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William Butler Yeats and Beer Goggles

John Wesley White's students' interpretation of Yeats's "A Drinking Song," one of his favorite poems, caused him to question his understanding of the poem and the teaching of poetry.

Who owns the meaning of a piece of literature? The author? The reader? The scholar? For me, as an English language arts methods professor, the question of ownership of meaning lives in multiple domains. It is esoteric in that it engages epistemological and philosophical questions within literary texts that themselves hint at broader questions about negotiating life's meaning. It is practical in that it has concrete implications for teaching English literature; after all, how teachers answer this question both influences their pedagogy and colors what their students take from the literature they read. And it can be emotional in that it may be the kind of question that first illuminates and then wrests from the heart of a teacher his or her investment in a particular truth.

In this article I explore the trickiness of navigating these competing layers of meaning by describing a somewhat disorienting experience from my classroom. I explain how interrogating personal literary artifacts in a shared educational space highlighted dominant but opposing interpretive paradigms and served to destabilize two literary artifacts—poems by William Butler Yeats and Theodore Roethke. I share how the ensuing struggle between my students and me for the ownership of meaning led to my own sense of disequilibrium and consequently opened the door for new pedagogical insights.

WHERE IS MEANING SITUATED?

Few scholars debate the fact that meaning is always "situated" (Barton and Hamilton 1); they debate fiercely, however, where and with whom it is situated. This debate frequently plays out in school settings, albeit unbeknownst to most students. Almost all of us have at some point encountered the autonomous view of literature: the idea that a text's meaning is firmly established by the author and is not situationally contextual. This stance suggests that meaning is stable and that authoritative interpretations trump individual interpretations. It follows as natural that English teachers who operate from this stance are comfortable with correcting the personal interpretations of students; teachers are vested with the power of the "right" interpretation while students merely guess at that answer. The authority of the teacher as literary sage (which accompanies this tradition) has only increased with the advent of high-stakes and value-added testing; the learning of specific content has superseded scholarly debates about meaning. Raised in this one-right-answer world, my teacher education students are unsettled by more contemporary notions of situated meaning. Apparently, the only thing more disturbing than not being right is being right in ways that are shaky, nuanced, or ambiguous. My students are taken aback, for instance, when presented with the view that meaning is not inherent within a text but is, rather, made via the interaction of a reader and a text. So focused on the author's intent and on discovering a specific scholarly interpretation, they seem far more willing to trust an authoritative interpretation than their own.

As a professor of education who studies the interactions between students and the literary texts they encounter, I have, like many if not most high school English teachers, long struggled with the best

way to navigate questions of ambiguity and contested meanings. While studying English in college and graduate school, I was indoctrinated into Goody's "autonomous" view of literature, a view that serves as the foundation of essentialism. I was taught that the endurance of great texts lies in the fact that their meaning is impermeable, floating above individual interpretations and the inconstancies of everyday life. Longevity was itself proof of universality. Since then, I have found that many college English departments, high school English teachers, and curriculum writers hold fast to this view. Essentialism's popularity is not hard to understand. On the one hand, structurally it supports the kind of mechanistic education pushed through standardized testing (in short, the horse and cart are nicely aligned). Questions have single answers and we as scholars have them. On the other hand, it supports the comforting myth of teacher as sage—a view that I was not above holding. Having invested great time and energy into learning to interpret literature, I developed an academic identity based at least in part on the authority that comes with being "in the know." I adopted the autonomous view and eschewed as relativism more contemporary literary approaches. Why had I pursued degrees in English and become a high school English teacher if not to be able to have an authoritative stance on a piece of literature?

What one sees in a given piece of art, including literary art, is subject to myriad variables outside of the creator's intent.

