Doing Theory: Words about Words about "The Outsiders"
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Doing Theory: Words about Words about The Outsiders

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Words
I had little use for critical theory until I met up with S. E. Hinton—or, rather, until I read The Outsiders (1967) with students. Since most of them knew the story (either through their own reading or the movie), my challenge was to find a way of using the book that enriched their enjoyment and appreciation, rather than simply repeating it.

Which is half of the story. The other half is that I had grown dissatisfied with the perfunctory ("since it’s March this must be Julius Caesar") literary road-trips that it seemed my role as English teacher to lead. I didn’t want my students simply to read a book, I wanted them to use it in the construction of their own meanings and in the refinement of their own thinking. The Outsiders, for the reasons enumerated above, seemed the right place to start. The only problem was I didn’t know how.

For help I turned to critical theory, which had made such a splash in the graduate courses I attended by night. Surprisingly, a quick perusal of my textbooks turned up what I was looking for. Only I didn’t find it in the newest wave of post-postmodern multisyllabicism. I found it in an earlier and more readable text—though one no less significant for its contribution to the field: M. H. Abrams’ The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (1958).

Words about Words
Defined broadly, literary theory is the field of study in which the criticism (the appreciation and understanding) of literature is itself criticized (or discussed): “Words about words about words,” as Murray Krieger (1988) has described it. Educationally, it can be understood as a body of expanding knowledge wherein the analysis and appreciation of literature is broadened to include increasingly higher and more diverse levels of abstraction. Literary critics who once wrote rather restrictively about “literature,” for example, now commonly discuss rap music, music videos, and the relation of daily life to popular culture and political power.

Abrams’ contribution to this tradition was to suggest a heuristic for distinguishing among perspectives from which works of art have been approached over the history of criticism. Noting that works of art have been seen in relation to the universe, the artist, the audience, in isolation or in comparison to other works, he offered the following diagram to clarify these relations:

According to this scheme (echoed in the discourse theories of James Kinneavy [1971], James Britton [1975], and others), critical approaches to literature can be distinguished on the basis of the particular relation they emphasize. Criticism in the...
first half of this century commonly viewed a story or poem as the expression of a writer’s life and experience; however, the structuralists and New Critics of the fifties and sixties rebelled against this view to stress “internal requirements of the work itself” (Abrams 3).

In the postmodern tradition of responding to a text with a text of my own, I have turned the purpose of the diagram on its head—finding it more useful in my secondary classes as a generative tool than an interpretive one. That is, whereas Abrams posited the diagram as a heuristic, an aid in the understanding of criticism, we use it in my classes to “do” criticism ourselves by writing about literature from the perspective of each of the approaches. This gives us more to “do” with *The Outsiders* and has proven a powerful catalyst for expanding the analysis we bring to bear on a text and increasing the use of higher order thinking skills (HOTS) in my classroom.

**Words about “Doing” Criticism**

Working with students, I begin with the first three perspectives, describing them as follows:

1. **Mimetic approaches** in which a book is evaluated in terms of how well it represents one’s experience of aspects of life or “the universe.”

2. **Pragmatic or rhetorical approaches** in which a book is evaluated in terms of how well it effects what we assume to be the author’s desired response from the audience.

3. **Expressive approaches** in which a book is evaluated as an expression or extension of the artist who wrote it.

This triad is applicable to a wide range of young-adult fiction, notwithstanding that the experiences of characters may be removed by time, class, geography, and race from the students’ own. Though I teach in rural Iowa, for example, students successfully criticize *The Outsiders* from each of the three approaches.

Before assigning a critical appraisal, however, I first ask students to describe each perspective in their own terms. I write these student-generated descriptions on the board, asking students to distinguish among evaluative criteria unique to each.

We also spend a great deal of time working through the levels of thinking identified by Benjamin S. Bloom (1956) and his colleagues as “comprehension” and “analysis.” Students discuss the motives behind the characters’ actions and the deterministic forces at work in each of their lives. Analytically, we chart the development, climax, and dénouement of the central conflict, and plot the growth and development of Ponyboy on a quest chart or “U curve.” The comparison of these diagrams is particularly significant as it encourages the acceptance of multiple points of view distinct from that which a student might otherwise bring to a book. This acceptance—a literal extension of the “decentering” process described by Jean Piaget (1926) and modified in the work of Lev S. Vygotsky (1962)—is key to the success of the critical appraisals. Students must accept the idea that distinct points of view can exist before they can attempt critical assessments from variant perspectives.

