



Constructing Literature

A Reflective Reader-Centered Approach

Martin Bickman
Professor of English
President's Teaching Scholar
English Department 226 UCB
University of Colorado
Boulder, Colorado 80309

303-492-8945

Bickman@colorado.edu

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The meaning of a sentence may make a unity, comprise some whole, but inevitably its concepts are loosed one by one like the release of pigeons. We must apprehend them, then, like backward readers: here's a this, now a that, now a this. The sentence must be sounded, too; it has a rhythm, speed, a tone, a flow, a pattern, shape, length, pitch conceptual direction. The sentence confers reality upon certain relations, but it also controls our estimation, apprehension, and response to them. Every sentence, in short, takes metaphysical dictation, and it is the sum of these dictations, involving the whole range of the work in which the sentences appear, which accounts for its philosophical quality, and the form of the life in the thing that has been made.

—William Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*

We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. . . . What if we awake one day, all of us, and find ourselves utterly unable to read? I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable (so I used to tell my students). Although I am capable, through long dabbling in blue magic, of imitating any prose in the world, I do not consider myself a true artist, save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do—pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and weft of that web.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. We must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have. . . . To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit. . . . requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately as they were written.

—Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*

A word is dead, when it is said
Some say –
I say it just begins to live
That day

—Emily Dickinson, Poem 278

Previous introductory anthologies and textbooks in literary analysis accomplish something I would not have thought possible: they make literature seem as dull and dry, as systematic and sporadic, as routine and regulated as mathematics, history, economics, biology. Not that any of

these last fields really deserve these adjectives either, but they are only more susceptible to the over-organization, homogenization and draining of intellectual vitality to which traditional education subjects them by turning them into "subjects." As William Gaddis writes in *JR*:

Before we go any further here, has it ever occurred to any of you that all this is simply one grand misunderstanding? Since you're not here to learn anything, but to be taught so you can pass these tests, knowledge has to be organized so it can be taught, and it has to be reduced to information so it can be organized do you follow that? In other words this information leads you to assume that organization is an inherent property of the knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are simply irrelevant forces that threaten it from the outside. In fact it's exactly the opposite. Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos. . . . (20)

Literature, then, is not the only victim of this process, but only the most heartbreaking, since its very home court is the imagination, novelty, wit, the subversive, the off-center, the off-color. The reason this book will succeed where others have failed is not that I am so much more scintillating or profound than my colleagues but because I know how to use the open secret of education, that students need to be actively engaged in the process of learning, that they have to construct knowledge for themselves by relating their own immediate, concrete experience to the acts of symbolizing and generalizing. This prospectus will try to follow what it advocates in presenting both the theory behind practice and using the practice to clarify and extend the theory.

The Theoretical Basis: Constructivism and Reader Response

Several years ago I was asked to deliver the Best Should Teach lecture at my university, and figuring that many more people would see the title than attend the talk, I decided to use the title itself as a teachable moment: "The More Teaching, the Less Learning, and Other Lessons from the Radical Past." The radical past referred to was both personal—I had been an educational reformer and activist in the 1960s and 70s—and collective, a stream of American thought and less often, unfortunately, actual school practice that I trace in *Minding American Education: Reclaiming the Tradition of Active Learning* (Teachers College Press, 2003). In my own classes in pedagogy and in my work with our graduate students learning to teach I have more time to expand on the ideas behind this title by asking them to make a Copernican shift in their own conceptions, to focus not on their own teaching performance but on how much the students are actually learning. They soon find that this approach not only lessens their initial anxieties but gives everything they do a focus and rationale.

But even veteran teachers are handicapped by the way the disciplines are organized in academia and by the reward structure of universities. Professors of literature rarely have a deep interest or understanding of the field of English Education and related areas such as educational philosophy, cognitive psychology, and the history of schooling. In "Our Missing Theory," Janet Emig has written one of the few articles lamenting this chasm. She begins by discussing a rare conference that included both university professors of literature and K-12 educators. It is not that one group knew "theory" and the other did not, but rather they knew different kinds of theory:

To over generalize, the theories that the college participants knew attempted to characterize universals of textuality and language; the theories the public school teachers, particularly the elementary school teachers, knew attempted to characterize the developmental dimension of learning and of teaching, the dimension that suggests that all of us evolve through phases, stages, episodes, periods (various theorists have their favorite metaphor) as we mature as doers and thinkers.

