Using Literary Criticism as a Strategy of Rhetorical Invention:
A Practical Guide to Writing About Literature

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Background

With a paradigm shift toward teaching of composition as a process rather than product over the last forty years, the field of composition studies has witnessed a renewed and increased interest in rhetorical invention. Although this term is often used interchangeably with 'pre-writing,' or 'pre-text' (Witte, 1987), rhetorical invention is a decidedly more inclusive and accurate term for two reasons. First, it suggests the complex interdisciplinary nature of writing, linking it to the broader context of rhetoric outside the domain of writing itself. Second, it reflects a high level of nonlinearity within the writing process, pointing to fact that its stages occur sequentially as well as concurrently with one another.

When the study of rhetorical invention first re-emerged from almost a century of obscurity, it attracted scholars and practitioners alike. The excitement was fueled by the hope that deliberate instruction in the strategies of rhetorical invention would immediately produce better student writing. A wide variety of approaches emerged, ranging from neoclassical to liberal, from highly structured to unstructured. There is, however, no general consensus about the effectiveness of particular strategies of rhetorical invention, and the results of disciplinary experimentation continue to vary as widely as the strategies themselves.

Current research reveals that the effectiveness of rhetorical invention may vary as a function of students' background characteristics, writing proficiency, and knowledge of discursive scripts appropriate for various types of writing. Teachers and scholars alike have argued that each strategy of rhetorical invention has its field of significance and may contribute differently to various types of discourse. For example, freewriting may be more effective for personal narratives than for argumentative discourse, while Larson's heuristic may be more appropriate for written argumentation than for personal narrative. Instruction in strategies of rhetorical invention is often based on the teacher's personal preferences and her intuitive assumptions about the contribution of these strategies to the overall quality of student writing.

The purpose of this paper is to (1) briefly discuss the advantages and limitations of popular strategies of rhetorical invention used in college composition courses; (2) provide a rationale for including literary criticism in the existing repertoire of rhetorical invention strategies; (3) provide an overview of

several paradigms within literary criticism; and (4) demonstrate how these paradigms can be applied to the interpretation of a short poem in a college composition class.

Structured and Non-Structured Strategies of Rhetorical Invention

Strategies of rhetorical invention that are generally taught in college composition classrooms can be subdivided into two major groups: structured and non-structured. Non-structured strategies are believed to free the spontaneous, intuitive, right-brain dominated writing. These strategies tend to provide very little direction for student writers' thinking and liberate the uninhibited inquiry. The most commonly known strategies within this group include freewriting, word associations, brainstorming, clustering, and webbing. The most obvious advantage of these strategies is that students focus on the expression of the content rather than the structure of their discourse or its formal grammatical properties.

Despite the popularity of non-structured strategies in composition classrooms, virtually all of them share serious limitations. First and foremost, they tend to facilitate good writing but appear to have little impact on poor writing. Likewise, they have been found to contribute more to the quantity of writing than to its quality (Hillocks, 1986). In general, these strategies provide an occasion for writers to articulate some pre-existing meaning rather than to create new discourse. Finally, non-structured strategies of rhetorical invention tend to activate those discourse plans that have already been established within the writers' knowledge modules. As a result, students feel inclined to produce the types of discourse with which they already feel comfortable (Matsuhashi, 1981). The implicit danger associated with freewriting is that student writers may never leave their "comfort zone" to engage in an active production of new knowledge.

In response of these and other perceived limitations of non-structured strategies of rhetorical invention, advocates of a more structured approach to the writing process offer the use of heuristics. Typically designed as a series of questions, they allow writers to explore the subject systematically and scientifically and provide clear directions for the exploration of the subject in student writing. Structured strategies include Larson's Heuristic, Burke's Pentad, and Pike's Tagmemic, to name a few. While they reduce the level of student writers' anxiety and uncertainty about the direction of their inquiry, they tend to create other issues. For example, highly structured strategies of rhetorical invention like Larson's heuristic direct writers' inquiry in such a way that other possibilities are often erased and assumed unimportant by the writer. This "censoring" function of heuristics puts them into a position of an authority that controls the writing process, because they impose the 'correct' line of inquiry. Not surprisingly, then, many student writers resist this additional source of

oppression in the classroom and resort to freewriting even when it is least effective for the type of discourse they strive to create.

