

Roundtable 1

Playing Literature Like an Amateur: Collaborative Pedagogy in Introducing Literature to Non-Majors and the Hermeneutics of the Team

Jason Carney
Case Western Reserve University

I do not think of literature as a decided canon of artworks that expert professors curate. I understand literature as a special type of non-knowledge and as a way of relating to the world. For me, to study literature is not to pleasantly and passively bask in the aura of sanctified art, but it is to do something much more uncomfortable. It is to dwell in unresolved tension in the irreducible complexity of concrete human experience and to acknowledge what Keats termed the "negative capability" entailed in confronting core mysteries of things.

This "gnostic" quality of literature is what makes literature courses distinct from "episteme-based" science courses. In the context of a basic chemistry class, for example, we expect liquid hydrogen to consistently behave as we have observed liquid hydrogen behaving in the past. In a foundational STEM course, the "subject of inquiry" is firmly established. As students advance through the sciences from lower division courses to working in labs as doctoral students and expert researchers, the certainty that marks their earlier coursework vanishes. The instructors of introductory science courses raise students from ignorance to certainty in order to prepare them for what might be termed a state of "higher level uncertainty" that stirs wonder and motivates.

I do not think this is the process operative in lower division literature classes for non-majors, and I think there are risks entailed in approaching introductory or elective literature classes with assumptions that echo effective pedagogical praxis in basic science courses: in essence, in doing so, in prematurely demanding conformity to specialized literary critical discourse, instructors risk alienating non-major students by conveying to them a distorted image of literary studies as a field of "certainty" and "expertise." Outlining and offering strategies for evading this pitfall in lower division literature courses for non-majors is the subject of my brief position paper. By sketching some of my classroom experiences, I offer suggestions as to how we ambassadors of literature to non-majors can strategically "start" particularly lower division courses by leveraging a strategic "rhetoric of amateurism" that brings the instability haunting and productively animating our critical discourses to the foreground on the very first day.

Below I outline a brief collaborative activity for "estranging" the literary and bringing the social and rhetorical process by which certain texts are deemed "literary" and "subliterary" into class discussion. In this way, I show how we can prepare our non-major students for making their own determinations of the literary and literary value while at the same time honestly revealing to them the extent to which studying literature at higher levels involves participating in a wider collaborative process of ongoing and recursive interpretation. I call this process the "hermeneutics of the team." Ultimately, the goal of the activity I outline is to strategically motivate non-major "tourist students" of literature at the college level by setting up conditions for them to experience literature in an exciting and ultimately more intellectually honest and theoretically rich, but not alienating, way: literature is not a pre-established discourse that they must subject themselves to, nor is it, à la Bourdieu, a conditioned *habitus* of taste; it is, rather, a

socially organized consensus group constellating around discursive instability, an ongoing and open-ended discussion they can participate in driven not by knowledge but by the affective pleasures entailed in experiencing and "unknowing" the unknown together.

The Rhetoric of Scientific Expertise and Introductions to STEM

From my admittedly limited perspective, introductory STEM classes operate in accordance to a "rhetoric of scientific expertise," a rhetoric perfectly suitable and strategic in the context of the distinct project of science, but nevertheless unsuitable and discursively dishonest for introductory literature courses for non-majors. To begin to make a case for these largely speculative claims, I need to turn briefly to etymology.

What is an "expert"? The word "expert" comes from the late 14th-century Old French word "expert," which in turn derives from the Latin "expertus," the past participle of the verb "experiri," which means "to try, to test." Thus, the word "expert" and the related quality, "expertise," connote something like "a person who, after repeated tests and attempts, has come to a rich understanding or even certainty about a particular theoretical problem or question." In this view, expertise has a domesticating thrust. Expertise entails certainty, albeit statistical rather than irrefutable certainty. The unstable phenomena or issue the expert confronts is, through repeated engagements, stabilized.