This essay makes two claims: the first is that most of us in English studies do not know these crucial learning and teaching theories. The second is that if we do not soon come to learn these theories and allow them to enter our classrooms, English studies will continue to lose its constituency, the possible future English major, and continue to fail the general student population, thus contributing, ironically—that is, unintentionally, but formidably—to the literacy crisis in high education. (88)

It is not so much, as the old saw has it, that some instructors teach students as opposed to others who teach subjects [indeed, it is towards getting beyond such simplistic dualisms that this project directs its energies] but rather much educational theory is diachronic in that it focuses on how much a student learns in the course of a class, a semester, or several years, while much literary theory is synchronic in tracing general characteristics of how texts work and how meanings are made or not made. Combining the two perspectives, as Emig and I have argued, could create powerful advances in understanding and reforming how we teach. More specifically, by synthesizing Constructivism, a term taken from philosophy, with Reader Response Criticism, an umbrella term for several movements in literary theory, we can create a pedagogy that moves beyond the self-defeating oppositions that have characterized our current educational practice: product vs. process, traditionalism vs. progressivism, discipline-centered vs. student-centered, thinking vs. feeling.

More specifically, while what we don't know about learning outweighs what we do, we can still find a widespread consensus on two related hypotheses: first, that real knowledge, operational knowledge, cannot simply be transmitted, merely told by the teacher to the student, but must be actively reconstructed in the mind of the knower, and, second, that knowledge cannot be only general and abstract, unmoored from any specifics, but must be rooted in the dialectic between the learner's immediate, concrete experience and symbolic constructions related to those experiences. William James said that one can see into a generalization only as far as one's knowledge of particulars allows, and Zora Neale Hurston has one of her characters say "Yuh got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there."

I came to Constructivism relatively late in my career, but when I did, first through Jerome Bruner's crucial book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Harvard University Press, 1986) and then through its widespread embrace by schools of education, it was illuminating to find out how complementary and mutually supportive it was with the reader response approach I had been following. I am old enough, alas, that the best way to explain my involvement with this approach is historical and biographical. . I remember having been awakened from my New Critical slumber in 1970 by a British critic usually not associated with reader response. I had heard a provocative lecture by Frank Kermode comparing Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" to an "impossible object," one of those optical illusions that can be "read" in two contradictory ways, as, say a cube with either its rear or its front side protruding, or a fork with

either two or three prongs. The illusion works because our eye and mind transform what is on one level a two-dimensional object into a three dimensional construct and there are at least two different ways to do this. Analogously, we do not merely absorb a similarly flat literary text but actively imagine it, creating a construct that is based on our previous experiences, satisfying and internally coherent. No side in "The Turn of the Screw" debate, Kermode suggested, neither those who see the ghosts as the governess' hallucinations nor those who see them as real within the frame of the story, has been able to defeat the other because James seems to have deliberately constructed the story as a platform for both possibilities. Although this story may seem a special case—James himself called it "a piece of ingenuity pure and simple . . . an *amulette* to catch those not easily caught"—I felt similar processes happening with every work I taught. Students were selectively perceiving different parts of the same text. I began to ask myself questions such as: Were all of these responses equally valid? As a teacher should one try to bring them to a sense of closure or let them all stand in their unresolved multiplicity and individuality? How much does the text itself control responses as opposed to how much each reader "pops out" or constructs that text as an imaginative unity?

