

PART I: BACKGROUND

Title: "Reading for Complexity: Recognizing and Valuing Ambiguity in Literature"

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Discipline or Field: Literary Studies

Course Name: Introduction to Literature and other literature courses

Last updated: February 4, 2007

**Course Description**

Introduction to Literature is a freshman, general education course that introduces students to the methods of analyzing literature. The content of this course varies, although it usually contains selections from several literary genres (poetry, fiction, drama). Introduction to Literature instructs mostly non-majors how to read literary texts and how to write a literary analysis.

This lesson study project was taught on two different campuses: the first time at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and secondly at the University of Wisconsin-Barron County. There were 45 students in the UW-GB course, which met for 50 minutes. There were 25 students in the UW-BC class, which met for 75 minutes. Although the UW-GB classroom was larger and more of a lecture hall, both classrooms allowed small group work. Each lesson was videotaped.

In each iteration, the lesson was taught early in the semester, after students had some experience reading and discussing literature, but before much formal work had been done. This lesson on reading for complexities and ambiguities was designed to be a first step in challenging students' preconceptions about how to read literature—specifically, students' tendency to assume there is one "correct" interpretation of a literary work.

Executive Summary*Goals*

The goals of the lesson were to teach students to recognize and value ambiguity and to resist simplifying a literary text by reducing it to one flat meaning. We chose a poem ("My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke) that, in our experience, students often interpret in one of two ways: either as representing a loving father-son relationship or as illustrating abuse. Our goal was for students to recognize that multiple patterns of meaning co-exist within this poem, hopefully showing them the richness of literature and enabling them to produce more sophisticated, nuanced readings of literary (and non-literary) texts.

Design

Prior to the class, students were asked to read the poem for homework and bring to class their written interpretations about the "patterns" they see in the poem, as well as "elements that don't fit the patterns."

Working in small groups, students annotated each of the group's patterns on separate overhead transparencies, underlined elements of the pattern, and crossed out with Xs elements that don't fit. The groups then shared their patterns with the whole class by showing their transparencies, followed by the instructor overlaying all transparencies at once as a visual representation of the poem's complexity. After a whole class discussion of the exercise, students reflected in writing on how their initial interpretations of Roethke's poem had changed and what this activity suggests about the process of reading literature.

Findings

The data from this lesson study reveals evidence of some success in students reading for complexity. Students' initial, pre-class writings illustrated a tendency toward flattening out the poem and attempting to reduce it to a single, defensible interpretation. Most of these initial readings offered no textual evidence. The majority of these interpretations focused on the "abuse" theme, rather than the loving relationship.

In the second step—the small group annotating exercise—students' interpretations became more evenly balanced, perhaps due to the effect of listening to their classmates and the lesson's prompt that they identify patterns and elements that don't fit. Thus students who began with one reductive interpretation had to acknowledge others and find textual details that resist their own initial interpretations.

Students' post-class writings indicated that the lesson developed some reading for complexity: a majority stated that they saw the interpretations as connected. In their reflections about the process of reading literature, the majority of students focused on the reader as the site of meaning, which shows an awareness of multiple meanings, but also a disappointing relativism. The second most common response, however, located meaning within the text, indicating that the lesson forced students to use textual evidence in their interpretations.

In summary, an unsophisticated look at the student work may conclude that their relationships with the text haven't changed; however, a close reading of the group annotations and post-lesson writings suggest that they recognize ambiguities and multiple meanings but lack the language to articulate their emerging and more sophisticated relationships to the text and to making meaning. For instance, in the written responses to "After today's activities, how has your interpretation of the poem changed?" about half of the students reported that the in-class activity expanded their initial interpretation of the poem (some explicitly recognizing co-existing or multiple meanings), while a majority reported that they still held to their initial interpretations. However, many of these students then expanded on their initial interpretations, inadvertently revealing that the lesson had indeed opened up—without contradicting—their readings. Indeed, the students who participated in our lesson are primed for additional practice and lessons in reading for complexity, particularly in how to articulate textual ambiguity and complexity.

This literary lesson is adaptable to any passage illustrating the ambiguity or complexity that students frequently oversimplify, resist, or even ignore. In fact, inasmuch as texts in philosophy, political science, art, biology, or music reward careful and analytical reading practices, our study invites further inquiry into activities that may cultivate reading for complexity in other disciplines. We also encourage other scholarly teachers in literature to build on our lesson. Ours is just one method for introducing students to the notion of reading in complex, sophisticated ways. What would other introductory lessons look like? What follow-up activities would reinforce and build upon what students just begin in our lesson? What about lessons for late in the semester? Perhaps, if our lesson is built upon and reinforced throughout their education, students will abandon their expectations for a solvable puzzle with discrete pieces of knowledge and instead situate their learning through a more complex, ambiguous, multi-layered metaphor.

For details and more in-depth analyses, see "Pressing an Ear Against the Hive": A Lesson Study on Reading Literature for Complexity," by Chick, Hassel, and Haynie (forthcoming).