Many assume all discourses operate this way. I do not think literature does. If any lesson survives the decline in postmodernism's stock, it is that language, and in particular the language arts, do not stabilize as discourses about them expand and grow, but rather they grow increasingly unstable and "overdetermined" in exciting and potentially liberating ways. One

might read and re-read every major utterance written about Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but the effect one experiences is not that the play has become domesticated or apprehended transcendentally but that it has become more complicated, a rich carnival of incommensurable and delightfully mingling meanings that can house queer, feminist, and historicist perspectives (and many more). Like chemistry, astrophysics, and biology, the more you apprehend, the more mysterious the discourse and theories become. But there is a major difference between distinguishing the discourses of literature and, say, chemistry in the admittedly narrow pedagogical context of introductory courses for non-majors: in chemistry, students new to the discourse require a level of theoretical certainty to approach higher level certainty; in literature, dictatorially insisting on a certain quality of unexamined discursive certainty and procedural regularity for non-majors risks squandering their goodwill by casting them as discursive outsiders and offering a distorted, alienating, and authoritative vision of our essentially "anti-transcendental" discourse.

The Rhetoric of Literary Amateurism and Introductions to Literature

I propose that the pedagogy of introductions to literature for non-majors should operate not in accordance to "the rhetoric of expertise" but in accordance to what I term a "rhetoric of the literary amateurism," a rhetoric that entails the first principle acknowledgement of the extent to which literary discourse precludes certainty and actually amplifies uncertainty. It should be not be the goal of these introductory classes to attempt to echo STEM courses by conveying sophisticated lexicons of formal structures, theoretical principles, or even basic literary corpus knowledge—narrow outcomes that risk squandering the goodwill of non-majors. Rather,

introductory courses to literature informed by the "rhetoric of literary amateurism" should authorize a diversity of "amateur" utterances. I propose a pedagogy of introductions to literature committed to cultivating a love of literature through "amateurism" in both its etymological and contemporary shades of meaning. The role of the instructor of the introductory literature course should not be to set students down a path toward narrow expertise in literary discourse, a goal more appropriate to upper division courses for majors and graduate level courses; rather, the teacher in the introductory course in literature for non-majors should function via "effervescent amateurism."

Like the other papers in this round table discussion, I make my case not through synthesizing the rich professional literature on pedagogy and literature—a task too broad for the length and nature of a position paper and the speculative enterprise it represents—but through leveraging my own classroom experiences as a graduate student teaching introductory courses of literature to engineers at Case Western Reserve University. But before turning in quasi-ethnographic fashion to my own classroom practice, let me bring to bear a final bit of etymology.

The "other" of the expert, the "amateur," has had the misfortune of being shaded with largely pejorative connotations of late. But this view of amateurism is a historical contingency, an ephemeral verbal configuration resulting from the historical and symbolic conditions linked to the "modern" economies driven and administered by expertise of the Anglophone people who speak and deploy this concept in their daily lives. But looking at this word through the lens of etymology allows us to exhume some of its older, more positive dimensions. "Amateur" comes from the French "amateur," meaning "lover of," which in turn derives from the Latin "amatorum," meaning "lover." Thus, in a more primitive, pre-modern register, to be an "amateur"

of a specific subject or vocation means to be a lover of it. This essence of the "amateur" is far from our contemporary understanding of "amateur," which connotes laziness, lack of specialized skill, shoddy work, and so on. But I think recuperating this older sense of the word in the context of lower-division literature courses for non-majors is useful, even authorizing, for such students as they interact with discursively specialized teachers and researchers. As "professors" of literature, we are "amateurs," in this primitive sense, and this is an identity we share with non-major students electing to take our introductory courses. Let me turn to an activity I have used in the past for productively revealing that point of confluence in the classroom.

Making Literature Strange on the First Day of Introductions

At the beginning of my introductory literary courses, I provide my students with a handout containing three passages, each without any accompanying contextual information and each marked with a number as follows:

1. Torches flared murkily on the revels in the Maul, where the thieves of the east held carnival by night. In the Maul they could carouse and roar as they liked, for honest people shunned the quarters, and watchmen, well paid with stained coins, did not interfere with their sport. Along the crooked, unpaved streets with their heaps of refuse and sloppy puddles, drunken roisterers staggered, roaring. Steel glinted in the shadows where wolf preyed on wolf, and from the darkness rose the shrill laughter of women, and the sounds of scufflings and strugglings.
2. The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, the yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes, licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,

- lingered upon the pools that stand in drains, let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys, slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, and seeing that it was a soft October night, curled once about the house, and fell asleep.
3. It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path. It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man.

