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The Found Play: Learning and Teaching the Value of Interpretive Reading and Writing

Cover Page Footnote

Randi Patterson is completing her dissertation in rhetorical theory and Romanticism. She also is a poetry editor of *The New Quarterly*, a Canadian literary magazine. Kim Jernigan teaches in the Writing Clinic at the University of Waterloo and is a fiction editor of *The New Quarterly*. They thank students Emily Arrowsmith, Heath Hutchings, Scott Nicholson, and Ang Vachon for permitting them to use their work and the Fall 1994 102A-Renison students for their reaction to it.

The Found Play: Learning and Teaching the Value of Interpretive Reading and Writing

Randi Patterson and Kim Jernigan

What is important is not to elaborate and disseminate knowledge about literature (in "literary histories") but to show literature to be a mediator of knowledge.

Roland Barthes

In traditional language education, the value of interpretive reading and writing is usually taken for granted. As educators, we focus on reading literary works and writing critically about them with the underlying assumption that this type of reading and writing is valuable. However, many entry level students aren't so sure. "Why must we take apart this story or poem? Isn't the experience of reading it enough? Surely the writer didn't intend for us to waste time thinking about this structure or image pattern. Where do you get all this?" Despite some resistance, students and educators are comfortable conceptualizing a literary text (canonical or not) primarily as a "thing," an artistic artifact or cultural icon worthy of study for its own sake, aesthetic pleasure, or historical-cultural representation. By conceptualizing the literary text as aesthetic object, we encourage both mute aesthetic response and thematic and/or cultural criticism. This approach is itself necessary, but limited. Students are unsure of the value of interpretation itself, the importance and utility of the practice of critical reading and writing. Consequently, we must teach the nature and value of interpretation explicitly.

If we focus on the work as both artifact and interpretive act, two types of interpretation are involved: authorial interpretation (the act of writing as both conscious and unconscious interpretation) and readerly interpretation. Because both are acts of interpretation, what the reader does can be seen as an extension of what the author does, rather than, as some students believe, antithetical to it or nonexistent. As such and arguably most important, the text is a medium that enables us to see the value of our own acts of interpretation, our own readerly processes.

What is at issue here is not simply the difference between product and

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process, but between our conceptualization and separation of “knowledge” as fact or artifact and “knowing” as a meaning-making process. While we strongly agree with critics such as Louise Rosenblatt (1978) and Stanley Fish (1980) that a transactional or interpretive theory of reading is necessary to effective reading and writing, most educators today are under pressure to acknowledge the role played by factual knowledge. However, we believe that this notion must be considered in any comprehensive articulation of the nature of “knowledge,” a word which, after all, has both noun and verb forms.

Theorists as disparate as the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the progressive educational psychologist Howard Gardner agree that interpretation, as a conscious cognitive skill, is invaluable in the search for self-knowledge and the need to overcome unconscious, limiting habits of thought. For Ricoeur (1981) hermeneutics involves not only a resolution of conflicting interpretations, but more importantly, the search for self-understanding by means of cultural works, particularly works of art. Gardner urges “education for understanding,” whereby one attains “a sufficient grasp of concepts, principles, or skills so that one can bring them to bear on new problems and situations, deciding in which ways one’s present competencies can suffice and in which ways one may require new skills or knowledge” (1991, p.18).

In order to focus our students’ attention on the literary work as an interpretive act deriving both from the author’s conscious and unconscious shaping of experience and the nature of language itself, we developed an exercise that requires students to eavesdrop on an actual conversation and then transcribe and shape this conversation into a short dramatic scene or “found” play. This exercise allows them to come at a literary artifact from the perspective of writer, performer, and critical reader by finding, enacting, and responding to a drama in their own domain. As we discovered, three types of interpretation are juxtaposed and made conscious in this project. When students turn actual dialogue into a play, they discover for themselves that the literary artifact is itself a work of interpretation—their own. When the work is performed, they discover that there are additional levels of mediation (such as casting, setting, symbols, and word choice) which also influence interpretation. Finally, when evaluation takes place (self, peer, and instructor), students engage in the act of critical interpretation with which we are most familiar. By identifying these types of interpretations, we had been privileging literary criticism as evaluation and not teaching the value of interpreting the text as itself a work of both authorial and readerly hermeneutics.

In order to take readers through our process, we outline the origins of the found play project, present a brief found play, examine the types of interpretation at work during the three main phases of the project, and articulate the pedagogical advantages of the project as a whole.