PART II: THE LESSON

How to Teach the Lesson

Pre-Class Preparations

- 1 Each student reads Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" and writes an informal paragraph responding to the question, "What is your initial interpretation of the poem "My Papa's Waltz"? Students bring their paragraphs to class.
- 2 The classroom will need to be equipped with an overhead projector or document camera.
- 3 Instructor gathers the following materials *for each group* of 4-6 students:
 - o one copy of the poem "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke in large font on white paper (if using a document camera) or a transparency (if using an overhead projector),
 - o approximately 8-10 blank transparencies, and
 - o transparency markers (approximately 4-5 different colors).
- 4 Instructor brings lesson prompts to class, as well as materials listed above.

In-Class Activities: Step 1, Writing

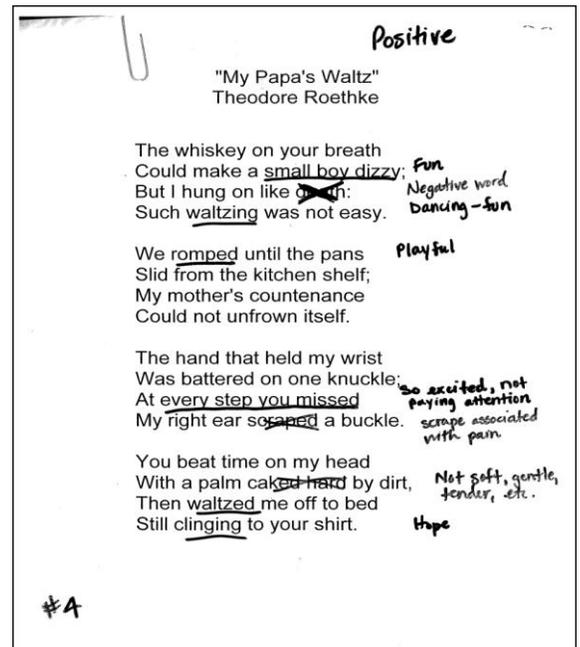
- 1 Students individually write responses to the questions, "What patterns do you see in the poem?" and "What elements of the poem do not fit one or more of these patterns?" on the same sheet of paper with their pre-class writing.

In Class Activities: Step 2, Group Discussion and Annotation

- 1 Students are divided into groups of 4-6, with each group assigned a number and getting a set of transparencies and markers.
- 2 Instructor demonstrates how to mark on transparencies and puts the prompt for the "In-Class Activities: Step 2, Group Discussion and Annotation" on the board.
- 3 Each group selects a "scribe" to write on the transparencies and a "reporter" to share the group's transparencies later with the class. Students talk in their small groups, share their responses to the "In-Class Activities: Step 1, Writing" prompt, and annotate their transparencies by identifying a pattern (or theme) in the poem, and then underlining words/phrases that support this theme, crossing out words/phrases that seem to contradict the theme. Students use a separate transparency for each "pattern" or theme. (See sample transparency to the right, placed on top of the poem for clarity.)

In Class Activities: Step 3, Group Reports and Class Discussion

- 1 Instructor asks for reporters from two to four groups to share findings with the whole class using an overhead projector. Reporter comes to the front of the class and overlays the group's transparencies, one at a time, over the copy of the poem, and explains each "pattern": the theme the group noted words in the poem that develop this theme, and words that don't seem to fit this theme. When finished, the reporter leaves the group's transparencies next to the overhead.
- 2 After 2-4 groups have shown their transparencies, the instructor gathers all groups' transparencies and superimposes all transparencies on top of the poem.
- 3 Instructor asks students to write (on the sheet with their pre-class paragraphs) their response to the question, "How do we explain "elements" (words) in the poem that do not fit the "patterns" (themes)?"
- 4 After a few minutes, the instructor asks for volunteers to share their thoughts on the question



above. Instructor might write on the board the common “patterns” groups found and ask them to consider the “elements” (words) that did not seem to fit.

- 5 It is in this last stage, class discussion, where the instructor has the opportunity to reinforce the learning goals of the activity. Students have collectively analyzed the language of the poem in multilayered ways in order to recognize ambiguity and paradox within a work, illustrating goals 2 and 4. Drawing attention to the ways that each group identified different patterns and interpreted particular imagery or diction in different ways can serve to illustrate the first learning goal, “to learn how to approach texts looking for subtlety, nuance, multiple layers of meaning.” The instructor should highlight especially those interpretations that are well-supported by textual evidence, especially those that may be dissonant.

Post-Class Writing

- 1 Students write a two informal paragraphs responding to these questions: "After today's activities, how has your interpretation of the poem changed?" and "What do today's activities suggest about the process of reading literature?"

See the “Appendix” for the specific writing prompts for students.

Student Learning Goals

- Students will begin to learn how to approach texts looking for subtlety, nuance, multiple layers of meaning
- Students will develop a greater tolerance for and appreciation of ambiguity as a literary device
- When studying a literary text, students will begin to reframe the intellectual and emotional responses “confusion” or “difficulty” as learning moments and entry-points to understanding.
- Students will start to approach texts in more complex ways while valuing complexity as an intellectual framework

“How the Lesson Is Intended to Work”: Scholarly Contexts for Learning Goals

“Students often tackle ‘education’ as if were a puzzle to be considered solved when every piece is in place. But an education—or reading—worthy of its name will recognize that even when the puzzle is finally put together into a perfect whole, there is always one piece left over which forces us to rethink the edifice we have erected.”