This view was significantly complicated, however, as I continued my studies in education. As a doctoral student and later as an English language arts methods professor, I grew to wholeheartedly endorse the tenets of the new literacy studies: the belief that meaning is actually made in the interstices between reader and author and thus that current contexts and the reader's prior history are integral to making meaning with a text (see Gee; New London Group; Street). New literacy studies, sometimes referred to by its origins in the New London Group, was the culmination of the work of ten top literacy researchers who in 1994 convened in New London, Connecticut, to address the ways in which globalization and technology were affecting education. Their resultant "multiliteracies approach" (New London Group 61) built on the seminal work of Louise M. Rosenblatt, who decades before posited that once a text is released for public consumption it can only hold meaning via the "transactional" relationship between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt ix). This body of study recognizes that texts are not simply delivery systems of facts. Rather, they are

> the results of political, economic, and cultural activities, battles, and compromises. They are conceived, designed, and authored by real people with real interests . . . . And what texts mean and how they are used are fought over by communities with distinctly different commitments and by teachers and students as well. (Apple 46)

Collectively, this body of work puts literature on par with the visual arts. What one sees in a given piece of art, including literary art, is subject to myriad variables outside of the creator's intent. To Rosenblatt and advocates of new literacy studies, the cliché of a tree falling in a forest is akin to a book on a shelf: the book has little meaning until such time as a reader engages with it.

Though these two paradigms appear to be antithetical, I seldom had reason to question either and I felt no disequilibrium in holding onto both. That recently changed, however, when discussing two of my favorite poems with my students. Each of these paradigms proved insufficient, forcing me both to reconsider the meaning of cherished artifacts and to reassess my identity as a scholar.

YEATS'S "A DRINKING SONG": A TOAST TO DRUNKEN LUST?

The autonomous view and the new literacy studies view recently came to a head in a methods course for prospective English language arts teachers. The focus of our lesson was on ways to engage students in reading and interpreting poetry. The first poem I used as an example was a favorite that I had studied in graduate school and had loved ever since. This is a common practice. Many teachers "teach the literature they studied in college classes because they are most comfortable with it and know the most about

it" (Maxwell and Meiser 314). In this case, I chose "A Drinking Song" by W. B. Yeats:

> Wine comes in at the mouth
> And love comes in at the eye;
> That's all we shall know for truth
> Before we grow old and die.
> I lift the glass to my mouth,
> I look at you, and I sigh. (1–6)

Having recited the poem aloud, I asked students what the poem was about. Instead of the usual silence that accompanies attempts to get students to interpret poems, a number of students responded without hesitation. One of my strongest students confidently stated that Yeats was "talking about beer goggles." Another said, in effect, that the more the poet drinks, the better the object of his romantic interest looks. Among laughter and widespread nods of agreement, a third student proclaimed that Yeats planned on "getting lucky" that night. In response to my probing for more romantic interpretations, another student corroborated her peers' interpretation by noting the hard-drinking stereotype of the Irish (Yeats being Irish) and that the poem is titled "A Drinking Song," not "a toast" or "love song." Nowhere on students' faces could I discern dissenting opinions; rather, each seemed to reinforce this Yeats-as-frat-boy interpretation. Contrary to what I had expected, I witnessed a response that challenged, if not debased, something with which I had a strong personal connection.

"A Drinking Song" had long before become a valued artifact to me, a symbol of both my entrée into Yeats's love poems (if not into an entire genre of early twentieth-century literature) and into my identity as a scholar. It was one of the first Yeats poems I felt I really understood and had memorized. The poem had been seminal in my budding love for Yeats and his well-known unrequited love for Maud Gonne. I had come to see the poem as a toast to a newfound love, believing that Yeats was saying that just as we become intoxicated with wine, so the speaker is becoming intoxicated with love, eagerly and helplessly so—"I lift the glass to my mouth, / I look at you, and I sigh" (5–6). I was so invested in this interpretation that I had once used the poem as a toast to my then fiancé.

