Literary Theorists, Hear My Cry!

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*The English Journal* is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

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A Teacher's Primal Cry

This is a true story. I have it tape recorded.

It is seventh-grade language arts, and we are reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor 1976). The class has nearly finished the book, and I am interviewing Chris, who is a fairly good reader. And as I do so, I can feel it happening again: I am on the set of *Saturday Night Live*, the nation is laughing, and I suddenly realize the joke is on me. (Every barb to the pedagogical brainpan has been numbered below.)

Teacher: What sort of guy is Mr. Morrison?

1 Chris: Big.

Teacher: Sure, but what about his personality? His traits?

Chris: He likes to crunch people.

Teacher: *(surprised)* He does? Why do you say that?

Chris: I don’t know. If I was big, I would like to crunch some people.

Yes, by now I know that it is definitely happening. And there is a roar of blood in my ears and a noose seems to be tightening around my corpus callosum.

Teacher: Okay. What did you think Mr. Morrison said to Uncle Hammer in the car? How did Mr. Morrison handle that situation?

2 Chris: I don’t remember.

Teacher: *(sharply, insistent)* Sure you do! *(regaining composure)* It is when Hammer was going to beat up Charlie Simms. He was upset when Cassie told him what happened in Strawberry when they went to the market.

Chris: Yeah. But I don’t remember Mr. Morrison doing anything.

Teacher: Well, the actual scene isn’t in the book, but it’s mentioned later. How do you think Mr. Morrison kept Hammer from beating up Charlie Simms?

Chris: By holding him down . . . and then socking him!

*Not!* I want to yell. Yes, it is definitely happening again and in my mind’s eye all of my students are Wayne and Garth yelling something about fishing me in.

Teacher: *(voice breaking)* Whatever gave you that idea?

4 Chris: Well you know Mr. Morrison probably doesn’t like Mr. Hammer.

Teacher: *(not able to hold it in)* But Mr. Morrison doesn’t even know Hammer! He’s never seen him before! . . . Are you confusing this with when Cassie beats up Lillian Jean?

3 Chris: Oh, yeah. I remember now. Cassie makes up with Lillian Jean, then Papa talks to her and Cassie decides to not be her friend after all.

There is a pause. I am trying desperately to collect my thoughts. And the nation is laughing and I am asking myself what it was I have been trying to teach these children.

5 Chris: Why are we reading this book anyway?

I imagine running off the set and towards a padded cell and in my mind I am running down the hallway and I get there and I lock the door with a slam and I let out a long and therapeutic primal scream.

But before I actually let go, I decide to try an experiment.

Teacher: Chris. What am I thinking right now?

Chris: You are thinking that you want to scream . . .
And just as I open my mouth to do it, the bell rings. And as the classroom empties I am wondering how in the world this student can read me so perfectly and not be able to read this book!

At that time I simply thought that my students could not infer from text and that they could not imagine from it. And I had no idea what to do about that problem... or about my blood pressure... or about what sounded like the laughter of Wayne and Garth somewhere deep in my mind.

**Literary Theory to the Rescue**

The first thing reading literary theory did was to provide me with a way of thinking about what I wanted students to accomplish.

Throughout our discussion, Chris was “responding” to literature. This is good, and for some theorists and commentators it’s an end in itself, but I say it’s not enough. Chris is responding to literature, but he’s not “understanding” it. As Robert Scholes has pointed out in *Textual Power* (1985), if you don’t work to read the text, then everything you do is looking in the mirror. Literature is better than a mirror; reading literature should be a unique and powerful way of knowing something new about yourself and about the world. Wayne Booth calls this “imaginative reversals of living” (1983); Kenneth Burke calls it “lived-through experience” (1957). By any name, this is the reading experience I want for my students. They cannot achieve it if they do not first understand what the author is saying to them.

In *Before Reading*, Peter Rabinowitz first makes the empirical argument that this sort of authorial

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reading is the way that people generally read anyway. Second, reading as an “authorial audience” is a necessary prerequisite to nearly any other sort of reading, especially those sorts of reading that “empower” the reader or “resist” the text (1987, 30). To Rabinowitz’s arguments I would add an ethical one: as Ludwig Wittgenstein puts it, you grant the correspondent his notation. In conversation, we try to understand what the other person is saying. To do otherwise would be limiting and solipsistic.

This is what I want to teach students: to read as an authorial audience. They can’t tap into the power of literature, or the power of other sorts of worthwhile reading, until they can do this. They cannot resist until they are aware; they aren’t empowered until they have some strategic control over their own reading process.

But how to do this? This is the second agenda that literary theory informed. In order to learn how to read authorially, students need to understand how authors use literary rules and conventions to communicate.