—Helen Reguiero Elam, “The Difficulty of Reading”

“I took a speed reading course and read War and Peace in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.”—Woody Allen

While making most audiences laugh, Woody Allen’s joke elicits knowing nods from literature teachers reminded of their eternal challenge: teaching students to read with attention to the texts’ nuances, textures, ambiguities, and multiple perspectives—according to the practices of the discipline. Much of the research on reading, whether K-12 or university-level, focuses on the basic failure to read in the first place (Bischooping; Burchfield and Sappington; Hassel and Lourey; Hoef; McDougall and Granby; National Endowment for the Arts; Ruscio; Sappington, Kinsey, and Munsayac), and there is ample research on helping students with basic reading comprehension (Au, Mason, and Scheu; Cukras; Harvey and Goudvis; Hurst, Fisk, and Wilson; Tovani and Keene; Wilhelm). Our project, however, focuses on how university students read literary texts—or more precisely how, as university students in a literature course, they should be reading these texts.

Specifically, this lesson study arose from a concern that plagues literature classrooms of all levels: students have trouble valuing or even identifying complexity in literature. When we teach lower-level literature courses, students seem conditioned to try to discover the “one correct” interpretation of each work of literature, usually looking to the instructor to provide this “answer” to the text and the process of

reading. Students thus simplify the complexity of literature, ignoring aspects of the text that don't fit the one "true" interpretation they believe exists. Our disciplinary challenge reflects Helen Reguiero Elam's observation of a larger pattern in which students treat learning in all its complexities as a puzzle to solve and be done with, based on the assumption that knowledge is made of discrete, static pieces of information that should fit together seamlessly. We wanted to help students envision a more complex puzzle or perhaps a different relationship with the puzzle—specifically, through those "puzzling" moments of confronting multiple and perhaps even contradictory meanings in literary texts—or, as former poet laureate Billy Collins writes in his poem "Introduction to Poetry," to "take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide/or press an ear against its hive" (Collins). The objective of our resulting lesson is to show students a more sophisticated method of analyzing literature, one that not only acknowledges complexity, ambiguity, and multiple meanings but also understands and perhaps even shares what Joanna Wolfe calls "the literary community's shared value of complexity" (407).

"The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous 1837 speech to the Phi Beta Kappa Society, offers an early call for teaching students to read literary texts in a scholarly way: "There is then creative reading, as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion" (1025). This "labor and invention" of "creative reading"—the work of close reading, the intimacy of engaging with the specific language and parts of a literary text, the joy at a poetic turn of phrase, the wrestling with ambiguous or complex passages, the consideration of larger contexts—is precisely what novice literary readers lack. The absence of these reading practices not only denies novices the beauty, complexity, and "manifold allusion" of literary texts; the implications are far more serious than simply failing to remember what they've read beyond the basic plot and setting, or thinking that *War and Peace* is about Russia.

As recent scholars have argued, reducing a text to a singular, unambiguous message that may or may not emerge from the text itself both reflects and forms the students' perspectives about the world around them. Robert Scholes's "The Transition to College Reading" diagnoses students with what may be called textual narcissism: they conflate what they're reading with their own lives to such an extent that the text, the author, the characters, indeed everything but the students themselves is lost in the process. "We have a reading problem of massive dimensions," he writes. "One is a failure to focus sharply on the language of the text. The other is a failure to imagine the otherness of the text's author" (Scholes 165-6). These related failures in reading, he argues,

can themselves be read as a symptom of a larger cultural problem. We are not good, as a culture, at imagining the other. After 11 September 2001 we have begun to learn, perhaps, that this deficiency is serious.... It is our responsibility as English teachers to help our students develop this form of [empathetic] textual power, in which strength comes, paradoxically, from subordinating one's own thoughts temporarily to the views and values of another person. (167-8)

Agreeing with Scholes, we approached our task of teaching students to read the language of the text—the words of an other, rarely simple and often ambiguous—with a sense of the complexity of the lesson itself and its multiple applications in the students' lives.

Our lesson is designed to allow students to develop their own interpretations of the poem—first on their own in the pre-class writing and then in groups—instead of relying on the instructor to provide the "correct" answer. Then, in order to challenge textual narcissism, students are confronted with other readings of the poem in their small groups and later as other groups present their readings in class. Finally, they watch as seemingly conflicting layers of interpretation (represented by each transparency) are laid over the poem, each attached to specific words in the poem. In their post-class writings, students are asked to re-consider their readings of the poem in light of the multiple layers of meaning they have seen displayed. The final question, "What do today's activities suggest about the process of reading literature?" asks students to begin articulating a theory of literature that allows for a multiplicity of meaning.

PART III: THE STUDY

Approach

Methodology

The types of evidence we collected were all written texts from students—some before class, some in class, and some after class. Our approach to data collection and analysis in this project emerges directly from our discipline and our disciplinary training: as literary scholars, our expertise comes from closely reading, interpreting, and analyzing written texts, and so as literary teacher-scholars researching and disseminating what Lee Shulman calls “pedagogical content knowledge,” we closely read, interpret, and analyze written texts—from students (“Those Who Understand” 9). Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue have noted that a key technique of research in English studies has been “discussion of *student language* and the status of *student text*” [emphasis in the original] (70-71). They also explain that a “baseline for scholarly work” in English studies scholarship is the “deployment of dominant styles of inquiry and methodologies—for example, textual interpretation and critique, discourse analysis, historical analysis, theoretical formulation” (“English Studies” 82).

