The Language of Literary Analysis

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The problem that the teacher faces first of all, then, is the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature. Unfortunately, many of the practices and much of the tone of literature teaching have precisely the opposite effect.

-- Louise Rosenblatt

Teaching Terminology

In common with any other academic discipline, literary analysis employs a language all its own. While this specialized vocabulary may at first pose obstacles for students in AP English Language and Literature classes, literary terminology is a tool for readers to explain what they see. Terms like assonance, motif, and synesthesia give us words to describe how an author achieves an effect. Banishing them from our classroom in order to simplify the study of literature makes students less, not more, articulate. I believe that without the words, without knowledge of this specialized vocabulary of the discipline, students actually see less in the texts they read.

This is not to suggest that reading poetry should become an exercise in identification: spot the synecdoche, find the foil, highlight the hyperbole -- a game of literary Trivial Pursuit. Instead we should make literary terminology the natural language of the AP classroom. The first time I use a particular term, I write it on a prominently posted list. This word wall of literary language grows over the first few weeks of class until the chart includes most of the essential vocabulary students will need for the AP Exam. Every time I use a term in class, I include the definition in my question, "How would you interpret the paradox in Donne's line 'Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me'? You know, a paradox is a statement that appears self-contradictory and yet reveals a kind of truth." On another day I might ask, "How would you describe the tone of Candide? Remember? Tone is the writer's attitude toward his subject." As I speak I point to the word on our chart. Like water dropping on stone, over time students become so familiar with the terms that they begin using them both in classroom discussion and in their papers. No need for a quiz when everyone knows the answers.

It is important to remember that although AP students may be intellectually gifted, they are only 16 to 17 years old. Teaching methods have to reflect students' actual as well as mental age. It is interesting to note that the teaching of literary terminology appears in most states' English language arts standards from about sixth grade onward. California expects all students in grades 9 and 10 to be able to "evaluate the aesthetic qualities of style, including the impact of diction and figurative language on tone, mood, and theme, using the terminology of literary criticism." Despite the mandate from the State House, few of my students arrive knowing much about figurative language. As a result they often find themselves tongue-tied when attempting to interpret poetry. Robert Scholes explains in Textual Power that "reading is the first step in all thought and all communication. It is essential; but it is incomplete in itself. It requires both interpretation and criticism for completion." Without the specialized language of literary analysis, students have no words with which to formulate an interpretation. They read but can't see how to take the next steps towards interpretation and criticism.

The 2002 AP English Literature Exam asked students to read Thomas Hardy's "Convergence of the Twain" and to analyze how the poetic devices convey the speaker's attitude toward the sinking of the ship. The prompt does not suggest devices for students to examine and therefore demands that test-takers be familiar with an arsenal of literary devices. They must also be able to recognize them as they read and interpret how these poetic tools demonstrate Hardy's feelings about the sinking of the Titanic. (The poem, the prompt, a scoring guide, and sample student papers are all available on the English Literature and Composition Exam page, available in "See also," below.) As we talked our way through the poem, students comfortable with the language of literary analysis pointed out how Hardy's use of alliteration -- "cold currents," "mirrors meant," "gilded gear" -- suggests the inevitability of the meeting of iceberg and ship. They saw how his rhetorical question, "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" marks the spot where the poem turns and prepares the reader for Hardy's answer that as man was building the proud ship, nature was preparing its nemesis. They discussed the connotations of "consummation" and how the word completes the image of the shipwreck as a strange wedding and the metaphor of ship and iceberg as bride and groom. I had read the poem many times, yet saw much more than ever before as a result of our discussion.

While some students moan that their teacher destroys literature with endless talk of imagery and diction, I believe that approaching a poem like Hardy's with the tools of literary analysis actually helps us think our way through the work. Exploring how he constructed the text leads to deeper understanding, richer interpretations. In the epigraph to this essay, Louise Rosenblatt warns against classroom practices that get in the way of students having a vital experience of literature. I cannot imagine that anyone reading this would disagree. If we can avoid the "Gotcha!" tone created by quizzes on meter and metonymy, teaching literary terms will help, not hinder, authentic reader response.