Jonathan Culler took the first pass at assimilating the French structuralism of theorists such as Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette to an Anglo American perspective. Culler asserted that the real object of poetics is not the work itself but its intelligibility. One must attempt to explain how it is that works can be understood; the implicit knowledge, the conventions that enable readers to make sense of them, must be formulated. (1975, 49)

As such, Culler shifts the structuralist focus somewhat from an emphasis on the systems inherent in literary texts themselves to the systems of interpretation used by the reader.
In a later work, *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), Culler recasts some structuralists, especially Genette, as semioticians, asserting that they pursue a semiotics of literature "which does not interpret works but tries to discover the conventions that make meaning possible." A semiotics of literature, Culler explains, needs the reader as the repository of "codes which account for the intelligibility of the text" (37-38). And this is the implied job of the literature teacher: teaching students how to become such repositories so that they can break and read the codes.

This all made me think of something a professor once said to me: as teachers, we need to make public those secret things that good readers do.

### Helping Readers with Theory-Informed Instruction

My study of theory helped me to identify the misreadings apparent in my interview with Chris. I will identify the numbered "misreadings" from the interview transcript, explain how theory helped me at least tentatively to understand its nature and how it suggested an instructional strategy.

1. **Constructing Meaning, Such as Character, from Text**

Many students, like Chris, are able to comprehend an isolated detail but not add various details together into a generalization. But as Umberto Eco asserts, "texts are lazy machines that ask someone to do part of their job" (1979, 214). Reading is a conventional activity, and authors expect readers to take notice of important details and add them together to get at their meaning.

Barthes’s very influential grammar of narrative was helpful in this regard. At the most basic level, a narrative consists of what Barthes calls nuclei. Nuclei are irreducible and irreplaceable units of plot and important associated information. A nucleus appears in one unit of text and relates directly to the story by anticipating future events, both chronologically and logically (1977, 94). When Mr. Morrison is introduced to the Logan children, their most salient impression of him is his physical size. When we find that he is there to protect the family from the night riders, future events are anticipated. Chris and his middle-school cohorts are adept at picking up information related to nuclear ideas. Chris therefore describes Mr. Morrison as "Big" and, anticipating his function in the story, describes him as physically powerful (so far, so good) but then stereotypically extrapolates a violent nature (not good, and not substantiated by the text).

As readers progress through time and the pages of the book, they should also be building, developing, modifying, and perhaps even reversing a whole set of concepts beyond the nuclear. These concepts would be expressed in generalizations, such as “Mr. Morrison is an understanding man and only uses physical force when provoked with lethal danger.” Such an idea is not idiosyncratic, since good readers would tend to agree upon the point. Nonetheless, these ongoing, cumulative concepts are located not in a unit of text, but in the reader’s mind, and have been triggered by what Barthes calls “indices.” Indices require the reader’s input and work.

So how could I help Chris read along indices, in this case help him build a personal, yet text-substantiated concept of character?

Character, like mood or the focalization of theme, is a construct that a reader puts together from various indications throughout the story. This “putting together” of indices is what Barthes calls “reading.”

To read is to struggle to name, to subject the sentences of a text to a semantic transformation. This transformation is erratic; it consists in hesitating among several names: if we are told that Sarrasine had "one of those strong wills that know no obstacle," what are we to read? will, energy, obstinacy, stubbornness, etc.? (1974, 92)

For students, the transition from reading indices to coming up with an abstracted character trait requires going through several stages of generalization. To help students generalize from indices, I took the suggestion of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan that “the construct called character can be seen as a tree-like hierarchical structure in which elements are assembled in categories of increasing integrative power” (1983, 37).

First, I provided students with references to character actions, descriptions, thoughts, and conversations. I then asked students to find three more details about the character that were suggested by the text, and finally to link two or more details into different unifying categories; for example, Mr.
Morrison's relations with the Logan family, or impressive physical acts. I stressed that details could be put into more than one category. I then asked students to generalize what the linkages communicated about the character. Lively discussion ensued from these activities as students added information from the text, argued about where details might fit on the "issue tree" and about what the details and various linkages meant. Some students made their trees into "mind maps" that pictorially depicted the branches of a character's personality. (See Figure 1.)

My interviews with students indicated that several things were achieved through this process: By providing references, I modeled how the reader pays attention to details and builds up inferences from these indices. Students then retroactively assessed what other information was important to building up a concept of character and worked with this information to reach some sort of generalization. Students like Chris, who had judged Mr. Morrison as violent, modified their assessment through the classroom discussions and saw how generalizations need to be built up throughout a reading and yet regarded as tentative pending additional information. The reader's new motto becomes, with apologies to Thoreau, "Modify, modify, modify!"