Consistent with our disciplinary values, then, we have drawn upon the skills of close reading and interpretation—or textual interpretation and critique—from our training as literary scholars and applied them to student language and student texts to reach meaningful conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of our lesson design and resultant student learning.

In addition to analyzing student texts, each of us sat with one small group of students and (with the exception of the lead teacher) took notes and filled out an observation form, noting students’ reactions to the lesson, the group dynamics, and the level of student engagement. (See appendix.)

The Content of the Lesson

We selected Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” because it’s a short, effective, commonly taught poem representative of many literary texts which students typically interpret with distinct and, in their eyes, mutually exclusive meanings. With Roethke’s poem in particular, one group of students usually reads it as a loving memory of father and son dancing, while another group concludes that it tells of a father’s abuse of his son. Both interpretations can be supported with evidence from the text, but students tend to pick one “camp” and refuse to recognize alternate readings. Or, picking up cues from the instructor, students who previously have not read the poem as representing abuse end up feeling corrected when presented with evidence of abuse in the poem and abandon their previous position, instead of reconciling the two (or more) interpretations. Using this poem in our lesson encourages students to confront this apparent ambiguity, a seemingly irreconcilable chasm between different interpretations. Of course, many literary texts lend themselves to such varied and contested interpretations and would thus be effective in this lesson, which is written to be adaptable in this way. Ultimately, we wanted to pose the question of how one reads texts that seem to contain contradictory meanings without choosing one interpretation and excluding the other(s). Ultimately, the lesson should show students that literature is not a puzzle with one unified picture, or a riddle with one answer, but instead a rich site of overlapping meanings and patterns that do not always fit one neat thesis.

Findings and Discussion

The data from this lesson study reveals evidence of some success in students reading for complexity. Students’ initial, pre-class writings illustrated a tendency toward flattening out the poem and attempting to reduce it to a single, defensible interpretation. For example, one student noted, “All [the] lines lead me to seeing the kid as being beat[en],” while another student responded, “I believe the poem illustrates the unconditional love of a child for a parent.” Most of these initial readings offered no textual evidence. The majority of these interpretations focused on the “abuse” theme, rather than the loving relationship.

In the second step—the small group annotating exercise—students' interpretations became more evenly balanced, perhaps due to the effect of listening to their classmates and the lesson's prompt that they identify patterns and elements that don't fit. Thus students who began with one reductive interpretation had to acknowledge others and find textual details that resist their own initial interpretations. For example, five groups used the word “romp” to support more than one pattern in the poem. One group pointed out that “romp” as evidence of the abuse theme, and also as evidence supporting a “playful, dancing theme.” One of the most fascinating aspects of observing the small groups was the watching the ways that group members negotiated each other's readings of the poem. In the second iteration of the lesson, each instructor was assigned one group to observe (with a video camera and by taking notes). We noted students' reactions to each other's readings, their ability to find evidence for divergent interpretations, and their levels of engagement. One group became polarized around two students' opposing interpretations of the poem: one student read the poem as describing abuse, and the other read it as homage to a working-class father. In another group, the four female students shut down their discussion of the poem when the only male member of the group expressed difficulty in interpreting the poem.

Readings of the transparencies produced in class, as well, reveal student progress in recognizing, documenting, and grappling with complex layers in a poem. Some student groups engaged

in the “struggle” of reading contrasting imagery and language within the poem and between readers, but were unable to incorporate the process of making *meaning* out of that struggle into their discussion. This may be because of the time limitations of the lesson, however. It also meant that students often wrestled with textual paradoxes but did so without arriving at a confident reading. For instance, one transparency focusing on the rhyme scheme (see right) juxtaposed the poem's melodic pattern that “sound[s] like a waltz” with their interpretation of the violence: “It is an up-beat rhyme scheme, but is it fitting because we assume that he is being beaten [sic].” Their marginal comment as an implied or hidden question—using a period instead of a question mark—suggests a lack of confidence with their questioning of the text and with their observation of this tension between form and meaning. After all, their attention to the form-content relationship is more sophisticated than simply observing that the words rhyme; however, their in-text notations merely underline the final word in every line—without

Rhyme Scheme

"My Papa's Waltz"
Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath
 Could make a small boy dizzy;
 But I hung on like death:
 Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
 Slid from the kitchen shelf;
 My mother's countenance
 Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step you missed
 My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,
 Then waltzed me off to bed
 Still clinging to your shirt.

If you read the poem in rhythm it can sound like a waltz.

It is an up-beat rhyme scheme, but is it fitting because we assume that he is being beaten.

2

putting X's through the violent words that led to their interpretation of meaning, again suggesting a lack of confidence or full recognition of this tension between the form and the content. Significantly, 10 of the 35 transparencies are similarly annotated without X's (meaning that these students didn't identify elements that don't fit), and most suggest resistance to the text's complexity: three focus solely on the abuse and alcohol, one on the boy wanting to spend more time with his father, four on rhyme scheme (two of which note the slant rhyme of “pans” and “countenance” but still identify them as part of a clear rhyme scheme), and one on a “cause and effect pattern.”

Students' post-class writings indicated that the lesson developed some reading for complexity: a majority stated that they saw the interpretations as connected. In their reflections about the process of reading literature, the majority of students focused on the reader as the site of meaning, which shows an awareness of multiple meanings, but also a disappointing relativism. The second most common response, however, located meaning within the text, indicating that the lesson forced students to use textual evidence in their interpretations.

