on trying to get it right and knowing that I never will. Faulkner, himself a farmer, knew that the end never comes, the answer remains elusive but that the value of his endeavor was in the attempt. The beauty, the worth, in teaching and in farming comes from personal fulfillment.

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BLOOM, HIRSCH, AND BARTHES IN THE CLASSROOM: NEGOTIATING CULTURAL LITERACY

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In describing the current state of education, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., notes a decline of interpretative reading skills among students, supporting his claim with references to various commissions and reports (*Cultural Literacy* 27, 219). Teachers of introductory college literature courses were scarcely surprised. For some time we have complained of the passivity of our students. "In this consumer-oriented age of instant gratification, people don't really read any more," we often say; "they just look at the words." Their papers we find equally unsatisfactory, often merely summaries of plot or of lecture material. For their part, students are puzzled by what we do in class. Hesitating, a few appear after class. "I really read the assignment," they begin apologetically, "but I didn't see any of that stuff you were talking about." Others approach more defensively, their papers still warm with red-inked invective against plot summary and imprecise diction: "I made an A in English last semester. Just what is it you want?"

This little vignette, common as it is, encapsulates one aspect of the current discussion of the literacy crisis. In this case, however, literacy refers not to the mere ability to read and write but to what Robert Pattison has described as an awareness of the uses and problems of language coupled with an ability "to express this consciousness in the ways evolved and sanctioned by the culture" in which a person lives (6). Their inability to interpret is akin to the failures of Pattison's "clown," who is "programmed to understand language only in its most literal form" and who "cannot adjust for context, tone, or nuance" (14).

The "clown" that Pattison describes, however, is supposed to be a literary creation, familiar only as a comic convention. What of those earnest students who dutifully read assignments and still come away from our lectures baffled? A real source of the problem lies, I think, in the term *reading*. Although we do not always say so explicitly, we want our students to reread a work of literature and draw subtle inferences from it, to spot patterns of repetition, and to tease out ambiguities. The truth is that most people do not read in that way; indeed, it runs counter to the prevailing notion of reading. In the larger culture to which our students belong, reading is a valued skill for retrieving information stored in print. That information is expected to be wholly unambiguous, so that all readers will extract the same single meaning from a printed text. After that meaning has been correctly extracted, one returns to the words that encoded it only for utilitarian reasons. There is little need, for example, to reread a computer manual or the *Wall Street Journal* except to solve a particular problem or to predict a trend.

Students learn to read that way both outside and inside school. We measure the reading comprehension of younger students by seeing how much data they can decode and maintain in short-term memory. Students are taught to treat imaginative literature in the same way. They are asked to recall plots, describe characters as objectively as possible, identify figures of speech. When it is time to draw inferences from or otherwise interpret a story, they are told the single meaning of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or *Julius Caesar* and store it away until it is called for, probably on an exam. New information about other works may be added, of course, but one need not return to a text unless its meaning has for some reason slipped out of storage. Such an approach is not limited to primary and secondary school instruction. One need only look at such an influential work as Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* to see how firmly it is entrenched in higher education as well. The long-powerful New Criticism also tended to posit a single best reading of a work, for the formal data of a piece of literature all pointed to a single best reading. The work might be reinterpreted on the basis of that data, but the new reading supplanted the incorrect old one.

The two most widely discussed recent books on the literacy crisis have tended to perpetuate this view of education as the accumulation and consumption of data. The metaphor of education as consumption (in a physical sense) is quite prominent in the opening section of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. In the preface, he comments that the essence of the craft of teaching is knowing both the "hungers" of the young and "what they can digest" (19). Later, rock music is described as "indigestible" (75) and its practitioners as "purveyors of junk food for the soul" (77). The metaphor is perhaps clearest in his approving summary of the "old Great Books conviction" that "the human desire to know is permanent, that all it really needs is the proper nourishment, and that education is merely putting the feast on the table" (51). Bloom repeatedly states that education should develop the whole person, but there is little sense that this well-fed intellect is developed by exercise. Curiously, then, despite his screed against the apathy of modern students, the student's preferred role in Bloom's view of education is also largely passive.

Likewise, Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* treats knowledge as discrete, unambiguous pieces of information to be presented for students to absorb. Acquisition of content is more important than skills: "Only by accumulating the shared symbols, and the shared information the symbols represent, can we learn to communicate effectively with one another in our national community" (xvii). For Hirsch, however, there is an immediate practical purpose for accumulating these symbols. The opening chapter of Hirsch's book makes it particularly clear that effective communication is a matter of economics. Hirsch quickly points out that only "highly literate societies can prosper economically"

(1) and discusses the use of Shakespearean allusions in business letters (9).

I concede that my quoting is highly selective and that I oversimplify Hirsch's and Bloom's positions considerably; furthermore, both men's books seem genuine attempts to defend the value of humanism and to ensure its survival. Nevertheless, it may still fairly be said that both treat knowledge as a commodity, something to be consumed or to be stored and then traded with. The more information one controls, the higher his or her value in the intellectual marketplace. To reread a text simply slows acquisition. It is, in short, a poor management practice.