2. Filling It Up!

When Chris says that he does not remember the incident between Uncle Hammer and Mr. Morrison in the car, he is truthfully reporting that he has failed to fill a textual gap. Some gaps can be left alone, but others need to be filled.

Rabinowitz argues that authors use "rules of notice" to tell us (among other things) what a book is about. Middle schoolers know from the first chapter when the Logan children are splashed by the whites' schoolbus and refuse to accept the books inscribed "Nigra" that this book is about injustice and how to fight it. According to Rabinowitz's rules of "configuration," we ask "how will this be worked out?" Gaps in the answer to this question need to be filled. The configuration of the text demands it.

Barthes would point out that many gaps are filled with the information we build and extrapolate from indices. This is one reason reading along indices is so important. But other helpful ideas about gaps abound in Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1972). Genette explains that text-time and text-order do not necessarily reflect story-time or story-order. It struck me that this was the root of Chris's second problem.

Genette asserts that the greatest time-oriented difficulties for readers are posed by the notion of

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Figure 1

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duration, or what might be called “pace.” Duration in the “story” can be measured in minutes, days, or years, but this does not correspond to the length of the text devoted to it which can only be measured in lines and pages.

Genette sets up a norm, which he calls “constancy of pace,” in which there would be an unchanged ratio between story-duration and textual length (a time-space relationship), and then discusses two modifications: deceleration and acceleration.

Deceleration consists in devoting a long piece of text to a relatively short period of story-time. Deceleration is relatively unproblematic and is generally used to provide added information and emphasis about important story elements.

Acceleration is produced by devoting a short section of text to a long period of story. Acceleration includes summary and has a maximum speed of “ellipsis” which constitutes an omission where no text is provided for a particular duration of story-time.

Such is the case on the night Uncle Hammer leaves in his car to take care of Charlie Simms. We read that

just as the Packard roared to life, a huge figure loomed from the darkness and jumped into the other side, and the car zoomed angrily down the drive into the blackness of the Mississippi night. (Taylor 93)

This story line is accelerated at elliptical speed until late the next morning, when we learn that Uncle Hammer is back home and looks like he hasn’t slept. Stacey reports that “Mama said Mr. Morrison talked all night to Uncle Hammer. Talked him tired and wouldn’t let him go up to the Simmses” (100).

Some ellipses do not need attention. But rules of notice tell us that this one does; Big Ma and Mama worry aloud about what is happening. Students need to learn that such a textual rupture can actually be an authorial move emphasizing the scene’s importance. Attention is also demanded by rules of configuration; this omitted scene has everything to do with the story’s subject, fighting injustice.

Chris missed the invitation to fill in the ellipsis in a manner consistent with the provided information. Most students, during my interviews with them, acted surprised that they should even be expected to do so, and at a loss about how to do it. To make the invitation more enticing, I provided them with a series of quotes that might have been exchanged during the nocturnal conversation between the two men. I asked students to identify the speaker of each quote, put the quotes in a logical order, and then add additional quotes from each character. The arguments of the two men provide two answers to the authorial question about how to fight injustice, and the resolution of the scene fits the “thematic bundle” expressed by the text as a whole. By writing the scene, students were able to discuss character, review plot, and explore the omitted scene and its importance. (See Figure 2.)

### Filling the Gap

Uncle Hammer is furious when he hears how Charlie Simms pushed Cassie off the sidewalk and humiliated her on the main street of Strawberry. He storms to his car, shotgun in hand. But he can’t get away before Mr. Morrison jumps into the car. Though the text doesn’t show us what happened, make an attempt to reconstruct the scene in the car. First, identify the probable speaker of the following quotes as Mr. Morrison or Uncle Hammer. Then put the quotes in the order in which you believe they would have been said. Then add at least two more quotes from each character. When you are done, you should have a scene that could have happened in the car. You will perform your scene in front of the class with your partner.

**Are you itchin’ so bad to get yourself lynched and hung from a tree?**

**Where do you think you’re goin’ with this shotgun, son?**

**You know you’ll just be giving them an excuse to take the land.**

**They’ll think we got no guts, no pride, no nothin’!**

**Do you think my brother died and I got my leg blown away in their German war just to come back here and be treated like dirt?**

**Did the law help the Berrys? Do you think the law will help us? We gotta take it in our own hands!**

**The whole family needs you. Think of what you’re doin’ to them.**

**Remember what happened to the Berrys. Remember Sam Tatum!**

**You’re as bad as they are if you go doin’ this thing.**

**I’ll show them what it’s like!**

**They’ll just keep pushin’ us around if I don’t do anything!**

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After this exercise, I found that students were more able to recognize ellipsis, judge the importance of filling it, and more willing to do so. One student, Jason, said to me, “I used to think a story told you everything you needed to know!” All the students I interviewed for final conferences recognized the gap between Papa and Mr. Morrison’s departure to the Avery’s and the setting of the fire as an ellipsis. All of them were able to make text-consistent guesses about what had actually happened in the novel’s climactic scene.