Perhaps it is idealistic to expect that there could be a “silver bullet” approach to rhetorical invention, a one-size-fits-all strategy that could work equally well for personal narratives, argumentative essays, research reports, and whatever other types of writing students are supposed to lproduce. Perhaps rhetorical invention is indeed a highly idiosyncratic activity that can be invoked but not deliberately taught. Or perhaps what we usually call strategies of rhetorical invention fail to serve our composition students because they only function as techniques and fail to address the long term goals of writing. These and other considerations force teachers to encourage students to experiment with various strategies of rhetorical invention and try them out separately or in combination with one another.

Rationale for Using Literary Criticism in College Composition Classrooms

Considering that each of the described strategies has its advantages and limitations, this approach tends to produce good results in many writing situations, especially when students have sufficient background knowledge about the subject of their writing. However, none of the existing strategies of rhetorical invention was designed specifically for writing about literature. Literary critiques as a mode of discourse poses unique challenges to student writers, primarily because the majority of students lack a significant degree of exposure to literary criticism, and as a result, very few of them have developed scripts for the development of an effective literary critique. As a result, the majority of students have only a vague idea of the type of writing that they strive to produce when they write literary critiques, most of them employ critical reading strategies to literary texts.

Furthermore, there is compelling evidence that the majority of good writers are at the same time good readers. Literary criticism corrects this deficiency by bringing together reading and writing. Since literary criticism is “a predisposition for making certain uses of certain classes of [textual] evidence” (Begraune, 1984, p. 538), it appears to be a natural tool for helping students to practice meaning making in reading and writing.

Many composition textbooks acknowledge the fact that literary critiques pose unique challenges to student writers and offer brief introductions into literary criticism to reduce students’ anxiety. Authors provide information about various textual properties, including the tone, plot, imagery, symbolism, and so on. Clearly an application of New Criticism, this approach is certainly one of the possible starting points for the examination of a literary text. It invites students to read the text closely and become familiar with its formal properties using the terminology and jargon of literary studies. This approach continues to take center

stage in college composition classrooms, often ignoring the post-New Critical paradigms in the field of literary criticism and despite the fact that New Criticism is not the most productive way to think and write about literature. Nor is it the most exciting.

The field of literary criticism has witnessed a number of dramatic and radical developments since New Criticism enjoyed the peak of its popularity in 1960s. Postmodern and post-structural paradigms in the study of literature offer tools for exploring the deepest layers of textual meaning. They encourage scholars and student writers to examine the assumptions that underlie the production and interpretation of a text and the cultural practices that make the text possible in the first place. These dimensions of meaning making are clearly inaccessible with the New Criticism.

Post-structuralism and post-modernism have a liberating effect, because they "explicate the conditions and motives for particular ways of experiencing works and reporting responses" (Beaugrande, 1984, p. 539). In contrast with New Criticism, these paradigms provide tools for examining the interaction between a literary text and an individual student writer. Perhaps equally important is their value in expanding composition classrooms to include a broader category of non-literary cultural texts that range from a football game to a visit to a doctor's office. Applying postmodern strategies to reading and writing enables students come to realize that Barbie doll, prime time TV programming, and "words on a page reflect … [the same] ideology or value system" (Alcorn, 1987, p. 150). This knowledge enables students to shape their own ideas about the established structures of cultural and ideological practices as they unfold in literature and life.

Broadly defined, literary criticism in college composition classroom gives teachers the opportunity to practice "persuasion by proof rather than persuasion by seduction" (deMan, 1987). As students become more comfortable with applying various strategies and techniques to literary texts, the primary locus of power is likely to shift; the classroom is likely to become de-centered. And perhaps this is exactly what is needed in a composition classroom; some "local, provisional, messy pluralism may be what is necessary to provide composition studies with multiple senses of authority that are inclusive and heterogeneous" (Mortensen & Kirsch, 1993, p. 566).