In summary, an unsophisticated look at the student work may conclude that their relationships with the text haven't changed; however, a close reading of the group annotations and post-lesson writings suggest that they recognize ambiguities and multiple meanings but lack the language to articulate their emerging and more sophisticated relationships to the text and to making meaning. For instance, in the written responses to "After today's activities, how has your interpretation of the poem changed?" about half of the students reported that the in-class activity expanded their initial interpretation of the poem (some explicitly recognizing co-existing or multiple meanings), while a majority reported that they still held to their initial interpretations. However, many of these students then expanded on their initial interpretations, inadvertently revealing that the lesson had indeed opened up—without contradicting—their readings. Indeed, the students who participated in our lesson are primed for additional practice and lessons in reading for complexity, particularly in how to articulate textual ambiguity and complexity.

Although our lesson study was successful overall, instructors may want to tailor the lesson to suit their individual teaching styles. Even a condensed version of the activity focusing on group discussions of their patterns and elements that don't fit those patterns would probably help students make progress in understanding complexity in literary texts. In addition, one of the most promising activities—the final discussion of the significance of the multiple patterns students found in the poem—is left very little time in the current design of the lesson, so a follow-up class discussion is strongly recommended.

This literary lesson is adaptable to any passage illustrating the ambiguity or complexity that students frequently oversimplify, resist, or even ignore. In fact, inasmuch as texts in philosophy, political science, art, biology, or music reward careful and analytical reading practices, our study invites further inquiry into activities that may cultivate reading for complexity in other disciplines. We also encourage other scholarly teachers in literature to build on our lesson. Ours is just one method for introducing students to the notion of reading in complex, sophisticated ways. What would other introductory lessons look like? What follow-up activities would reinforce and build upon what students just begin in our lesson? What about lessons for late in the semester? Perhaps, if our lesson is built upon and reinforced throughout their education, students will abandon their expectations for a solvable puzzle with discrete pieces of knowledge and instead situate their learning through a more complex, ambiguous, multi-layered metaphor.

For details and more in-depth analyses, see "'Pressing an Ear Against the Hive': A Lesson Study on Reading Literature for Complexity," by Chick, Hassel, and Haynie (forthcoming).

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APPENDIX

Activity Prompts for the Lesson: Reading Literature for Complexity

Pre-Class Writing

- 1 What is your initial interpretation of the poem "My Papa's Waltz"?

In-Class Activities: Step 1, Writing

- 1 What patterns do you see in the poem?
- 2 What elements of the poem do not fit one or more of these patterns?

In-Class Activities: Step 2, Group Discussion and Annotation

Annotate the poem as directed by putting only one pattern on each transparency. *On each transparency, do the following:*

- 1 use a different color ink per pattern, if possible,
- 2 label the pattern on top of the transparency,
- 3 underline elements of the pattern,
- 4 cross out what doesn't fit the pattern,
- 5 explain in the margins why each underlined element fits and each crossed out elements doesn't fit, and
- 6 Write the group number on the bottom of each transparency.

In-Class Activities: Step 3, In-Class Writing and Discussion

- 1 How do the patterns relate to one another?
- 2 How is it possible for all these patterns to exist in the same poem?
- 3 How do we explain elements in the poem that do not fit the patterns?

Post-Class Writing

- 1 After today's activities, how has your interpretation of the poem changed?
- 2 What do today's activities suggest about the process of reading literature?

“My Papa's Waltz” by Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Sample Observation Report

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER	OBSERVATIONS, QUOTATIONS, ETC.	COMMENTS
<p>REACTION TO COMPLEXITY</p> <p>How do students <i>react</i> to ambiguity/complexity in the poem?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they seem frustrated by it? • Do they see ambiguity/complexity as a problem to be solved? • Do they search for closure, for one right answer? • Do they see ambiguity/complexity as generative, as part of the richness of the text? <p>EXPLANATION OF COMPLEXITY</p> <p>How do students <i>account for or explain</i> ambiguity/complexity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they use relativism as an explanation (e.g. “because everyone sees things differently”)? • Do they see it as an inherent property of this poem (e.g. “it’s just this stupid poem”)? • Do they see it as an inherent property of literary texts? • Do they see it as part of the process of reading literature? <p>USE OF COMPLEXITY</p> <p>What do students <i>do</i> with the ambiguity/complexity they discover?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they see relations between and among layers? 		

- Do they try to construct an interpretation that takes into account all or most of the patterns and elements?
- Do students work with elements that do not seem to fit the patterns?
- Do students avoid talking about certain elements or patterns?

ENGAGEMENT

How do activities help or hinder progress toward the learning goal?

- Do all or most students seem to be reading the text closely?
- Do certain students do most of the work?
- Do students seem challenged by the activities?
- Do all or most students identify identical patterns and elements?
- Do students argue for certain interpretations of the poem over others?
- Do students seem to value or tolerate alternative interpretations?
- Do individual interpretations change during the lesson?

OVERALL

To what extent did students *recognize* ambiguity/complexity in the poem?

To what extent did students *use* ambiguity/complexity to construct interpretations?

To what extent did students seem to *value* or appreciate ambiguity/complexity?

