limited and omniscient narration, and a reliance on particular, concrete details. In the process, the reader drops in and out of slight but important frames, or time/spaces, within the text's topography (Bal 51-57). It states, dripping with irony, "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." This ostensible aside locates the reader by way of focalization in or near the grandmother's consciousness at a point in the story when she is looking ahead. A student familiar with narrative frame-theory and relevant terminology – when pressed with the question, "Who knows what when?"—can speak to this line's significance by noting how the text employs a nuanced mix of perspective and free indirect discourse to produce prolepses and, more evident to casual readers, irony.

This is exciting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the students can express and discuss what they intuitively appreciate about this passage during a
follow-up discussion. It is also thrilling because this type of advanced reading puts the students in a fortunate position once more in relation to the narrative. A naïve reader, like the grandmother and the other characters, does not know the implications of this statement; and, thanks to O'Connor's cagey public persona, even many critics and teachers likewise get trapped on the inside of the outermost interpretive frame.

V. Conclusion

While this brief survey addressing how narrative-based teaching techniques can help students analyze and discuss such canonical texts as *Huck Finn*, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and *Invisible Man* to some edifying ends, postmodern works represent even more potentially rewarding venues for this type of narrative-based teaching. This is because conventional pedagogies seldom do work well when one is engaging what Brian Richardson describes as nonmimetic "varieties of temporal construction" (47). And, it should be noted, this is a fact not lost on most students, many of whom effortlessly inhabit and perform playful, post-structural worlds on a daily basis when watching contemporary sitcoms, playing video games, inhabiting hypertexts, and even taking in an hour of two of "reality TV."

Marked by such features as intertextuality, pastiche, dissonance, depthlessness, decentering, hybridization, and fragmentation, these postmodern storyworlds seldom, if ever, keep separate their nested and embedded contexts. Instead, they blur lines between the narrative and reality, and in these ways challenge readers and viewers to distinguish characters and their diegetic realm from the extra-diegetic contexts beyond the liminal edge of the page or screen. In these instances, the problem is not necessarily that students cannot or do not understand these texts; the problem is that they often lack sufficient terminology and strategies to engage and discuss them. Familiar terms such as Plot, Character, Point of View, and Setting fall short of what one requires to work with and on these texts. Hence, to insist, in essence, that students employ these fairly broad and inexact concepts when analyzing something along the lines of *The Matrix* or NBC's *Community* is to hand a person a socket set so as to equip him or her to work on an iPad or smart phone.

In closing, I hope to one day sit in the back of a classroom and during a break in the chaos look up on the walls around me and see terms such as "focalization," "homodiegetic narrator," "prolepsis," "deixis," "fabula," and, of course, framed narrative. (And, yes, I could not resist using a hook-and-return frame for the structure of this essay.)
Works Cited


http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/Winkle.html


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