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## Two Roads Diverged: IAAS @ 50

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## Two Roads Diverged

Sue Norton, Technological University Dublin

For a little over two decades, I have been teaching American literature and other subject matter in an institution of higher learning with a technological orientation. Unlike those who study English in most universities, my students are not undertaking single or joint honours degrees in English or in literary studies, per se. They are on programmes in other disciplines, often combined with a modern language.

When I arrived to Ireland in 1993, I began teaching American literature first at University College Cork and then at University College Dublin. In 1999, I secured a permanent role in the Dublin Institute of Technology where I began to fashion my subject matter expertise into curricula that would be meaningful to students on degrees that were in languages, business, tourism, journalism, public relations, and combinations thereof. My role has morphed in various ways so that over these twenty-one years I have had the chance to work with an assortment of student cohorts, including Erasmus, in what is now Technological University Dublin.

I have always been satisfied that I accepted my whole-time offer of employment in 1999 in the DIT. When I started my M.A. in American literature in 1987 at Rutgers University, and then continued with a PhD in UCD starting in 1994, I had assumed I would be embarking on a career in an English Department somewhere. But when I found myself a lecturer with permanency in a School of Languages in an institute of technology, I did not regard my career path as digressive. Instead, I perceived the students I would now work with as standing to benefit from literary studies, and I anticipated they would be receptive to explorations of the fictive, poetic, and rhetorical facilities of language, not only ‘the practical.’ My experience has borne out this expectation.

Nevertheless, in the DIT I was in a new kind of environment, a kind of environment in which I had no background. Since 1982, when I started my undergraduate degree in English at Seton Hall University, I had been in the realm of liberal arts and now I had entered this new realm of ‘applied’ areas of study. My office space was on the same corridor as the School of Culinary Arts’ bakery where students sold their day’s assignments, cakes and scones. The National Optometry Centre was two floors up, and opticians in training sought staff and students for eye exams. Those enrolled in these and other programmes could take language modules as options, but the flagship programme in our School of

Languages was, and remains, the IBL, the Degree in *International Business and Languages*. DIT prided itself on being “one step closer to the real world.” In my liberal arts mind, how could graduates “apply” themselves, or inhabit “the real world,” without a grounding in light verse?

Today’s Technological University Dublin takes as its slogan ‘Infinite Possibilities,’ and as an educator, I respond now as I did then: literature expands the possible. Currently, I teach a yearlong course called *American Vantage Points*. It begins with Whitman and ends with Updike. I created it for our degree called *Languages and English Studies*. But before I brought this strictly American literature module into existence, I was regularly folding American texts into my other modules on diverse programmes. I have used Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” to exemplify the elements of plot in *Creative Writing*. I have used Marina Keegan’s essay “Even Artichokes Have Doubts” to help final year students target application letters in *Writing for Professional Purposes*. I have used the poetry of Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams to examine connotative language with Erasmus students in *English for Academic Purposes* and in *Literature of the English Speaking World*. I have long included former *New York Times* columnist Anna Quindlen’s essays wherever they made sense, such as in *Rhetoric and Composition* and in *Grammar for Journalists*. In September of 2020, I will begin teaching a course called “Back East: Roots and Routes from Whitman to Wolitzer,” which will be an option on several programmes.

For the most part, my students experience American literature in small doses and sometimes only in incidental ways that are strategic on my part. I am superbly positioned to introduce them to writers and writings that they probably would not meet otherwise. Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* resonates with undergraduate students of all stripes simply because they live with the rest of us in a consumerist society.

Given my diverse cohorts, I have found that approaches to literary texts are often best kept straightforward. In the programme called *Languages and English Studies*, I introduce theory and criticism in conjunction with the texts themselves as I would in any university English department setting. But in the other programmes, those that are more ‘applied,’ I tend to orchestrate close readings that allow students to note the observable features of the text and to appreciate its innovative and engrossing aspects of language. For instance, excerpts from Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) offer gripping material that is even more compelling when discussed alongside representations of blackness in Childish Gambino’s 2018 music video “This is America.” For many students, finding the

language to express their own visceral responses to estranging plots and images is a broadening exercise in articulation, a learning outcome in itself. The move from text to subtext is an exciting one, but it can wait. I agree with Cori Ann McKenzie and Scott Jarvie who argue in their 2018 article “The Limits of Resistant Reading in Critical Literary Practices” that requiring students to read through “critical lenses” is an expression of “*our will*” (2). Our good intention is to give them “the tools of critique so they can liberate themselves by reading the word and the world” (2). This is why we introduce theory and specific critical approaches designed to expose a text’s loaded messages. However, we do so at the expense of imaginative possibilities. We might instead resist the urge to take up the “scythe of critique” (2) directed at adjusting social norms in favour of engagement with the surface of a text, its syntactical patterns and lexical choices. We might, in other words, allow students the pleasure of the text.

So while I could of course introduce Toni Morrison’s stances on blackness, whiteness, and the literary imagination to our reading of excerpts from *Native Son*, and I often do, sometimes I just allow Bigger Thomas to represent himself without recourse to Wright’s declared intentions or to Morrison’s trenchant analyses of cultural hegemony. In this way, my students have the chance -- the freedom -- to be thrilled by words and to unpack ideology only if that is what they would like to do with them.

For a long time, I did not regard myself as an Americanist. After I arrived to the DIT, my portfolio broadened so much that I came to understand myself as a generalist. The kinds of teaching I was doing, and still do, take as a principal objective the immersion of my students in good things to read. The discipline of English Studies has within it many areas of specialisation, but it does not have one called Written Word Scholarship. That would be tautological. It would also describe what I find myself to be, a scholar of the written word. I am of course an Americanist too, but at the end of any day, I hardly notice whether the repertoire of materials I have drawn from was or wasn’t American. I only notice that my students thought new thoughts prompted by our texts and our talks.

### Works Cited

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Sue Norton is a lecturer of English in Technological University Dublin. In 2018, she co-edited *European Perspectives on John Updike* (Camden House) with Laurence W. Mazzeno. They are currently working on a collection called *Contemporary American Fiction in the European Classroom* for Palgrave and recently collaborated on the article “When Literature Scholars Write for General Readers” for *The Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (Univ. of Toronto Press, 2019).

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