In class that day I resisted my first inclination—to decry students' interpretation as naive or debased—because that would have been premature. Unlike me, students had neither read about the contexts in which Yeats was writing nor read his other works; they thus had no base from which to compare meanings, tone, and intent. Instead, they only had their current contexts for understanding the poem. Just as importantly, I realized that, based on a textual reading alone, the students' interpretation made perfect sense. The poem could mean something different than I had originally thought. Further, it seemed to me that both interpretations could be "correct"; the poem could be a toast to Yeats's beloved and a rowdy "song" celebrating intoxication and lust. What also became clear to me in this interaction is that although ideologically I supported the notion that a work of art can and should mean different things to different people, the alignment between theory and practice became convoluted when I was emotionally invested in a particular meaning of the artwork. So as I stood before the class that day, I was faced with confronting competing literary interpretive paradigms, competing views of a valued artifact, and even competing paradigms of myself as a scholar and teacher.

"MY PAPA'S WALTZ": FOND RECOLLECTION OR NIGHTMARE?

Another example from this same lesson highlights the complicated and contextualized nature of making meaning with texts and negotiating meaning in classroom spaces. Following "A Drinking Song," I presented another favorite poem: Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." The poem, which ostensibly describes a child's fond recollection of a hard-working father frolicking with his son or daughter in an impromptu waltz, elicited a different interpretation from my students. They claimed—albeit with less fervor than in the other example—that Roethke is describing child abuse.

Even though my students and I share many of the same cultural and social characteristics, time and the experiences wrought by it had nonetheless differentiated what we saw in this poem. While I saw a tender reminiscence of childhood and remembered similar moments with my own father, my students focused on words such as "death," "romped,"

"battered," "scraped," and, most importantly, "beat." To my students, these words forged a vision of the poem that mirrors the violence prevalent in so much of the media they consume. Words implying violence were foregrounded in their understandings while only backgrounded in mine. Our respective constructions of meaning were based in different linguistic and personal contexts—mine forged in romantic ideas, theirs forged through forms of popular culture that situate power in physical prowess. These different personal and linguistic contexts layered on top of our different knowledge bases about poetry in general and this poem in particular.

In addition, most of my students misconstrued words and contexts that might have tempered their interpretation. They were, for example, largely unfamiliar with words such as "countenance" and "romped." Even after pairing "countenance" with "unfrown," one student guessed that the former meant "a mean or angry face." Few students were able to grasp the nuanced double-negative "could not unfrown" as a forced show of disapproval, instead reading this as the mother's disapproval of her husband's abusiveness. Similarly, most of the students who were familiar with the word "romp" understood only its lewd definition from contemporary slang. The few students who knew the traditional definition focused on a particular aspect of its meaning—rough—rather than on an enjoyable time of rough and noisy play.

By endorsing how my students originally saw the poems, I was forced to reconsider my own understanding of them as well.

Another signifier of differing cultures—and interpretive confusion—was that many students were unfamiliar with waltzing itself. While they recognized waltzing as a dance, they knew neither its steps nor that it was a staple of previous generations that had been widely represented across US culture. And while some students had as children experienced the game of walking atop a parent's feet, few connected such experiences with this poem. As a result, these readers had no referents to the conventions of waltzing in the poem. Absent the cultural knowledge on which the poem relies, my students had little chance of seeing Roethke's kitchen scene as I did. Armed with contextual knowledge, I had trouble seeing the poem as they did.

In class that day, we first examined the textual evidence and the modern contexts that might support students' interpretation. Afterward, I provided definitions for some key words, gave some contexts for waltzing, and described what I saw in the scene. Not surprisingly, my students then began to see the poem more positively. But at what cost? While I wanted my students to be able to experience a different interpretation, I worried that I—the teacher and the supposed expert—might have both reinforced an authoritative interpretive paradigm and invalidated their original understanding of the poem.

