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Incorporating One's Own Literary Criticism into the Curriculum: The Teachable Essay via John Updike's Short Stories

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When so few university graduates in the world are going to become literary critics professionally, I have as a lecturer asked myself whether it makes sense to require college students of English to write literary criticism. I quickly remind myself that I am not someone who believes that the purpose of higher education need primarily be 'practical' to be valuable. The practical (the applied, the professional, the marketable) aspects of a bachelor's degree can and often do occur downstream of the degree itself. Even philosophy majors get jobs because various kinds of organizations value their capacity for abstract thought.

But generally speaking, literary critic isn't an occupation. It does not appear in employment advertisements. Those of us who are literary critics tend to work or aspire to work in university settings, not out of them. We become literary critics because we are lecturers and professors of English or of other languages, and we understand that conducting research about the genres, texts, and authors we teach is integral to our discipline, an expectation of scholarship. So we write without pay for academic journals, and, for small financial returns, we edit collections and produce monographs for university presses and commercial publishers. Only those of our students who go on to the postgraduate study of literature and then into academic careers are likely to write any literary criticism at all over the course of their lifetimes.

And so it is that, without a career path of literary criticism in mind, many undergraduates around the world choose to study literature and, in Europe, to study what is sometimes departmentalized as philology, encompassing disparate branches of textual analysis including linguistic and historical. Those of us in

classrooms who teach these students share a consensus that the serious, sustained analysis of literature, under whatever programmatic heading it occurs, sensitizes and broadens the mind to the varieties of human experience, and to the fictive and poetic expression of that experience, to such a great and beneficial extent that it hardly requires justification.

But of course it constantly requires justification, which is why Martha C. Nussbaum published her forceful, influential book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* in 2010 in the hope that policy makers, governments, school systems, and families around the world would place renewed value on the long and short term benefits for individuals and for societies of university disciplines that prioritize wide reading across languages, literatures, the arts, history, and philosophy. Her central thesis is that a citizenry humanistically versed and informed is better able to preserve its core values of freedom and self-determination than a citizenry focused exclusively on economic growth. In June, 2021, President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins, a poet himself, made similar, impassioned claims to the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities as reported in *The Irish Times*. His words offer insight into the current state of Irish university affairs as relate to the encroachment of market forces, the attendant erosion of courses in the arts, and the “inexorable drive towards a utilitarian reductionism that is now pervasive” (O’Brien).

For the readership of this present volume, [*Contemporary American Fiction in the European Classroom: Teaching and Texts*](#), the study of literature as a discipline of the humanities hardly requires defence by reference to Nussbaum, Higgins, or anyone else. Its premise presupposes a regard for the value of deep literary and cultural exploration. However, whether those of us engaged in classroom teaching should require our students to compose critical essays about culture and literature -- essays in particular, with their traditional structure of narrow focus and incrementally substantiated claims -- does warrant examination and should have a rationale. Otherwise, we are merely practicing a kind of

habitual pedagogy resulting in a status quo: ‘it’s always been done this way,’ so, ‘Class, here comes your next choice of essay topics.’

It has been my experience since arriving to Ireland from my home country of the United States in 1993 that Irish students who choose Arts Degrees are eager to study American literature. My travels to continental countries for teaching exchanges, including France, Spain, and Germany, have been easy to arrange because there too, American literature is popular. Attendance is high when I arrive, and the students are receptive. American fiction, which in much of the world has the benefit of familiarity arising from the pervasive influence of other forms of American cultural production such as cinema and television, is not a hard sell to students of literature in Europe. However, assignments requiring learners to conduct even limited research and produce critical analyses of works of literature, whether American or not, are generally experienced as arduous. In Ireland, students in higher education tend to be native speakers of English, but no matter their mother tongue, many young people do not find writing easy, especially in formal contexts. Nevertheless, owing to social media, they are accustomed to expressing their opinions freely and volubly, if not always cogently. In recent years, some of my students have resisted the incorporation into their assignments of secondary sources, for instance, because they prefer to proffer their own perspectives on the readings I assign, anything from nineteenth-century texts centering on ‘The Woman Question’ to twenty-first century fan fiction: Generation Z knows its own mind. This preference for the ‘personal opinion’ suggests one urgent reason why professors and lecturers of English should continue to require today’s students to write literary criticism, especially research-informed literary criticism. Otherwise, they may gradually eschew the value of due diligence in arriving at positions. Since an American literature class would be ironically un-American if it failed to encourage freedom of expression, I welcome dissent and willingly grapple aloud and Socratically with learner

reluctance to engage in wider reading and to include critical reference material in assignments. But then I proceed.

