

Lesson Study in English: Framing Expectations for Literary Interpretation

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BACKGROUND

Course Titles

- Eng 200, Literature and Human Experience (Fall '11)
- Eng 301, Foundations for Literary Study (Spring '12)

Student Learning Goals

1. to understand that both a “right answer” approach to interpretation and an “anything goes” approach are problematic;
2. to appreciate the positive value of ambiguity as something that invites multiple persuasive interpretations; and,
3. to recognize that literary modes of thinking can be applicable to non-literary texts as well.

Note: Time constraints resulted in using class time to focus on first two learning goals.

THE LESSON

Major Steps

Our lesson was divided into three parts:

1. Discussion of students' prior knowledge about reading literature and the tools used to read it, then discussing these preconceptions to shape their expectation that literary analysis yields multiple valid interpretations
2. Discussion of Elizabeth Bishop's poem “The Fish” prompted by three questions:
 - a. *what stood out in the poem?*
 - b. *how you do you interpret the ending?*
 - c. *what approaches did you use to arrive at your interpretation?*
3. Discussion of three non-literary texts prompted by two questions
 - a. *what makes them different from a literary text?*
 - b. *what makes them similar to a literary text?*

THE STUDY

Approach

- We gathered a pre-class informal writing and observed the students during the lessons.

Key Findings

Eng 200

1. Pre-class informal writing demonstrated that students approached literature from a reader-response perspective
2. In small groups, students gravitated towards a single reading of the poem - perhaps due to prompt, time constraints, or small group dynamics.
3. Instructor was able to use large group contributions to demonstrate how students' collective evidence could lead to at least two persuasive interpretations.

Eng 301

1. Pre-class informal writing demonstrated that students approached literature with more sophisticated knowledge of literary terms and analysis, and students completed some web research.
2. In small groups, students gravitated toward a single reading but spent more time developing support
3. In large group, students eagerly presented a variety of interpretations they found persuasive, but none was particularly persuasive according to disciplinary standards.

Questions

1. What forms of ambiguity are more productive than others, and how can we help students discern the difference?
2. How do our goals translate to cohesive student writing?
3. Do the superficial differences between the results in 200 and 301 just mask a similar cognitive sticking point in the students' thinking?

The Fish

Elizabeth Bishop

[\(video reading\)](#)

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks

of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.

Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.