OTHER NOTES

Observer Notes and Reports

During the classroom observations, team members took notes either on their own paper or on the observation reports themselves and then completed the observation report afterwards. While we focused on the student texts, these rich observation texts provided some of the material for our analyses. What follows are samples of these rich texts: Chick's notes and Hassel's report for the UW-GB observation and Hassel's and Haynie's reports for the UW-BC observation. (Lead teachers don't complete observation materials for their classroom sessions because they're primarily focused on teaching the lesson. Haynie was lead teacher at UW-GB, and Chick was lead teacher at UW-BC.) Chick, Hassel, and Haynie are the only team members who submitted notes or reports for the classroom observations.

UW-GB

Sept 30, 2005

11-11⁵⁰am

①

Lesson Study

ahead of time - w/rr
bring 2 up this "what patterns do you see? what of it?"

- emailed her these ITs
9 apps of 5 (7 of 5, 2 of 4)

"it sounds like he's in pain"

"tough love"

"dance = fun"

① "clinging" - still loves him
other ^{students} = scared

30
+ + one ♂
one nontrad

one for break

one for abuse

walk + bump into shelves, scraped back

"health" = graceful

① PUT directions on ott - all do on one ott

talk > rhyme scheme - correct how?
talk > meter

30 talk, other 9 + ♂ excluded
went back after work on 2nd pattern to X out
other stuff on orig pattern

"simplifying it had to look it up from the other POV (flat the)"
① "Fred is actually being this." - older ♀

- silent ♀ "unless you want to do the theme of the
child clinging" - new pattern

(looked up "pattern" in glossary - & help) X out
whole
2/20/25

they start pointing out a few to see this other Pov

11:22 she stops - vols to show patterns

Danielle PATTERN

#1 rhymescheme - most obv + easiest
- Ironic - waltz = happy → 1st line = "oh, never mind"
- admin father, ~~get~~ cling
abusive yet holds on
mother - (ignores typically but pleased her
(surprising b/c an exp resp from mom))

of talk abxs

- abuse - phys/alc

- waltz = phys abuse, stumble; hold hand but wrist, battered, scraped

- whiskey = alc, dizzy

X - admirer of hung on, cling

- rhyming patterns (#5) - but some r off (dizzy + easy, pans + countenance - assonance) - then becomes more similar - inegs in 1st 2 sts, esp 2nd

drunk abuse } phys abuse but more we read, & purpose of abuse - just stumbling - em waltz, boy happy to see him - intentional abuse [want to excuse / forgive father!]

iron - put rhyme pattern on top - relat bet 2 diff patterns? connections?

could pick diff patterns

reg str, preexist pattern w a few & as regular

- loving

student - unconvnt relat w f + son - of structures as usual - end rhyme perfect = loving relat

1st - 1/2 rocky = abuse? but end = loving

(*) poem raises ?'s ab loving but then reveal 1st 1/2

Bryan - 1 = violence

~~dance + viol~~
of fit = dance b/c dance + viol
pattern of abuse, dance of fit

2 = dance - lots details, even "beat time,
hold wrist, "cling to shirt"

- very binomial ("drunk when dancing")

Aeron edges + asks class how fits, what
but 3 apparent centered

- love + abusive + dance

b/c all 3 exist in poem

- how do we interpret, understand poem

now? diff levels?

Jose - maybe it's all 3 - unintentional father ^{key to all 3}

- can you also have V, dance, abuse?

- could be whole life + not one moment, so

Aeron too
kills much

reflects composite, multilayered exper

take out orig pts + jot down - look back on orig
pts; on bottom, wr what's changed since

You wrote them - THEY'RE ALL WR!

(Aeron was into 3 for ITA Mon email to me: What
does today's activ sugg to you abt the
process of reading lit?)

**OBSERVER GUIDELINES
ENGLISH LESSON STUDY**

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER	OBSERVATIONS, QUOTATIONS, ETC.	COMMENTS
<p>REACTION TO COMPLEXITY How do students <i>react</i> to ambiguity/complexity in the poem?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they seem frustrated by it? • Do they see ambiguity/complexity as a problem to be solved? • Do they search for closure, for one right answer? • Do they see ambiguity/complexity as generative, as part of the richness of the text? <p>EXPLANATION OF COMPLEXITY How do students <i>account for or explain</i> ambiguity/complexity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they use relativism as an explanation (e.g. "because everyone sees things differently")? • Do they see it as an inherent property of this poem (e.g. "it's just this stupid poem")? • Do they see it as an inherent property of literary texts? • Do they see it as part of the process of reading literature? 	<p>The group elected a reporter. Two students seemed to be the primary instigators in the discussion and both offered individual interpretations, one student arguing that the poem is a kind of homage to a working class, "rough" guy who doesn't know how to express love very effectively. Three students were quiet, questioning, and less engaged in the discussion other than to appreciate the offerings of the two students, Tim and Lisa.</p> <p>The students did not appear frustrated by the poem---they did see, however, the ambiguity and complexity as a problem to be solved, a correct reading to locate. Lisa seemed especially resistant to reading any anger and violence in the poem <i>along with</i> the reading of an expression of love. Lisa seemed especially disturbed by a "negative" reading of the text, identifying it as synonymous with being a 'negative person' to interpret the text in that way.</p> <p>They were only able to come up with two patterns in this discussion, "positive" patterns and "negative" patterns.</p> <p>Jasmine took the notes, while Lisa and Tim did most of the debating about the poem. Occasionally she and the other two students would ask questions or offer limited commentary. Lisa frequently made statements such as "this is my first literature class" and "I don't really like poetry" even as she retained her own reading of it in contrast with Tim's more "sophisticated" interpretations that garnered admiration from this group, though it bordered on the "nerd stigma" common in college classes with semi-sarcastic statements like "Wow, you're pretty deep!"</p> <p>Tim did seem to see the different readings of the poem as a function of interpretation and an inherent property of literary texts. He later shared some comments with Lisa and showed her another poem (review on videotape?) as a way of talking about how "it's all kind of interpretation."</p>	

USE OF COMPLEXITY

What do students do with the ambiguity/complexity they discover?