After providing my students with these mysterious passages, I ask for volunteers to dramatically recite them. I ask that the rest of the class pay close attention to the recitation, noting any conscious or unconscious dramatic decisions in vocal expression and tone the reader makes. Afterwards, we discuss these specific choices. Because the passages are given to the students without any indication of formal genre, our discussion centers around issues of meaning and narrative. Where is this Maul? Are we to understand this fog as supernatural and intelligent? Perhaps it is a spirit? Or is the anthropomorphism here simply a dramatic effect? Who is witnessing this execution, and how does he feel about it? What passages convey his character and give us access to his psychological/emotional state? Is his representation of the "gait of the Indian" an unfair stereotype or an excusable aesthetic touch? At this initial stage, students have reported that this tense state of frustrating unknowing—in terms of literary genre and canonical

status—is strangely pleasurable and contributes to their unmediated experience of the language presented to them on the handout. The language offered to them in this unconventional way has become "strange" and therefore intrigues them.

After this initial discussion, I guide the conversation by inquiring of them which passage they preferred and why, specifically, did they prefer it. I suggest that their affective/emotional reactions to these passages is not mere degraded "opinion" but potentially useful data for interpreting and understanding the passages that have been made mysterious by their manner of presentation. Unlike some sophisticated English majors aware of theoretical controversies who are reluctant to share their reactions before being "tricked" by the instructor into professing their love of, say, a passage from a "low" or "popular" source, it has been my experience that non-majors in elected introduction to literature courses are quite comfortable and familiar with the discussion of their likes and dislikes.

Students have justified their preference for passage 1 because of the "eerie tone of 'otherworldliness' and 'antiquity'" it strikes. Students have defended their preference for passage 2 by praising the "beauty of the imagery" and the "lyrical quality" of the language. And students have preferred passage 3 on the grounds of the "psychological depth of the narrator" and its "realism." Although I am unprepared to provide concrete ethnographic data to substantiate this claim, I recall that these descriptions were utterances expressed by non-majors. To my mind, my reluctance as an instructor to frontload literary terminology or initially translate their discourse into a "professional" literary critical register authorized them to leverage their affective responses to these decontextualized passages in order to make acute observations about them.

As the students share their preferences, I make notes of the specific descriptive language they use to justify them. And then, using that same language, I inquire about the other passages. Does passage 1 possess a "lyrical quality"? Why or why not? Can someone argue that passage 2 evokes a sense of "otherworldliness" or even "antiquity"? Does not the richness of "detail" create an effect of "realism" in passage 1 as it does in passage 3? Is it fair to say that "psychological depth" or even "character" is lacking in passages 1 and 2? By taking up the descriptive language as interpretive tools—the "hermeneutics of the team"—students are able to see literary theory positively as an inviting activity unfolding in time and discourse rather than as an alienating, ossified, curated, and "cordoned off" corpus of complex philosophical concepts. The literary theory and formalism they deploy in this first class is the result of their collaborative effort. Highlighting this specific dimension of their discourse—reminding them that this discourse is indeed *theirs* and not an "expert" discourse I control and have provided them—is an important and strategic touch required by the instructor at this point.

Next, I begin to offer students some speculative and strategically misleading contextual hints, but I do so in the form of questions about implications. For example, I might ask, "What if I told you passage 1 is a 'poem' and I have removed the original formatting? How would that change the way you view that passage? What if I told you passage 2 comes from a book with vivid and colorful illustrations? How would that change the way you view that passage? What if I revealed that passage 3 is a 'confession'? What if I said it was 'transcript' of something spoken? How would that change the way you view that passage?"

At this point the discussion takes on a carnivalesque quality with certain students retracting their preferences or altering them based on these contextual implications. Often

students demand accurate contextual information, which I do not provide. I remind them that they are fully capable of finding this information themselves after class. Of the times I have executed with my students this discussion cycle, it has taken the full hour and fifteen minutes allotted to our meeting. And generally speaking, it is at this point that they demand "the answer," the missing contextual information. I do not give in. I like to close this discussion with a question that cuts quickly to the heart of what I mean about the "rhetoric of amateurism" that informs my first-day pedagogy in introduction to literature classes for non-majors: Of these three passages, which of them counts as literature?

I refuse to discuss this question on the first day. It has been my experience, however, that starting the class in this way, in accordance to "amateurism" rather than "expertise," the collaboratively-produced "hermeneutics of the team" rather than established literary theory and formalism, animates and motivates my non-major students by helping them come to understand that literature is not a decided canon of work authorized by experts, but essentially a long-sustained game we play for the love of it perhaps worth preserving that continues until next time as long as we find value in it together.