Practicing strategies of detecting and questioning the textual authority enables students to acquire their own voices. As Harris (1987) noted, it is dangerous to assume that "writers already *have* a self somewhere, ready-made, that they merely need to make their prose reflect and express [it] (p. 161). Composition classroom is the place in which the self and voice are shaped, where they are challenged, revised, refined, and enriched. Students' critical reading and writing and their ability to change their perspectives while examining the authority of the text help them realize that their 'plural self" exists (Barthens).

Literary criticism as a discipline has been engaged in theory and practice of meaning making since antiquity and continues to accumulate fascinating means of guiding students' reading and writing. Its positive impact on the development of students' ability to engage in writing about literature is evident in the increased level of students' participation in classroom discussions and in their increased enthusiasm about writing.

The following section contains selected paradigms within the field of literary criticism that serve as important alternatives to New Critical approach. Each paradigm is introduced as a set of underlying assumptions that students can apply to their writing about literature. Each theoretical premise is followed by a brief summary of students' responses to a short poem "My Papa's Waltz" by P. Roethke.

New Criticism:
What the text says and *how* it says it.

- Literary texts are finished 'knowable' products;
- Interpretations are based solely on the properties inherent in texts;
- Everything necessary for understanding of a text is already in the text;
- The emphasis is on close, rigorous, and analytical reading;
- There is the correct reading of any given text;
- Tensions and/or indeterminacy of a text reduce the value of the text;
- Classical values and norms are to be maintained in literature;
- The text is approached empirically (the type of meter, number of lines in the stanzas, sound effects, syntax, tropes, imagery, etc.);
- The parts of a text are analyzed for their contribution to the overall meaning

Students' Responses to "My Papa's Waltz" from New Critical Perspective:

- The family is probably poor;
- The lines rhyme (ABAB), and this suggests some playfulness;
- Word choice is not characteristic of a child; the speaker is likely an adult reminiscing on his childhood;
- Grammatical inversion in the third stanza suggests the lack of coordination in the movements;
- Simile "I hung on like death" suggests a boy's anxiety;
- Violation of the rhythmic arrangement in the last stanza suggests that perhaps the intensity of the dance increased

Reader Response:
What the Text Means to Me.

- The separation between the reader and the text is minimal;
- The meaning of a text arises from the interaction between the text and the reader; it is influenced by the knowledge of the world;
- The texts are not written until and unless they are read, and there is no single correct reading of a text;
- An individual interpretation is based on the readers' 'identity frames' (Holland), i.e. on conscious or subconscious perceptions of their inner self;
- "Particular interpretive strategies are based on the reader's belonging to an 'interpretive community' (Fish, 1987);
- Though there is no single 'correct' reading of the text, the meaning constructed must be accounted for by the textual signifiers
- The goal of a reader is to capture the experience and not necessarily the formal limits;
- There is no single correct meaning of a text

Students' Responses to "My Papa's Waltz" from Reader Response Perspective

1. There is an abusive father in this poem:
   - Violent waltzing in the kitchen ("pans slid down")
   - The boy is intimidated ("hung on like death")
   - Not a single occurrence ("such waltzing was not easy")
   - "Mother's countenance could not unfrown itself"
2. There is a caring father in this poem:
   - Waltzing suggests affection and caring
   - passionate waltzing that the boy clearly enjoys ("hung on like death")
   - close and regular father-son relationship; the scene in the kitchen is obviously not a single occurrence;
   - the father and boy are just having too much fun, so the mother frowns

Deconstruction:

Why Does It Seem to Mean What It Means?