3. Reading Text-Sequence as Story-Sequence

Chris mistakes the order of the information presented in the text as the actual order of the story and then imputes a cause-effect relationship to the mistaken order.

Genette’s work on time continues to be helpful in this case. In addition to duration, Genette also discusses the use of order and frequency. The two main types of discrepancies between story-order and text-order are flashback (analepsis) and foreshadowing (prolepsis). *Roll of Thunder* makes great use of analepsis, since the narrator Cassie cannot personally experience much of what occurs in the story. Therefore, other narrators must tell what happened previously, such as when Stacey tells about the robbery of the Barnett Mercantile.

This is also a case of what Genette terms intercalated narrative, in which different sequences are intercut and when a character who was the object of narration becomes a narrator. Both such disjunctures constitute a rule of notice, and the rule of configuration can only be preserved in such a case by the applied coherence of reader input.

Analepsis is also used for rhetorical effect in such instances as the interpolation of Cassie’s previous discussion with Papa into the story of her well-planned revenge on Lillian Jean. Here, Chris misreads this because he falls into Barthes’ narrative fallacy of post hoc, ergo propter hoc, erroneously believing that Papa’s discussion with Cassie caused her to give up her voluntary enslavement to Lillian Jean and to take revenge. As is the case with many narrative conventions, students need to be made aware of them. By learning how text-order is crafted, they can follow what is going on and be wary of the post hoc fallacy, thus avoiding it.

*Roll of Thunder* also makes use of prolepsis, as when Papa and Mr. Morrison predict the arrival of the night riders and when Papa predicts the outcome of T. J.’s trial. Again, this technique empha-
knowledge many rewarding texts will be confusing, inaccessible, or simply not as rewarding for them.

4. Interpretations That Violate Available Information

Both Barthes and Genette provide useful conceptions of reading in that they point out that the act is much more than simple comprehension of words on a page. There is work that must be done by the reader, and that work requires understanding conventions about how stories and their meanings are made.

All texts, as Eco has pointed out in *The Role of the Reader*, are open to some extent. But so are they closed. In other words, there is room in every text for personal involvement and interpretation—in fact every text requires it—but these interpretations must be made within the constraints set by the information provided by the text. “Every text, however ‘open’ it is, is constituted, not as the place of all possibilities, but rather as the field of oriented possibilities” (76).

It is typical for a text to be more or less closed, as the sender offers his addressee continual occasions for forecasting, but at each further step he reasserts, so to speak, the rights of his own text, saying without ambiguity what has to be taken as “true” in his fictional world. (37)

Reading, according to this model, is a progressive integration of new information provided by the author. Though texts provide information gradually, the reader is encouraged by convention to integrate this information from the outset. Reading then becomes a continuous process of making hypotheses, reinforcing them, developing them, modifying or completely discarding them in the light of new information.

This is a problematical issue for teachers. How far should students be allowed their idiosyncratic interpretations? I think theory provides a good answer: as far as the text allows.

At the novel’s end, students completed “Value Profiles” that ranked the values of different characters and the author. Top and low values were justified by examples built up from the text. Then the class was divided into teams for a debate. The debate was exciting, and texts were eagerly thumbed through and searched for evidence to both support a cause and undermine the other team’s. Such debates establish an ethic that personal interpretations are important and will be listened to, but that one is accountable for them. “Authorial understanding” carries the day.

5. Answering the Omnipresent Question “Why do We Have to Read This?”

Barthes asserts that use of narrative and response to narrative are fundamental human attributes. Keeping students from the fullest possible experience of narrative would be as negligent as depriving them of language itself. I believe this, and I believe that teaching literature is a worthwhile and tremendously important pursuit. I also believe, like commentators such as Eco, that what we read implies a complete world, and this world may be assumed to stand in some intelligible relationship to our own world. Reading a text can therefore help us read our own lives.

This is a point that needs to be made to students. Autobiographical writing before reading, perhaps about injustices fought in their own lives, can help them enter a text such as *Roll of Thunder* and see the author’s concerns not just as their own but as those of a wider world.

This is the great power of reading literature, and it’s why I have chosen to dedicate my life to teaching it. I thank literary theory for helping me to do it better and think more clearly about it.

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Works Cited