Origins of the Project (Kim)

I devised this exercise for a first-year genres course (i.e., short stories, drama, novels, and poetry), the sort of course that attracts both students for whom it will be the only English course they take at the university and those for whom it is

the entry course into an English major. In Ontario first year students are typically 18 or 19 years old, though a number of second and third year students and returning students extended the age range to 45. Consequently, students diverged both in their ability and their enthusiasm for the kind of close analysis we practiced in class. For some, criticism seemed to diminish their emotional response to a literary work without increasing their intellectual or aesthetic engagement in it or their understanding of the way language, inevitably, shapes their own experience. The question of authorial intent was often the stickler, that is, the question of whether criticism is a matter of perceiving or interpreting meaning or of simply extracting what the author has "put into" the text. Students were willing to accept both the constructed nature of the text and also the possibility that the act of construction might be partly intuitive, conditioned by the author's own psychology, culture, or historical and economic position. But they felt confident neither of their ability to divine the author's intention nor of their right to interpret the text.

The term hermeneutics means not only to interpret but to translate into one's own idiom. I wanted an exercise that would help my students see how they selected, framed, and patterned the details of ordinary life in order to make it meaningful. I wanted them to understand that shaping the play was eased or frustrated by language, that is, how language both reflects and constructs the world. By having them play author, and then allowing the class to respond to their work, I hoped to demonstrate how a text can sustain a variety of interpretations, not all of which are subject to the author's control.

A number of other educators have demonstrated the effectiveness of creative writing as a means to critical reading (see Bowen, 1993; Gebhardt, 1988). Of particular relevance to the found play exercise is Peter Parisi's (1979) contention that creative writing, when offered for class discussion, can focus students' attention on the indeterminacy of their own language and on the way both the writing of a primary text and its subsequent reading are interpretative acts. By observing what students make of their own work, their peers come to appreciate that language is not so much "the transparent garment of the writer's thought" as "a locus of...possible meanings" which an adept reader or writer can "sense, control, and ultimately exploit (p.64).

The Found Play (Randi)

The project began with this basic intent: to personalize both authorial intent and critical interpretation. The students were not asked to create a play, but to form actual dialogue, so they could experience how the author molds and thus interprets experience without the overwhelming task of imagining a play. Kim introduced it as an impromptu exercise, marking the transition from their study of short fiction to drama. I subsequently wrote the project into the course, supplementing class discussion with written responses from students in their dual role as playwright and critic.

The plays ranged from social realism to theater of the absurd, from farce to self-reflexive metadrama, plays that call attention to the process of their own construction. Circular forms were popular; and most, like the one below, pre-

sented a slice of student or family life. The following play is typical of what students produced or found, both in its personal subject matter and its seeming inconsequentiality.

Dinner Table Talk (Ang Vachon)

Characters: Mom, Dad, Teenage Daughter, and Younger Daughter.

Mom: *[yells]* Dinner!

[Mom, Dad, and Younger Daughter all sit down at the dinner table. Mom and Dad are discussing their days.]

Mom: I was talking to my sister today, and she told me that Brian cries every day when she drops him off at school. He says he hates his teacher.

Dad: *[uninterested]* Oh, yeah.

Younger Daughter: *[whining]* Mom, cut the fat off my meat.

Mom: *[yelling]* Becky! It's dinner time!

Dad: *[sarcastic]* She's probably on the phone again!

Younger Daughter: Why do we always have to have salad?

Mom: Because it's good for you. Now stop asking questions and eat your dinner.

[Older Daughter sits down at the table.]

Older Daughter: Pork chops are so gross! They're fattening and I don't want one.

Younger Daughter: *[whining again]* I have to eat my salad so she has to eat her meat!

Older Daughter: *[says to sister]* You be quiet! *[turns to mother]* But Mom! I'm on a diet!

Mom: *[frustrated]* I don't care. Do what you want!

Younger Daughter: Danny had to sit in the thinking chair today because he spit in Jenny's hair.

Older Daughter: We're eating! Don't tell us your gross stories now!

Dad: Be nice to your sister.

Older Daughter: Well, tell her not to....

[Telephone rings. The Older Daughter jumps up to answer it.]