- Do they see relations between and among layers?
- Do they try to construct an interpretation that takes into account all or most of the patterns and elements?
- Do students work with elements that do not seem to fit the patterns?
- Do students avoid talking about certain elements or patterns?

ENGAGEMENT

How do activities help or hinder progress toward the learning goal?

- Do all or most students seem to be reading the text closely?
- Do certain students do most of the work?
- Do students seem challenged by the activities?
- Do all or most students identify identical patterns and elements?
- Do students argue for certain interpretations of the poem over others?
- Do students seem to value or tolerate alternative interpretations?
- Do individual interpretations change during the lesson?

This group did not appear to see a relationship between the layers of the transparencies, as they were very attached to a binary reading of the poem—positive and negative, and were not able to see a relationship between those two “positive” and “negative” readings, at least in their discussion.

The students read the text closely, many times coming back to specific words such as trying to figure out what to do with specific language several times. For example, Tim spent some time trying to figure out whether “recklessness” was a pattern, going back to the figure of the mother repeatedly and talking about the terms “countenance” and “unfrown.” They as a group played with the word “cling,” trying to pin down whether it was about desperation or love. Similarly, they struggled over the word “romp”—is it rough?

Over the course of the discussion, Lisa was more inclined to open up her reading to include the “negative” elements raised by Tim. Other students were less attached to their initial readings, though they had not shared them extensively. At one point, however, she did joke to Tim (as they were

**OBSERVER GUIDELINES
ENGLISH LESSON STUDY**

	marking out a “positive” pattern on their transparency, that she “forced” Tim to see a positive interpretation to the poem.	
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OVERALL

To what extent did students *recognize* ambiguity/complexity in the poem? To what extent did students *use* ambiguity/complexity to construct interpretations? To what extent did students seem to *value* or appreciate ambiguity/complexity?

Students were willing to discuss multiple interpretations but did not appear willing to let them co-exist. That is, two students offered disparate and in some ways contrasting interpretations but most of the discussion was spent “working out” whose was more valid rather than attempting to figure out how both readings could co-exist in the poem and what would be suggested if they could both be “right.” Further, the discussion did not appear to extend to a consideration of why a poet/writer might choose to use ambiguity and complexity in a poem and for what effect.

The student group seemed very intent on constructing a “correct” reading through their discussion and took a very binary approach to the assignment. Even when marking their patterns on the overhead, they struggled to find words that didn’t “fit” with the pattern.

The section they mulled over the most was the role of the mother. At one point they spent quite a bit of time trying to “make sense” of her role—is her disapproval real or pretend? This seemed to be the most fruitful intersection in the discussion because all of the group members were grappling with this particular image and thinking about how it fit in with the patterns they had identified. Perhaps this could have been the site of the best discussion had we had more time or been pushed a particular direction, to think about what the image suggested, how it might fit with both interpretations they had offered, and what that might suggest about reading literature.

OTHER NOTES

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER	OBSERVATIONS, QUOTATIONS, ETC.	COMMENTS
<p>REACTION TO COMPLEXITY How do students <i>react</i> to ambiguity/complexity in the poem?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •1 Do they seem frustrated by it? •2 Do they see ambiguity/complexity as a problem to be solved? •3 Do they search for closure, for one right answer? •4 Do they see ambiguity/complexity as generative, as part of the richness of the text? <p>EXPLANATION OF COMPLEXITY How do students <i>account for or explain</i> ambiguity/complexity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •5 Do they use relativism as an explanation (e.g. "because everyone sees things differently")? •6 Do they see it as an inherent property of this poem (e.g. "it's just this stupid poem")? •7 Do they see it as an inherent property of literary texts? •8 Do they see it as part of the process of reading literature? 	<p>Group #1</p> <p>Each student shared his/her interpretation of the "patterns" in the poem. They identified patterns of "abuse" and "waltzing." All of the students laughed nervously when offering the abuse pattern. When other group members shared alternative patterns (such as "love between father and child") group members accepted this alternative interpretation. However, instead of viewing these contradictory interpretations as "part of the richness of the text," the students made comments that "all interpretations are true."</p> <p>Student used relativism to explain their different interpretations of the poem. "All individuals see different patterns." They seemed very concerned with NOT excluding other students' interpretations. They stated that "all poetry" has multiple interpretations. One student stated that "there is no right or wrong answer, which makes it hard" although it, "should be easier."</p>	

USE OF COMPLEXITY
What do students do with the ambiguity/complexity they discover?

- 9 Do they see relations between and among layers?
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- 12 Do students avoid talking about certain elements or patterns?