The essay assignments I design are not unusual. They typically require students to read a primary text, locate and read some secondary sources about that text, and then write about it incorporating textual evidence, critical material, and informed but original thought. Classroom discussion is a part of this cycle. Short stories are good primary texts because they are manageable. If students are expected to draft and revise a thousand words about a short story, they are unlikely to be overwhelmed as they might be by the narrative expansiveness of a novel. An essay of modest length on a fiction of modest length is an academically worthwhile endeavour, however compact, because it demands the summoning of vocabulary to express value judgements related to the usual literary variables of aesthetics, form, theme, import, and context. When an essay assignment further demands reference to secondary sources, even just a couple, it will by definition require engagement with other perspectives, with, that is, the perspectives of scholars who are learned on their subject matters.

In my classrooms, I have made myself one of those scholars, one of those sources of secondary material. In other words, I opt to exemplify for my students what literary analysis looks like when it is taken out of the ephemeral conversation of the classroom and applied to paper. I provide them with my own literary criticism. Instructionally, this move allows them to observe me first as a talker, and second as a writer; first as one who thinks aloud, second as one who puts thoughts onto a page. They note that my casual conversational style is demonstrably honed to a much more exacting register of discourse to meet the requirements of the published academic essay, where every word counts if it is to be persuasive.

John Updike's Maple stories, which chart the dissolution of the marriage of Joan and Richard Maple, provide readable, relatable short prose fiction at the levels of plot and character. What undergraduate students early in their college

careers are inclined to do when asked to write about a literary text is describe how it makes them *feel*. Their impulse is to respond emotionally rather than to adopt a critical distance. So-called affective criticism, as we discuss in class, is dismissed by some schools of thought as fallacious (the affective fallacy), but is respected by others, such as Reader Response theory, which regard it as interpretatively valid. Even this much pre-consideration of what constitutes a legitimate approach to the analysis of a literary text is unfamiliar territory to most new students of literature and will open up discussion about what it is that criticism should do, or can do.

Updike's widely anthologized short story "Separating" (1975), which revolves around the announcement of Joan and Richard Maple to their children that they will soon divorce, offers college readers a poignant rendition of a familiar and emotive experience, marital breakdown in the home. When given a choice of texts to write about, many will choose this one even in Ireland where divorce has been legal only since the 1990s. The story's collection of characters includes the four Maple children of varying ages of adolescence and young adulthood at disparate stages of development toward independence. John, Judith, Dickie, and Margaret are manifestly American in their attitudes of rebellion, sophistication, emotional effusiveness, and defensiveness. From a cross-Atlantic distance, they prompt both compassion and derision in somewhat equal measure. Students need little coaxing to discuss the Maple children and to write about them in an unmediated way. Their opinions simply flow. So to nudge them toward more mediated ways of analysis, I offer them an article I wrote in 2020 for *The John Updike Review*. It juxtaposes "Separating" against an essay written by John Updike's son, David Updike. David Updike's account called "Summer 1974, in Fiction and Life" indulges biographical curiosity about the marriage and separation of John and Mary Updike that inspired the story (that inspired all of the Maple stories, which were published over an eighteen year period), and allows students the affective *feeling*-experience of reading that they desire. David

Updike expresses the anxiety and confusion he remembers from that time period in his family's life. His personal tone helps to draw students into this secondary source material on an emotional level. My article, called "Writing and Well Being: Story as Salve in the Work of (More than) Two Updikes" about David Updike's essay, which I offer next, gives them a first glance at what deliberations on a literary text look like when they are gathered up by someone they know (me), sequentially ordered, rendered objectively, not emotionally, and presented in an intellectually driven manner. As we move in class from the story "Separating," to the essay by David Updike, to my own article, we deliberately and perceptibly increase our critical distance.

We move, in other words, toward the mediated approach, toward opinion informed by secondary source material. We then begin to ruminate on why we might so methodically explore a literary text. What can literature tell us about "the world and the word," as I often ask, so as to suggest that literature can say something about society and / or something about itself, its own verbal constructedness. Broadly put, we can 'use' literature to examine ideology by considering its subtext, or we can examine literature for its interior qualities, its formal aspects, by looking at its arrangement: at the orchestrated, nuanced ways that the twenty six letters of the English alphabet interact with each other on the page to produce a compelling, aesthetic whole. In terms that scholars recognize, and as I direct my students now to recognize, we can behave as New Historicists or as New Critics. Or we can behave as both.

An earlier Maple story called "Wife-Wooing" (1960) offers fertile ground for either approach. Its internal features are nearly poetic, with passages like this:

What soul took thought and knew that adding "wo" to man would make a woman? The difference exactly. The wide w, the receptive o. Womb. In our crescent the children for all their size seem to come out of you toward me, wet fingers and eyes, tinted bronze.