Older Daughter: I'll get it! *[She exits.]*

Levels of Interpretation

The Play as Artifact: "Writing" the Found Play (Kim)

Our instructions were minimal as to what constitutes a play. We asked students to listen for a bit of dialogue that had some sort of dramatic tension. We stressed that they need not reproduce the found text exactly, that they could trust memory to select the significant detail, intuition to shape it, and intellect to name it. Supplying a title was the one overtly interpretive gesture they needed to make.

The first thing the students were able to see was how the most mundane exchange became significant as soon as they lifted it from the quotidian, framed it, and set it before an audience. Presenting life as a literary artifact creates the *illusion* that everything is significant and connected. Because the found dialogues were isolated and transformed, the class saw them as cohesive texts and automatically treated them as meaningful and the details symbolic.

The intention of the author of *Dinner Table Talk* was to present a slice of ordinary family talk—fragmented and discontinuous—as opposed to sitcom family conversation. She claimed not to have given much thought as to how to give it aesthetic form. However, the class saw the telephone as a framing device. The teenage daughter is presumably late for dinner because she is on the telephone. She subsequently uses the telephone to escape from the dinner table and the tension she has helped create. What is ordinarily a vehicle of communication becomes, ironically, a symbol of the failure to communicate. The teenager's refusal to hear her younger sister's concerns is prefigured by the father's failure to attend to the mother and undermines the sincerity of his imperative, "Be nice to your sister." The play contains a number of passing references to culturally engendered values (for instance, the importance that teenage girls attach to being thin) and the whole argument around food is perhaps emblematic of a larger conflict in the family about what's "good for you."

Such discussion focuses attention on the construction of meaning and on the degree to which a literary text is fluid or fixed. The "finder" of this play had not put in this symbolic detail in any conscious way. However, she could see in retrospect that in making her decisions about how to shape the play—where to begin and end, what to juxtapose—she had recognized, without fully articulating, the patterns inherent in the situation itself.

As we hoped, students reported that the found play exercise gave them insight not only into literature but also into their own experience. One student, recording a conversation with an older relative which took place while they were raking leaves, thought he had written a simple play about male bonding when in fact, he had written about his sadness on his father's aging. When another student focused attention on a passing inquiry about the student's father (then severely crippled with arthritis), he began to see how much the whole interaction was overshadowed by his father's absence, the father's inability to do such simple things as rake leaves, and how the setting (the time of year, the falling leaves, and other details he had thought to include) underscored a loss he was feeling but had not yet articulated.

As their classmates responded to the plays, students began to relinquish the egocentric attitude that the author controls the text. At the same time, they discovered how many supposedly literary devices—the use of metaphors, repetition, silences, circular structures—are akin to their strategies for making experience intelligible. This helped them read with greater attention and begin to appreciate criticism.

The Play as Enactment: Performing the Found Play (Kim)

If creating the play as artifact allowed students to see how art can

determine as well as reflect what is significant in the world, then performing the plays in class allowed them to see how many different forms interpretation can take. This had two positive consequences: It made criticism seem less daunting, and it empowered a different segment of the class by facilitating less language-centered types of interpretation.

Drama is a particularly useful genre for demonstrating the naturalness and value of interpretive response because of its inherent levels of mediation. Words of a play are not sacrosanct but are "interpreted" by the casting, the staging, the pacing—modes of interpretation more easily enacted, though no less telling, than conventional academic criticism. The playwrights were asked whether their plays turned out in performance as they had envisioned them. Often casting, vocal tonality, expression, gestures, and timing shifted the intended meaning. For instance, the author of *Dinner Table Talk* could see how her play could be enacted humorously (for the comic predictability of the sibling rivalry, the parents' helpless resignation, the audience's benign identification with the scene) or more soberly (as a sociological inquiry into family breakdown).

Students were directed to consider not only the more obvious theatrical devices at work, but also the cultural context and how that affected their reception of the play. What was the effect of university students playing older or younger characters? How might people of different ages or economic classes react to the play? How do changes in the race or gender of given characters affect our sense of the power relationships at work? They could see, for instance, how, without changing a word of the text, casting women in a male locker room drama immediately changed the impact of the scene. Thus, they were prepared to accept that a work's professed ideology and its implicit ideology can be at odds.