When reader response criticism broke most noticeably on the scene with the appearance in 1980 of two well-conceived anthologies, *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane Tompkins and *The Reader in the Text: Essays in Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, I read them avidly for answers. There was considerable intellectual excitement in the way theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Norman Holland were able to reconceptualize the reading process, but I still felt a lack of concrete texture, of specific analyses. What these writers gave with one hand, the idea that meaning is created in the interaction of reader and text, they took away with the other, as it remained only an idea. Instead of actual readers, we encountered "the implied reader," "the ideal reader," "the narratee,"—arguably as much constructs of the isolated critic as any single interpretation of the text itself. At this point I began to wonder if the best laboratory, the most dependable source of data, might not be the classroom itself.

Theory into Practice

With these questions in mind, and the hope of bringing into graduate education a course that would relate make theory less amorphous and theoretical and teaching more intellectually exciting and rigorous, I offered "Theory and the Teaching of Literature." This course was built around a beginning undergraduate course that the graduate students and I taught together. We met for the hour immediately after each undergraduate class to share our perceptions and analyses of it, to relate it to theories we had read or formulated ourselves, to plan the next class in the light of all this, and to form new hypotheses that would be confirmed, denied or qualified by what we were to see in that next class. We also read carefully and often as a group the undergraduates' papers and other written responses, so in effect the undergraduate class, both in its oral and written dimensions, became the main "text" for the graduate course. I hoped to get both the graduate students and myself to read that text with the same kinds of passionate attention and theoretical conceptualizing that we expect of the best readings of literary texts.

The first time I taught the course I made the mistake of running the undergraduate course myself for the first couple of weeks, to try to do some modeling and initiate the graduate students gradually. But I soon realized that with teaching as with most things, the only way to really learn is to do it oneself, and that the graduate students should jump in the water the very first day. One

ability I hoped to teach the graduate students was to learn from mistakes. What I learned from this false start was the huge gap between my perceptions of my own lecturing and what was really going on, an immediate example of how important it is to have classroom observers not confined to the roles of teacher or student. As I lectured, I consistently saw upturned, interested faces. But I did not realize how much my looking affected the very behavior I was trying to see, how I was enacting the kind of distorted perception that John Holt described. It was primarily the graduate students who were really absorbed in the lectures, not the undergraduates who were often more interested in doodling and writing letters.

It was not simply this perceptual difficulty that created the gap between my sense of the classes and the graduate students' collective account of them. The difference also has to do with the inherent distance between talking and listening, between being able to move about and being confined to a seat, between being a lecturer and being a lecturee. I blush to say it, but I was never tired or bored by my own lectures. And yet I know I cannot keep my mind from wandering after about a half hour of someone else's lecture, no matter how good it is. As Bouton and Garth have pointed out, "The active role of the teacher in the traditional classroom contrasts sharply with the passive role of the students. It is not surprising that teaching is the best learning. The teacher's activity makes the traditional method a very effective method of learning—for the teacher" ("Students in Learning Groups: Active Learning through Conversation" (1983). This realization helped explain why often what I thought were the most brilliantly original parts of my lectures often lagged the most for the students. I was thinking things out for the first time, discovering what I had not fully seen before, but these ideas by their very nature were not yet in a form that was particularly clear or incisive to my listeners. These were also my most enthusiastic moments of lecturing, but clearly they were not the ones that created the most enthusiasm in the students. I mention this for those who think enthusiasm works like a virus: if the teacher is enthusiastic those in proximity will catch the bug. Although I feel that short, well-prepared lectures can be useful, it is also important to be aware that we are always embodying our values in the classroom by what we choose to do, and that to lecture is to value having thought over thinking, the transmission of knowledge over its making. Another recovering lecturer, Stephen Monk, writes: "My TAs and I spent all the time telling students how we did mathematics. Their job was to imitate us when they did the homework. The message was that learning was to take place not on course time, but on their own time, away from teachers and away from one another" ("Student Engagement and Teacher Power in Large Classes," 1984). The implication of all this—particularly as the graduate students began to do their own teaching—became evident. Why should we hoard all the wealth and shoulder all the responsibility? Why have just one person prepare to run a class when every student could benefit from such preparation.