**Mimetic Approach**

Thinking at the “application” and “synthesis” levels should also be accomplished before students can work from the first approach and evaluate the novel in terms of mimesis or verisimilitude, its correspondence to aspects of life. Typically, I ask students to imagine that S. E. Hinton attended our school and wrote *The Outsiders* about kids in our community. How would the novel be different? In what ways would it remain the same?

Students respond to the above questions in journal fashion, looking back at the novel as they need to. Sally’s description of Soda is typical of the “transference” students enact to imagine these characters in our community.

As long as Soda continues to work at the gas station, people around here will like him, though they may not want their daughters to date him because he doesn’t have his diploma. He would probably be a clean-cut rocker and into heavy metal, but not the drugs. He’d still attract all kinds of girls. Because people knew his parents died they’d try to be understanding with him, but I’m sure he’d be considered a rebel.

When they have completed their descriptions, I ask students to compare their versions of each character in small groups. After we reassemble as a class, we discuss the differences they encountered in their group work, my goal being to move to a discussion of why different readers perceive and transfer the characters to our community differently. In this way (and without ever mentioning it), we broach the central concepts of another school of critical theory: reader response.
I assign the first critical appraisal the next day. The assignment I use looks like this:

A. Look back at three actions that Ponyboy takes in the book and explain whether you think these actions were realistic or "life-like." Examine each action in a separate paragraph. Base your response on your expert knowledge of what it feels like to be accepted by some groups and rejected by others, and what you imagine (or know) it would be like to have a close friend die.

B. Reread the section on the death of Dally (133–135). Is it realistic to think that the death of Johnny would cause him to seek his own death in such a way? Base your answer on what you know about his childhood and what we have said about physical and emotional pain.

C. Given what you have written in A and B above, how realistic or "life-like" is The Outsiders? State your answer in a brief paragraph.

Interestingly, while students at first tend to find The Outsiders "realistic," after considering three specific scenes they frequently argue that at least one is not realistic. Discussing the rumble that concludes the book, for example, Travis writes that

"When the Socs jumped out of the car and wanted to fight the Greasers, I don't think that is very likely to happen because rich kids like that usually try to stay away from trouble and try to avoid getting into fights unless they can gang up on somebody or unless someone else starts it and there is nothing that they can do to avoid the situation."

**Pragmatic Approach**

I introduce the second, or "pragmatic," approach by referring students to the passage in which Ponyboy states the purposes behind his telling of the story.

Suddenly it wasn't only a personal thing to me. I could picture hundreds and hundreds of boys living on the wrong sides of cities, boys with black eyes who jumped at their own shadows. Hundreds of boys who maybe watched sunsets and looked at stars and ached for something better. I could see boys going down under street lights because they were mean and tough and hated the world, and it was too late to tell them that there was still good in it, and they wouldn't believe you if you did. It was too vast a problem to be just a personal thing. There should be some help, someone should tell them before it was too late. Someone should tell their side of the story, and maybe people would understand then and wouldn't be so quick to judge a boy by the amount of hair oil he wore. It was important to me.

The actual assignment looks like this:

A. Assume S. E. Hinton's reasons for writing The Outsiders are the same as Ponyboy's. What two purposes does she want her novel to accomplish? Describe each in your journal.

B. How well does The Outsiders accomplish the goals you've described above? Write a paragraph about each in your journal.

C. On a separate sheet of paper, write a brief essay in which you describe Hinton's purposes in writing the novel and state how well you believe her purposes are achieved. You may use any of what you've written in your journal. Make sure you polish and proofread your essay.

**Expressive Approach**

I use the third or "expressive" approach by referring students to Jay Daly's biography of Hinton, *Presenting S. E. Hinton* (1987).

Read chapter one of the biography. When you've finished, write in your journal about Hinton. Does knowing about her make you like The Outsiders less or more? Which book, the biography or novel, does a better job of telling us who she is?

Because Hinton began composing The Outsiders while still a teenager, students find reading about her a natural extension of reading the novel itself. This heightens their awareness of her book as a
product of artistic aims and choices and challenges
them to think about the relation between an
author’s life and work. Indeed, our discussions
about whether The Outsiders can be read as an ex-
pression of Hinton’s acceptance of her father’s
death rank among the finest and most poignant
moments I have ever shared with students. A taste
of these discussions can be gleaned from Paige’s
essay. Interestingly, Paige, like Darry, helped to par-
ent her younger brothers.