Gardner (1991) proposes that intelligence is not single but multiple, that students have disparate learning styles depending on the form of intelligence that dominates. Humans possess to varying degrees the following seven "intelligences": linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner argues that many "who exhibit the canonical [scholastic] mind are credited with understanding, even when real understanding is limited or absent" while others "who are capable of exhibiting significant understanding appear deficient, simply because they cannot readily traffic in the commonly accepted coin to the educational realm" (p. 12-15). Our educational system increasingly favors language-centered learners. Gardner urges educators to teach to a variety of learning styles. An unanticipated side effect of the found play was the sense of community it built in the class. The quality and engagement in class discussion increased as types of learners who had been reluctant to participate felt their disparate learning styles validated. Bowen (1993) also found that the use of creative writing as a mode of critical inquiry levels the playing field and that student involvement in play production as well as in response leads to richer discussion of the critical issues raised by the primary text. It also increases awareness of both the techniques available to writers in a given genre and the effects these techniques create. Both Bowen and Gardner envision a topic as a room with many doors; students will enter it differently depending on their learning styles.

The Play and Criticism: Evaluation as Interpretation (Randi)

The play as artifact and the play as enactment are forms of interpretation and also incentives to a third kind of interpretation. In order to help students discover what and how they know intuitively and to use that knowledge and experience to enhance critical interpretation, I subsequently developed several evaluative techniques. The first two times we tried this exercise, we focused on authorial interpretation and the levels of mediation inherent in dramatic performance. In an effort to stress the importance of this kind of experiential exercise or performance-based learning, I graded each found play and provided a written assessment of how the play made meaning through the use of symbols, word choice, non-verbal dramatic devices, and so forth. For instance, one found play presented two roommates discussing an unspecified event taking place off stage that the characters ostensibly could see, but the audience could not. The result was a comic Theater of the Absurd. While the class could articulate why the play was funny, my interpretations not only provided a critical vocabulary to facilitate interpretation but also eased the transition from authorial intent and performance-based response to criticism.

In order to encourage students to take part in this type of criticism, I scheduled more time for in-class discussion of each play (7–8 minutes for each 2–3 minute play). To stress transferring oral criticism into critical writing, after hearing and contributing to class discussion, students were required to fill out a one-page written evaluation of two found plays. I assessed and graded this evaluation and returned it to the student playwrights. In addition, the playwrights were free to comment in class on the performance of their plays and were required to submit a brief evaluation of their play as performed, with particular attention to levels of mediation that resulted in unexpected interpretation. Consequently, all students received oral and written feedback from other students and the instructor, as well as experience in writing authorial, performance-based, and critical interpretation.

In my evaluation of *Dinner Table Talk*, I focused on how the title influences our interpretation of the play as an example of “talk” and lack of communication or genuine “conversation.” The students were comfortable naming the play as social realism which used both the telephone and the entire family situation symbolically. What was most satisfying for the students, as the playwright herself noted, was the interaction between shared personal experience as dramatically portrayed and the pleasure of articulating how this experience worked as a play. Bridges had been built between personal experience and authorial, performative, and critical interpretation, bridges that facilitated a sense of the personal value, limitations, and pleasure. Having had several interpretive experiences in relation to their own found play and the accessible and assessable plays of their peers, the students were able to apply these kinds of interpretations to the anthologies studied in the course.

Then for us came the process of interpreting what the project had achieved and how. When we repeat the project, we will stress the movement of the play from artifact, to enactment, to authorial and readerly interpretation. We will stress how both literature and criticism are ways of knowing and of creating knowledge.

What may resist articulation to some extent but nevertheless be enacted in class is the value of interpretive reading and writing. To some degree, the interpretation of a literary cultural artifact is used to provide justification for the value of a work. The text as literary artifact is a useful concept for reading in relation to historical and cultural concerns which must be recognized and used responsibly. But it must not be given priority over the pedagogical and personal value of learning about the nature of interpretation itself. Like particle and wave theories used to describe the nature of light, the nature of the text (and the nature of the text as knowledge) encompasses this basic act. Literary interpretation, then, not only operates within this epistemic system, but also provides us with the opportunity to foreground the nature of interpretation itself, to foreground the ways that we both know the world and create verbal knowledge. As the found play playwrights seemed to experience, interpretive reading and writing is not valuable for the purpose of dissection or even to interpret a work for its own sake. By becoming conscious of different types of interpretation as we work in relation to literature, we become conscious of how we limit ourselves with private, disconnected interpretations, how we can expand our ethical and cultural horizons by grappling with other interpretations, and why we should take pleasure in the human experience as it is enacted in both literature and interpretive reading and writing. ☺

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