Journal Prompts and Structured Inquiry

To go beyond what is on the one hand the overly leading questions of traditional textbooks and the vague looseness of the response paper, the graduate students and I began to devise structured assignments that were at once open-ended and specific. To do this, we as teachers focused not on our readings but on the processes by which we came to an understanding of the text--e.g., what words and images are repeated, what more becomes revealed in the first paragraph after one has read through the entire text, what effects are created by the syntax and rhythms of sentences—rather than on final interpretations. We asked each other what came to be known as

the epistemological question: not what we know, but how we came to know it.

The exercises in this book follow these aims and directly stem from our creating assignments like the following on Wallace Stevens' poem "Gubbinal":

That strange flower, the sun,
Is just what you say.
Have it your way.

The world is ugly
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,
The animal eye,
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,
The seed,
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

Please consider the following questions, but don't just answer them in order; try to relate your answers to each other. When you're finished, read what you've written and see what other insights and connections you can make.

In what ways can the sun be said to be a "strange flower"? How does this metaphor work for you? Similarly, what about the other images for the sun—"that tuft of jungle feathers," "that animal eye," "that savage of fire," "that seed"? Are the images related? Is there a progression through the poem? Why does the speaker say, "the world is ugly and the people are sad"? Why is it repeated? Is there more than one speaker? In what ways is the sun "just what you say"? What questions do you have here that you'd like to raise with the class?

Earlier in my career I might have asked the class first what Stevens is suggesting here about the relation of language to perception. And I would have gotten the skimpy, vague generalities the question deserved. To say that this poem is about the power of articulation would not be wrong; it would just be banal and superficial. The questions ask the students not simply to find out what the poem means, to get to some bottom line, but to immerse themselves in it imaginatively. Questions about individual words and images are deliberately meant to make the reading more deliberate, to slow it down enough to allow the poem to resonate through the imagination. While there are no right answers to questions like "Are the images related? Is there a progression through the poem?" they are important in having the student see *how* one does or does not make meaning out of a poem. To ask, for example, how the sun is a strange flower, is to at once draw the students into the texture of the poem and to generate a series of disparate responses. Some students seize upon the visual qualities of an orb that appears to radiate lines, as in a child's drawing of the sun. Others are more emotive, talking about feelings of natural freshness they associate with both, others more conceptual and scientific as they talk about both

participating in cycles or growing from small beginnings. Even students who see no resemblances can help to underscore how the sun can be described as a *strange* flower. The very act of producing and sharing responses gives the students an inner knowledge of what it means to say the "sun/Is just what you say," a knowledge that they can then be asked to articulate.

As already suggested, generalizations about how metaphor works or how language can alter our sense of the world are intelligible to the student only to the extent that these ideas emerge from and relate back to their own experiences of metaphor and language. Stevens' writing, like that of other participants in the tradition of active learning, is particularly helpful in easing students into the journaling situation for several reasons. His poetry tends towards self-reflection; in a playful way it examines its own workings. Although most poetry does this to some extent, Stevens' work is particularly aggressive in challenging and involving the reader as a participant in the making of meaning. As David Walker has noted, a Stevens poem often is "a poem whose rhetoric establishes its own incompleteness; it is presented not as completed discourse but as a structure that invites the reader to project himself or herself into its world, and thus to verify it as contiguous with reality". Further, Stevens writes at a level of difficulty that is just beyond the grasp of most students when they first read the poems, yet comes just within their reach as they begin writing about them; Stevens once wrote: "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully." In response to questions about Stevens' poems, many students begin with a statement to the effect that they have no idea what is going on and then proceed to write a couple of pages that contain some powerful insights. Indeed, it was exciting for us as teachers to see a student's mind unfold through the course of a journal entry and the course of a semester. One frequent movement is the students' increasing use of them to work out things for themselves—mnemonics such as diagrams, charts, drawings appear more often. A related trend is that the individual entries get longer, far beyond what a student would have to write just to fulfill the assignment.