- Deconstruction is "an attempt to locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier, to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed" (qtd. in Sarup, p. 51)
- An effort is made to identify what has been excluded from the text;
- Cultural assumptions and practices are examined for their contribution to the gaps and omissions within the text;
- Alternative readings of a text could be just as possible and the most readily available interpretation;

- The ultimate understanding of the text is impossible, only the multiplicity of its various possibilities;
- The text always disappears into other texts;
- The reader's role is to examine what has been excluded from the text, to explore the cultural practices that make the exclusion possible, to reverse the seemingly reasonable interpretation, to turn the text "against itself" and show why its meaning is ultimately undeterminable;

Students' Responses to "My Papa's Waltz" from Deconstrucitonist Perspective

- The title suggests that the poem is about the father, but there is no other references to the father;
- We think we know that it is about the father, because the details paint a stereotypical male;
- The attire suggests that it is a male, although women were already wearing pants at the time when the poem was written;
- We cannot know for sure who the speaker's partner although we assume that it is the father;
- It is equally possible to assume that it is the mother who is "dancing" with her son;
- The scene is in the kitchen, so it is more likely that the mother would be there than the father;
- The poem was written in 1948, after the end of the Second World War, and it could be about a widowed mother's dancing with her son;
- It would make more sense if the mother actually waltzed her son off to bed, not the father;
- The gender of the speaker can not be determined: "could make a small boy dizzy" (boy's speech) or "could make [even] a small boy dizzy" (girl's speech)

Psychoanalysis:

What Fantasies Are Repressed and How Do We Know?

- "What draws us as readers to a text is the secret expression of what we desire to hear much as we protest we do not" (D. Schwarz)
- We approache literature as dreams and repressed desires;
- Psychoanalysis relies heavily on symbols (yonic and phallic);
- An attempt is made to examine sexuality of the characters, explicit or implied;
- One of the central concerns posed by psychoanalysis is the fear of castration or loss as the motivation behind the character's actions

Students' Responses to "My Papa's Waltz" from Psychoanalytical Perspective

- All information provided is sensory, as if the scene is a dream rather than reality;
- Father is definitely in the center, as if everything revolves around him ("my ear scraped the buckle");
- The boy intuitively expects that he'll occupy the father's central place in somebody's kitchen ("hung on like death");
- There is a sexual connotation of the positioning of the two partners;
- One of the most sensitive parts of the human body, the ear, is scraped by the buckle, as if masculinity hurts;
- The drunken father waltzes the boy off to bed. Is that why the mother frowns?

Feminism:

How the female is (not) represented in the text.

- "The world is represented from the male point of view, and it systematically forces women to choose: either they can imagine and represent themselves as men imagine and represent them (in which case they may speak but they will speak as men) or they can choose 'silence,' becoming in the process 'the invisible and unheard sex' (J. Jones)
- "The ability to argue, and even the capacity for articulate speech is not uniformly distributed in the population" (E. Schweikart)
- Female identity (physical, social, economic, political, erotic, etc.) is repressed and marginalized;
- There is a hole (lack) in the text where the woman could or should be;
- Women are represented as passive and mute (castrated male)

Students' responses to "My Papa's Waltz" from Feminist Perspective

- Fragmentation of the mother: we see only her dissatisfied facial expression;
- Her language, appearance, clothing, etc. are assumed unimportant and therefore excluded;
- She is marginalized even in the kitchen, which is traditionally her turf;
- "The pans slid down the kitchen shelves" is a symbolic representation of the insignificance of her world;
- Whereas the boy and the father act, she only reacts;
- She is the negative of the father, mute and passive;
- Her gaze of disapproval is clearly persistent, but she does not turn away or leave. Perhaps there is nowhere for her to go.

The benefits of using literary criticism in teaching of writing about literature in college composition courses include an increased level of student participation in meaning making and a deeper level of their engagement with a literary text. Literary criticism enables students to think about the authority in literature and life as they unfold within the legitimizing and prohibiting practices of their culture. Perhaps even more important is the potential of literary criticism to enable students to question their own assumptions and stereotypes as they guide and censor their understanding of literary and other texts. While some paradigms present a greater difficulty than others, students tend to become more willing to experiment in their thinking and writing after they are introduced to such paradigms as deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and feminism.

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