ARTIFACT, STRUCTURE, AND DISEQUILIBRIUM

Adding to my sense of conflict in both of these examples was the fact that in validating how my students interpreted the poems, I was by default stepping into a state of academic and even emotional disequilibrium. By endorsing how my students originally saw the poems, I was forced to reconsider my own understanding of them as well. My interpretations were enmeshed with my history and with emotional connections to each poem. Mine were interpretations that I had learned in college and were thus "authorized" (Giroux 48). Knowing that a scholarly interpretation was connected to my identity as an English teacher, what would it say about the validity of my training if my interpretations were wrong or if they could change with varying contexts? More personally, differing interpretations of "A Drinking Song" suggested even more complexity. Could the lines that I had cherished really be nothing more than an aphorism about alcohol-induced lust? If I completely missed Yeats's meaning in this relatively simple poem, where else might I have made grievous interpretive errors?

On further reflection, I recognized that the conflict I felt could be a cultural and epistemological shibboleth that set my students and me apart culturally and academically. It could also position our classroom in opposition to my ideal—a classroom

in which my students and I learn from each other, where we make meaning together, and wherein our respective scholarly identities grow and change. Although I believe we should all avoid interpretive polarities, I was confronted with the uncomfortable realization that for this to happen, I had to forfeit authoritative power and my emotional need for certain poems to mean what I wanted them to. These experiences additionally problematized one major facet of new literacy studies: the relative independence between authorial intent, historical contexts, and readers' interpretations. I was forced to question whether I could remain true to traditional interpretations while also validating their antithesis. Assuming that I could, I would have to additionally consider my power and how it affected my students' ability to engage in culturally relevant and personalized interpretations of literature and art.

These are questions that have at their roots the enormous chasm between two major and competing literacy paradigms, the first still dominant in many high school and college-level English departments and the latter dominant in teacher education programs. Inherent in these competing paradigms are questions of authorial intent and historical contexts, readers' cultures and contexts, textual autonomy, and who holds—or should hold—the power to determine the validity of a given literary interpretation.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD: PROVIDING NONAUTHORITATIVE CONTEXT

In grappling with these questions, it has become increasingly clear to me that the construction of literary meaning requires a delicate dance that weaves together expertise and empathy, emotion and authority. The aim must be to provide students with the space to construct new meaning while concurrently supplying the contexts requisite for more traditional meaning making. To succeed in this aim, both students and teachers have to be able to sit with nuance and ambiguity, to embrace contradiction without conflict. Clearly in my teaching this requires a commitment to the discomfort of critical self-reflection. If I am to align my teaching with the ideas I espouse, I must be willing to loosen my grip on literary interpretations that lie close to the bone of who I am. Yet I must also present students with the contexts they need to fully comprehend the traditional meaning of pieces of literature. This begs the question of when and how to provide that contextual knowledge.

While having historical and cultural referents certainly helps students better read and understand literature, educators must be attentive to the fact that scholarly introductions to texts can also coopt how students read those texts. In other words, teachers can inadvertently limit students' meaning making by directing them too specifically (McGinley et al.). Teaching contextual knowledge prior to students' engagement with a text certainly influences the possible meanings that they can take from that text. At the same time, teaching relevant contextual knowledge ex post facto can discount students' original interpretations and thereby disempower them as readers. There is thus a latent irony in providing contextual knowledge: by helping students understand the contexts that lead to more scholarly interpretations, teachers may in some ways coopt or discount students' initial understanding of pieces of literature.

To ensure that students have a right to their original interpretations *and* have the contextual knowledge requisite for understanding certain poems, my preference is to provide additional contexts only after students have experienced the poem without that information. When students rely first on textual evidence and their impressions, they come to unique perspectives about poems. Once fueled with additional contextual knowledge, they are then able to weigh interpretations.

MOVING FORWARD: FACILITATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

New literacy studies highlights that reading is a social interaction between author and reader. As a social endeavor, it is akin to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's notion of "situated literacy" (3), which posits that we learn and think differently when engaged in different communities of practice. Students constitute their own culture(s) and ways of thinking; they assume a slightly different identity and culture when engaged in classroom-based scholarly inquiry.