Convergent and Divergent Thinking

An issue that is implicit in the last section and in the exercises that follow is that there are various styles and rhythms in the thinking process, although in traditional methods of teaching literature we encourage the students to use only one phase, banning the rest to some realm beyond the classroom. Conceptually we talk about analysis vs. synthesis, classical vs. romantic (a formulation used by both Alfred Whitehead and Robert Pirsig), logical vs. intuitive, convergent vs. divergent thinking. While these dichotomies are not quite parallel, we could say that our assignments and classroom activities have traditionally focused on the first term in each pair, although a brief self-reflection reveals that for all of us both are necessary for real thinking, as the diastole and systole of a single process. It is because the divergent—the playful kind of thought that generates a number of possibilities—and been so stifled that I find I have to clear space for it, create structures that actively elicit it. One of the intentions, then, of the exercises and learning structures that follow, is to increase the number of "answers" and possibilities before one would even think of narrowing them down. Understandably, though, this situation can also generate anxieties in students and teachers—a sense of diffusiveness, of not getting anywhere, of reaching even a momentary stay against confusion.

To suggest that this is not inevitable and how the divergent and convergent and complement each other I take as an example how I approach a poem written by a seventh-grade girl.

Some old people
Are like potatoes,
Mealy, and with eyes
That do not see.

My grandmother is
Like an apple,
Rich with the joys
Of the autumn of life.

An advantage of using this poem is that there is no difficulty with a paraphrasable "meaning," so the students can focus on how the words work, not what they "say." The exercise asks the students to fill in, make explicit the connective links between, on the one hand, potatoes and some old people, and, on the other, between her grandmother and an apple, to build on the two examples already given in the poem. In working with their answers, I try first to get as many on the blackboard as I can without too much analysis or comparison. Some of these are wildly eccentric, such as someone's aged uncle who grows potatoes, but most are clearly resonant with the other members of the class, picking up on attributes like wrinkled skin or musty smell. We then do the same with the poet's grandmother and an apple; usually once the ice—or crust—is broken, getting more responses in less time.

So far the activities have been almost exclusively divergent, intuitive, playful, using techniques similar to what in the 1950s we called "brainstorming." But then I ask the class to look more analytically and reflectively at the poem and their responses to see what we can say. One of the first things they notice is the fact of divergence itself, how a single analogy can generate so many responses—responses that many in the class had not been envisioned before but that can speak to each other strongly enough to create even more resonances in themselves. Usually the students also note that the two metaphors in the poem work synergistically off each other, so that the effect is not merely additive but multiplicative. I often ask the students also to go back to the list and note which senses are brought into play. If we are lucky, all the senses are represented, but even if not, the students get a sense of can see how poetry can bring us to our senses in several ways. So even if the students don't reach a consensus on the level of interpretation, through this kind of metacognition they experience a good deal of closure in understanding the processes themselves. Such reflective moments in the sequence of assignments pull both the exercises and the students together in ways that serve as a balance and clarification to the open-ended nature of individual responses.

that the literary text generates a number of divergent responses, we often work in the classroom towards closure and consensus. While we know that literature speaks to our whole being, to our emotions and senses as well as to our intellects, the kinds of responses we encourage are often abstract, generalized, cognitive ones. Too often process--the pluralistic, the erring, the mysterious--is ignored, suppressed, or finessed to get to some kind of product on schedule. Even in classrooms where the most radical lines of social defiance are presented through such counter-ideologies as feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, etc., the structures of authority and patterns of interaction remain as rigid and unimaginative as ever.

It is not that professors of literature are happy with this situation—it is that they don't know how to change it and have not had the experiences, either as students themselves or teachers, that would help them do so. Most professors are not particularly authoritarian or rigid. But in general, teachers, whatever their noble intentions, will be reluctant to teach in ways that they have not experienced themselves in the classroom. This is part of the vicious circle by which the least effective aspects of teaching perpetuate themselves. John Dewey noted this as he saw what was happening to his own ideas as they were cranked through schools of education and the public school system:

The drive of established institutions is to assimilate and distort the new into conformity with themselves. . . . In teachers colleges and elsewhere the ideas and principles have been converted into a fixed subject matter of ready-made rules, to be taught and memorized according to certain standardized procedures and, when occasion arises, to be applied to educational problems externally, the way mustard plasters, for example, are applied.