Three children, five persons, seven years. Seven years since I wed
wide warm woman, white-thighed. Wooed and wed. Wife. (1066)

The story's verbal richness seems to beckon examination through a New Critical lens with that school's focus on intrinsic textual features. But I opt with my classes to examine it first through a social lens, looking at its underlying assertions about American family life, so that I can encourage an ideological reading. Here again, I offer my own critical work as an example. I provide my students with a short article I published in 2013 in *The Explicator* called "Romancing the Stone Age: John Updike's 'Wife-Wooing' and the Naturally Occurring Nuclear Family," in which I argue, through textual evidence, that in this short story John Updike is implying that what we call "the nuclear family," with its private property and exclusivity, is not only traditional but natural. His suburban household setting, which locates the young family seated on the floor in front of their living room fireplace with a take-out meal that the husband "wrested warm from the raw hands of the hamburger girl in the diner a mile away" (Updike 1066), resembles popular conceptions of "prehistoric man" grouped around a camp fire. My essay traces the elemental, primal aspects of the story, its linguistic suggestions of the stone age, to suggest that Updike is offering an essentialist understanding of male and female gender roles. In the historical context of American society during the sexually tumultuous 1960s, I conclude that through "Wife-Wooing" Updike is ratifying "the nuclear family form as the form for all seasons" (227 Norton).

My line of reasoning and its resting place is entirely open to debate, which occurs in the classroom and has been most fruitful when students locate textual evidence to contradict my conclusion. Some have observed that Updike is merely being ironic in his presentation of these mid-century 'Flintstones,' a reference to the popular animated cartoon that has found its way into box office cinema and global merchandizing. Well considered student counterpoint is always a teaching

triumph, and of course I have no wish to convince my students of my argument, only to show them what my writing persona ‘sounds like’ when making one. In this “Wife-Wooing” lesson plan, I aim to show what an ideological reading does: it seeks to uncover cultural assumptions so that we can observe which ones a literary text is disputing and which ones it is affirming. An ideological reading is resistant, in other words. It wants to expose subtext and discern that subtext’s socio-political operations on the reader.

We next examine a different excerpt from “Wife-Wooing” through a New Critical lens. We observe its internal features such as symbolism, metaphor, alliteration, assonance, and intertextuality. John Updike produced opulent prose fiction. He was a celebrated stylist. Here, the first person narrator-husband in “Wife-Wooing” ruminates:

There is a line of Joyce. I try to recover it from the legendary, imperfectly explored grottoes of *Ulysses*: a garter snapped, to please Blazes Boylan, in a deep Dublin den. What? Smackwarm. That was the crucial word. Smacked Smackwarm on her smackable warm woman’s thigh. Something like that. Splendid also to feel the curious and potent, inexplicable and irrefutably magic life language leads within itself (Updike 1066).

Updike’s verbal playfulness within playfulness in this passage, especially given its Irish intertextuality with *Ulysses*, is useful to me in my Dublin classroom to draw learner attention to the richness of language and to the ever present option of non-resistant reading. Pleasure and reward, we discover, can be found in well-wrought writing even in abeyance of any search for hidden commentary on power relations in society. So we ‘unpack’ (a term I use frequently) this passage to demonstrate to ourselves that we can be alert to ideological considerations, such as gendered objectification, without getting waylaid by them. We can note our own social conditioning, note the ideological undertow of what we are reading,

and then begin to observe aspects of the text that achieve rhythm, seduction, intrigue, and, if we wish, moral messaging too. To read in a way that suspends moral or ideological interpretation is not to compromise ourselves as free agents. As real human beings, not subject to authorial depiction, not subject to representational restriction, we have choices.

Our students should understand these choices. They are approaching literary study at a time when social justice occupies centrality in public discourse, a time when racism, sexism, euro-centrism, and Ameri-centrism are commanding unprecedented levels of interest and analysis both inside the academy and out of it. If they can set aside a mandate to read ideologically, just momentarily, they will be better able to observe how fine literature achieves its artistry. Therefore, if my students choose to approach their essays with attention to the ideological undertow of their selected texts, I offer validation. If they choose to approach their essays with attention to the intrinsic features of their selected texts, I offer validation. But if they produce work that is purely affective, with only token reference to secondary sources and an unrefined critical approach, I become, well, ‘critical.’ As an educator, I feel certain that exacting tasks, whatever they may be, are good for us over time. My requirement that my students consider the nature and value of secondary sources prior to analysing a literary text offers them initiation into procedural criticality, a mind-set essential to good essay writing. It discourages them from having purely emotional reactions to the literature they are assigned. And perhaps over the course of their careers, which are unlikely to be in literary criticism, their experience of evaluating analytical approaches before proffering opinions will have sufficiently practiced them in collecting points of view before expressing them.

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