S. E. Hinton also reflects part of her life in the book
by writing about how the Curtis kids’ parents had
been killed. She is really expressing what grief and
pain she went through as her father was dying. She
said that she was really close to her father and in the
book she tries to show the significance of a close
relationship with a father figure. In the book Darry is
the father figure and she shows that at first there is a
link missing between Darry and Ponyboy and then
she shows how their relationship becomes closer.

Words about Words about Words
By this point students have become articulate
enough with the triad to identify and evaluate ap-
proaches used by professional critics and book re-
viewers. I copy reviews for their analysis, or simply
ask them to turn their novels over. The paperback
cover to The Outsiders, for example, excerpts state-
ments from reviews praising the novel for both its
verisimilitude and its pragmatic value as a persua-
sive text.

What it’s like to live lonely and unwanted and cor-
erned by circumstance. . . . There is rawness and vio-
ence here, but honest hope, too.—National Observer

Written by a most perceptive teenager . . . it attempts
to speak for all teenagers who find it so difficult to
communicate to adults their doubts, their dreams,
and their needs.—Book Week

Most reviews of young-adult novels stress an as-
seSSment from at least two of the triad’s theoretical
approaches. A few consider each before stating a
final opinion. The Book Week review, for instance,
stresses the realism of The Outsiders, but to a lesser
extent it also alludes to its persuasiveness and the
manner in which the book is an accurate “expres-
sion” of Hinton herself.

After struggling with their own reviews, students
find it great fun to pick apart the work of profes-
sional critics in this manner. In so doing they fre-
quently give way to that greatest of teenage
temptations—the urge to point out the shortcom-
ings of adult thought. The temptation need be only
nudgingly encouraged and students will write an-
other critique, this one of the book review itself. In
this act they “criticize criticism” and come full cir-
cle as literary critics themselves.

When Words Fail
A situation eventually arises for which the initial
three perspectives of the triad are not suitable.
Someone will ask how to evaluate science fiction or
fantasy in terms of “realism” or “verisimilitude.” Or
a student will skip ahead and demand to know what
“being realistic,” bringing an audience to behave
or think in a certain way, or “expressing” the au-
thor has to do with the quality of a novel. Such
questions are not to be avoided: they indicate not
that the triad has failed but that students have
transcended it.

This transcendence could lead a class to con-
sider Abrams’ fourth approach: the evaluation of
texts without references to the universe, author, or
audience. This perspective may be best introduced
by simply raising the question of its feasibility: Can
YA novels be compared and evaluated in such an
objective manner? If so, how? Classes interested in
pursuing this approach could generate their own
criteria for such “objective” evaluation and compare it to any of the New Critical approaches popular in the 1950s and 60s.

But students need not use anyone else’s ideas in pursuing these issues— their questions alone can open up a world of possibilities for further discussion, thinking, and writing about literature and literary theory.

What, indeed, does verisimilitude have to do with a book’s quality? (And what does “realistic” or “life-like” mean? What is life that literature can be compared to it? If books imitate life, cannot life also imitate books?) Should the author’s intent be considered? (If so, where is the intent located? In the author, the book, or the reader?) Can a novel be conceived that is not an expressive extension of its author? (If not, are novels then limited to being expressive extensions of no one but the author?) And what of the current emphasis on reading as a mode of writing? That is, what happens to the relationship between author and audience when the text is considered an expression, not of the writer, but of the reader?

Words about My Words
By raising such questions, students address some of the most essential issues of literary theory. In so doing those who initially think of novels as self-contained come to see them as books that invite active engagement and response—texts about which they can create texts of their own. The path of theoretical questioning common to literary theory, moving as it does from order to chaos, may be unsettling for teachers. But the basic goal is a simple one: to “do” more with what we read and to think more about our thinking. Who could be better served by “doing” such criticism than secondary students? And who better to turn such theory into practice than secondary teachers?

After all, while college instructors may guide their students further along the critical path, no one gives more class time to the practice of criticism than secondary teachers. And certainly it is to our benefit that student inquiry in such activities manifest itself in the highest levels of thinking and, quite frequently, great intellectual joy.

Words about My Words

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Works Cited