More specifically, Dewey as early as 1916, pointed to the paradox which we still find ourselves:

Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of "telling" and being told, but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory. Is not this deplorable situation due to the fact that the doctrine itself is merely told? It is preached; it is lectured; it is written about.

In other words, the teaching profession and literature professors especially find themselves torn between an intuitive and theoretical sense of how they would like to teach and the forces of habit and daily exigencies. For some of them, having a book like the one proposed might be the tipping point. Further, if what I am saying here about teaching and learning is wrong, there would be no point in trying to sell the book at all. But if I am right, teachers and students will be getting better results and there would be the best kind of publicity—people in the field recommending it to each other.



Journal 1. The journey begins . . . crossing the threshold of adventure at the Spouter Inn. .

In chapter 3 of *Moby-Dick*, the narrator (call him Ishmael) enters the foyer of a well-worn dilapidated inn (chosen by him precisely because its run-down appearance promises a low rate) in New Bedford. He is on the eve of a whaling voyage, or at least of a packet voyage to Nantucket, where he will board for the first time a whaling ship. As he goes into the foyer, he stops before a painting that he can barely make out:

[1]Entering that gable-ended Spouter-Inn, you found yourself in a wide, low straggling entry with old-fashioned wainscots, reminding one of the bulwarks of some condemned old craft. [2]On one side hung a very large oil painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal crosslights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. [3]Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched. [4]But by dint of much and earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings, and especially by throwing open the little window towards the back of the entry, you at last came to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted.

[5]But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. [6]A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. [7]Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant. [8]Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through. --[9]It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale. [10]--It's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements. --[11]It's a blasted heath. --[12]It's a

Hyperborean winter scene. --[13]It's the breaking-up of the icebound stream of Time. [14] But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. [15] That once found out, and all the rest were plain. [16]But stop; does it not bear a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great leviathan himself? [17]In fact, the artist's design seemed this: a final theory of my own, partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed upon the subject. [18]The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads.

Your first task is to try to replicate this painting on a separate sheet of paper—you can use any visual medium you want—pens, colored pencils, crayons, fingerpaints, oil, etc. As you come into the classroom, we'll tape these up, creating a gallery of interpretations or "readings" of these three paragraphs.

Then use your words to write on your experiences trying to turn Ishmael's prose into something visual. What difficulties, if any, did you run into? Why do you think so much time is spent on describing a painting in a room to which never return in the course of the novel? [This runs against Ibsen's advice that if you have pistols hanging on the wall in the first scene of a play, they should go off by the end.] What might the purpose of this scene near the beginning of the novel be—can you extrapolate on what might follow it?

Now go back and focus on all aspects of Ishmael's style—the rhythm of his sentences, his syntax, his diction [note small, function words like "but," as well as lexical signs like "chaos"] to talk about Ishmael's mind and personality. Don't try to fish out biographical facts—there are few enough in the text about him either before or after this scene—but say what you can about how his experience of being in the world is conveyed through the textures and turns of his language. What questions and other comments does this journal entry raise in your own minds?

Pedagogical Rationale and Commentary

I see this first assignment as a kind of overture to the entire process, touching upon all the subsequent themes and processes: the attempted construction of meaning in the face of a world that frightens us with a sense of "chaos bewitched" and the role of art in this encounter, the depiction and creation of consciousness in the very turns, twists, and textures of language itself, the nature of representation and interpretation, the fact that literature is not only immersed in these issues but often takes them as its major themes. For many students, confronting each other's radically different drawings dramatizes the subjective and individual nature of the interpretative process. For most of us, we experience ourselves as reading the "text" while others are merely making interpretations. This assignment helps moves them from this egocentrism to experience their own rendition of the painting as yet another interpretative version.