Similarly, students' understanding of texts (and their beliefs more generally) change via their many interactions with teachers and peers—what Kris Gutiérrez calls "third space" (148). Combined, these theories suggest that what readers ultimately take from a text comes through engagement with the author (via the text) and from the agents and discursive spaces surrounding the reader. Certainly, many of my students have come to more nuanced or even completely altered perceptions of a piece of literature via our discussions.

It is important to remember, however, that seldom are all meaning-makers equally positioned. In classrooms, teachers have significant powers that students do not. Both overtly and tacitly, teachers hold great sway over students' interpretations of texts. Consequently, teachers who seek to empower students should not only be open to the deconstruction of cherished pieces of literature in unforeseen ways, they should foster constructions of meaning that are neither individual nor authoritative, that are coconstructed in a community of practice, and that allow for meaning to be challenged and to grow in complexity. This, in turn, requires that teachers interrogate their classroom culture to ensure that it is a safe space for students to voice alternative interpretations, to allow competing interpretations to breathe, and to learn together.

The creation of safe spaces involves readily acknowledging that while I have some expertise, there remains a lot I do not know.

In my practice, the creation of safe spaces involves an eagerness to learn about youth culture and culturally responsive pedagogies from my students. It involves readily acknowledging that while I have some expertise, there remains a lot I do not know. It also involves a deformalization of the teacher-student relationship so that we might have less hierarchical and more genuine conversations. To this end, I invite students to call me by my first name, I always refer to "our class," I am frequently self-deprecating, and I encourage informal language in class discussions (I discourage students from code-switching into academic speech). Most importantly, I encourage new and unconventional interpretations of texts while espousing the belief that we do not have to agree with a given interpretation to learn from it. Integral to this is the belief that, as art, literature grows with multiple meanings.

CONCLUSION

I began by asking the question, "Who owns the meaning of a poem or a piece of literature?" Reflection on the experiences I describe in this article has led me to believe that literacy educators must think critically about the philosophical and epistemological implications of this question. We must similarly reflect on our emotional needs and understand our roles as authority figures. We must craft spaces wherein multiple interpretations can coexist, and we must recognize that the discomfort of living with contesting interpretations can be a means to growth. For these things to happen, however, teachers must be open to interrogating their own views of personal literary "artifacts" and, in some ways, be willing to sacrifice the sanctity of those artifacts.

In the months following our classroom discussion of these poems, many of my old views have changed. I have, for example, become far more comfortable with the idea that while "A Drinking Song" may indeed be a toast to love, it might just as well be a 100-year-old shout-out to beer goggles. Neither interpretation negates nor diminishes the other; rather, each serves to make the poem more rich and nuanced. I believe the same might be said of the autonomous view and the new literacy studies view of literary interpretation. These two disparate paradigms can not only peacefully coexist, they can complement each other. When thoughtfully coupled, these two interpretive approaches can help students become more empowered as readers *and* more able to grasp literary meaning than either could alone. Finally, this experience has helped me become more comfortable with my scholarly identity. Interpretations that challenge my understandings of cherished pieces of literature pose no threat to who I am as a professional; if anything, they stimulate critical reflection and scholarly growth. Similarly, the many things I do not

know do not diminish my identity as a teacher and a scholar; rather, they open up pedagogical opportunities by providing spaces wherein my students and I can learn and make meaning together.

My takeaway is this: while it can be uncomfortable for us to experience disequilibrium while teaching, we should welcome rather than avoid these moments. It is within the discomfiting space of disequilibrium that we are forced to recognize—and ideally to address—the very things that hinder our growth as learners, as teachers, and as scholars. EJ

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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

"In Literature, Interpretation Is the Thing" or, in the case of this article, poetry. Studying great works of literature is generally considered beneficial because of what is inherent in the writing. Students are told that this literature contains brilliant and timeless insights into human nature. Conflict may arise, however, when the attitudes of a particular time are reflected in a text. Critical analysis encourages students to look beyond this conflict by examining the relationship between the text and a reader's interpretation. The purpose of this lesson is to facilitate such analysis by looking at the text itself as well as critical interpretations of it. Students present this analysis in both oral and written form.
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