ENGAGEMENT
How do activities help or hinder progress toward the learning goal?

- 13 Do all or most students seem to be reading the text closely?
- 14 Do certain students do most of the work?
- 15 Do students seem challenged by the activities?
- 16 Do all or most students identify identical patterns and elements?
- 17 Do students argue for certain interpretations of the poem over others?

One student offered an interpretation that took into account many of the patterns: "the boy wants the love of his father despite the conflicts in their relationship."

However, most students seemed to privilege the authorial intention. They referred to the biographical introduction in the textbook as evidence.

- 18 Do students seem to value or tolerate alternative interpretations?
- 19 Do individual interpretations change during the lesson?

All of the students seemed engaged in the lesson initially. Each student offered an interpretation. At first, the discussion involved everyone. However, the only male student in the group--who claimed not to understand some of the more complex readings of the poem--exerted an indirect dominance over the group. The female members of the group politely deferred to his lack of understanding and did not develop insights that made him uncomfortable. He kept laughingly claiming that he was "outnumbered" but his viewpoint (he did not see abuse as a pattern in the poem) shut down other discussion. The female students elected the one male student recorder for their group (despite the fact that he seemed less confident making claims about the poem).

OVERALL

To what extent did students *recognize* ambiguity/complexity in the poem? To what extent did students *use* ambiguity/complexity to construct interpretations? To what extent did students seem to *value* or appreciate ambiguity/complexity?

Students seemed to recognize ambiguity in the poem, but the discussion did not get beyond "everyone interprets the poem differently." Students seemed to overvalue a certain student's discomfort with interpreting the poem; students seemed more concerned with making everyone in their group comfortable than in digging deeper into the poem.

Step 4, #7 did not seem to work very well. When the instructor projected all of the transparencies at the same time, the result was a jumble. It might be more useful to write names of patterns ("abuse," "wall" etc.) on the board as the students name them, and then ask the students to write about how these patterns fit together.

OTHER NOTES

In this case, the group dynamics were more compelling to observe than the students' reactions to the poem. I observed a phenomena of more prepared, more articulate female students backing away from interpreting the poem in order to make a less confident, less articulate male student

feel more comfortable. When presenting to the whole class, this male student seemed unprepared to explain the patterns in the poem, and not one female student intervened (until prompted by the instructor).

**OBSERVER GUIDELINES
ENGLISH LESSON STUDY**

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**OBSERVER GUIDELINES
ENGLISH LESSON STUDY**

USE OF COMPLEXITY

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Students avoided finding patterns that were explicitly contradictory. This group used the rhyme scheme and abuse and the waltz as patterns and seemed comfortable locating specific terms/words that caused tensions or dissonance between their analyses of those patterns. They did not resist particular patterns but rather seemed collectively engaged in discussing the relationships between the rhyme scheme, the abuse and the waltz themes.

The group appeared to defer to Morgan primarily because she seemed the most confident in her analysis and with literature generally. Other students contributed but after a while the group became distracted by social talk while Morgan reviewed their transparency. Toward the end of the time, they seemed to reconvene and look at what they had crossed out on the individual transparency patterns.

Students didn't argue about particular interpretations. They all seemed pretty amenable to considering multiple patterns and understanding how they co-existed in the poem.

Interpretations did seem to change. One student stated, "abuse...but now that I've read it I'm not sure it's about that" and seemed to be reconsidering her initial interpretation.

**OBSERVER GUIDELINES
ENGLISH LESSON STUDY**

OVERALL

To what extent did students *recognize* ambiguity/complexity in the poem? To what extent did students *use* ambiguity/complexity to construct interpretations? To what extent did students seem to *value* or appreciate ambiguity/complexity?

Students appeared very willing to acknowledge ambiguity and complexity as they discussed it and attempted to identify patterns in the poem. While they began their discussion with a focus on technical aspects (rhyme) they moved their discussion to themes and imagery and in fact were able to make connections between formal and thematic observations. They did not appear resistant to tensions and juxtapositions, engaged in pondering their co-existence in the poem. To some degree the discussion seemed to have finding the "right interpretation" as its goal; however, they didn't explicitly de-value the complexity or ambiguity of the poem i.e. critique the fact that it doesn't have a clear, explicit "meaning."

OTHER NOTES

Reading with and For Complexity Rubric

One of the goals of a literature course is to encourage students to see nuances, texture, and multiple perspectives in the texts they read. The rubric below assesses the two prongs of the learning outcome: identifying passages that contribute to tensions and nuances in a piece, and acknowledging the ambiguities in a text as a source of richness rather than frustration. Students who read with complexity will do the following:

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
<i>Identify multiple meanings</i>	Thoughtfully summarize the basic meaning <i>and</i> recognize the multi-layered meanings of the text and its specific language	Accurately summarize the basic meaning of the text as a whole and its specific language	Do not recognize the literal meanings of the text or demonstrate confusion about its basic meanings
<i>Identify passages that contribute to a text's complexity or ambiguity</i>	Identify important passages of complexity or ambiguity in text	Recognize important passages of complexity or ambiguity in text when identified by others	Do not recognize or identify important passages of complexity or ambiguity in text
<i>Acknowledge ambiguities</i>	Identify ambiguities in text	Recognize ambiguities in text	Resist ambiguities in the text