In other words, theoretical and philosophical issues are raised, but only in the context of the students own reading and writing [and in this case, drawing] experience. Some students, for example, will likely notice that some of the drawings include frames around them and if so, the teacher can seize that moment to question them about the extent to which the work of art too selectively "frames" exterior realities, about what determines what is in and out of the frame, about when the frame becomes part of the picture itself. A companion piece here would be that moment in "The Custom-House" when the author takes the moonlit room symbolizing romance and flips it into another dimension by turning around and looking at the scene in a mirror—a mirror that includes, of course, himself as author. So to what extent does the embedding of a work of art within a larger work of art create reflectivity, and how does this influence the reading of the entire text?

My department requires two introductory courses for the English major, both taught at the lower-division level—a small seminar in Literary Analysis and a lecture course in Modern Critical Thought. This coming year I am teaching several sections of the former in part to suggest that if taught reflectively and metacognitively this course could make the latter obsolete, or at least relegate it to an upper-division elective. In other words, I think it more important for students to learn how to become their own theoreticians, reflecting and conceptualizing their immediate experiences rather than having to start with the pre-fabricated, often jargon-rich formulations of Derrida or Judith Butler.

Another reason for beginning with this exercise is that right from the start it signals that students that there will be no bystanders here, only active participants. Some students will feel shy about displaying their artistic skills or lack of them in front of the entire class or feel that this is a throwback to those high school assignments where they were asked to make a whale ship out of construction paper. But hopefully these students see that much of what we do in this classroom are not "tests," but structured learning experiences.

From a discussion of the visual interpretations, I then ask the students to turn to a more direct analysis of the language itself. At some level the class begins to realize a central complexity: that Ishmael is describing temporally what is a static, spatial object, and that we as readers have to reconstruct space ourselves from what is rendered through time. This indeed is what we readers do with any narrative as we add previous details to current ones in building up a mental picture of a scene or character, and this process adds as spatial dimension to reading that some reader response critics are hesitant to acknowledge.

If the spatial, then, must necessarily be rendered through the temporal, what, I ask the students, orders that temporal recounting? After we try more schematic orders such as left to right or top to bottom, most classes observe that the prose follows a more psychological and epistemological tracing of Ishmael's mental processes, which we then try to track more specifically rhythms, syntax, and diction. For instance, as we read the passage we notice how sentences like the second and third go on past the point at which our ears expects them to stop syntactically. Instead of mitigating this aspect, Ishmael increases it in both sentences by adding an extra "and" between the first and second items in a series as well as between the second and the last, which seems part of a general strategy of extending and redundancy in constructions such as

"shades and shadoes," "puzzled and confounded," "chaos bewitched," "at last come to the conclusion" and the piling up of adjectives, especially in sentences 5 and 6 and 7.

Once a student observed that if she were to write like Ishmael, her instructor would keep writing "wordy" or "redundant" in red ink on the passage. If we remember, though, that if Ishmael is rendering a series of mental processes rather than giving us the "answer," a bottom line, we can witness a mind throwing up excess verbiage and elaborate syntax to grapple with an unknown, dimly perceived, threatening reality. It is a mind that seeks some kind of ordered, rational naming but that also has the intellectual honesty not to settle for oversimplifications or glib answers. The syntax is almost consistently involuted, complex, hypotactic. The important exception, however, is the run of five simple, paratactic, anaphoristic sentences, 9 through 13, the ideas in which, we are told beforehand, are "bright, but, alas, deceptive." It is as if anything clear and distinct must necessarily be erroneously oversimplified in Melville's world, where bright ideas cancel each other out after suggesting a vague tone of foreboding, conflict, and chaos. The "but, alas" could be a signature phrase for the entire passage, where four of the sentences begin with "But" and another "Yet."

The passage is essentially a crash course in both reading Moby-Dick and in reading complex literature in general. There is no single interpretation I want students to achieve here, but rather the total experience of going through the same kinds of tenacious yet open-minded seekings Ishmael performs: trying to perceive and order, hypothesize and test, reconstruct and imagine. I want them to find ways to deepen and problematize their own initial responses, and I try to help them by slowing down their reading mainly through the reflective acts of writing and discussing. Some of the questions and tasks I put before them are general, intended to trawl the widest range of personal responses, but others call for quite specific rereading and reflections, as, for example, what it might mean to "delineate chaos."