In *S/Z* Roland Barthes identifies both the economic and consumerist (in Bloom's sense) implications of our habit of not returning to a text. Rereading, he points out, is "an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us 'throw away' the story once it has been consumed ('devoured'), so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book." In such a society, he wryly adds, rereading is tolerated "only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors)" (15-16). If Barthes is right in delineating this prevailing cultural attitude, we should certainly understand our students' confusion at our implicit assumption that a text is to be reread. If we share the prevailing values of the larger culture, then we should modify our approach to help them learn how to throttle down a literary text to a single meaning. We should act on Bloom's and Hirsch's assumptions that it is enough to supply students with information to be mastered as quickly as possible and turned to their economic advantage.

If, however, our values are opposed to this consumerist attitude – and we have traditionally claimed that they are – some other approach is needed. With Jerome Bruner, I would argue that something larger than the old system of education, whereby one merely transmits knowledge and values to the inexperienced, is needed; that education is a forum in which one negotiates and renegotiates the culture; that students must be active participants rather than passive consumers (123). In short, what I propose is a compromise between the older authoritarian model of education and recent developments in critical theory. Such a view of education need not lead to the relativism or anarchy feared by Bloom, nor need it neglect the content prized by Hirsch. The teacher's greater experience and knowledge would continue to play an important part in that negotiation, both in providing information (as in the older model) and in pointing the boundaries established by consensus in the discipline. In addition to these elements of the tradition defended by Hirsch and Bloom, this method would attempt to involve the student more thoroughly as a participant in the culture in which he or she is increasingly sharing. Classroom discussions would be designed to help students model the interpretative behaviors that literature classes have often claimed as their goals.

At this point, it would be helpful to look at a particular statement of those goals, especially an institutional rather than an individual one. The undergraduate catalog of the University of Texas at Arlington includes a course description for English 2319, British Literature, that is typical of many such statements in its all-encompassing seriousness of purpose and in its grand generality: "Major British authors with emphasis on their ideas and the ways in which their works reflect cultural values; introduction to . . . critical methods of reading (e.g., biographical, formalistic, mythological, psychological, etc.) which will enable students to perceive those ideas and values" (178). It seems a description that calls for activity, not passive consumerism, on the part of the students. How then are they to go beyond reading only the literal level that both the larger society and their education have fostered?

One of the first questions that must be answered in trying to plan such a course concerns the nature of reading, particularly the kind of reading that is expected of "literature." Barthes' *S/Z* contains not only a description of consumerist reading habits but also, in his detailed examination of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, an approach to rereading a text that can profitably be adapted for an introductory literature course. Barthes opens the text by arbitrarily dividing it into small units (which he calls lexias) and then examining the "codes" or means by which these units signify. He isolates five such codes: the hermeneutic, the proairetic, the semic, the symbolic, and the referential. The hermeneutic code identifies, suggests, formulates, sustains, and eventually answers some question. The proairetic code refers to the sequence of actions that shape the story. The semic code refers to the individual appearance of the seme, the "signifier par excellence because of its connotations in the usual sense of the term." This "shifting element . . . can combine with other similar elements to create characters, ambiances, shapes, and symbols" (17). Such combinations constitute a fourth code, the symbolic. The grouping of elements is often rhetorically patterned in various sorts of repetition, including reversal, contrast, and antithesis. The fifth of Barthes' codes is the referential or cultural code, which draws upon a science or body of special knowledge (e.g., medical, literary, historical, or psychological information).

Barthes' concern in *S/Z* is to examine the reading process, not to establish the "truth" of the text or to set forth a criticism of it. However, as he acknowledges, his examination draws on the substance of several schools of criticism (psychological, psychoanalytical, thematic, historical, and structural), and he also notes that "if it should so desire" any one of these criticisms could make its voice heard (14). It is this pluralism of methods that makes his approach particularly attractive for the sort of course described in the catalog entry cited earlier. Because of Barthes' manner of presentation, though, the voices of these codes are likely to be voices of confusion for the beginning student. The arcane vocabulary, eclectic approach, and difficult style will not make *S/Z* an automatic choice as the text for most freshmen and sophomore courses. His procedure, however, can be described in much simpler terms that can provide students with a strategy for rereading a text in a way that opens a number of ways of interpretation for them. The balance of this essay will describe an attempt to incorporate such a program into this same sophomore-level British literature course already described.

The first item on the syllabus was "The Sisters," the opening story of Joyce's *Dubliners*, a seemingly simple narrative that generally leaves students baffled or even a little indignant because so little seems to happen in this very straightforward account of events. Faced with that response, I suggest a close look at the story with particular attention to five areas: questions raised by the text, actions or events in the narrative, connotations of individual words, patterns of repetition or contrast emerging as the story progresses, and items referring to some body of specialized knowledge. We divided the opening paragraph of the story into small segments and then examined them in great detail. Although the class devoted about forty minutes to this activity, I shall recount only a bit of it here, emphasizing the kinds of things that emerged rather than modeling the process by which they emerged.

The title itself poses several questions that the reader sustains and modifies throughout much of the story. Who are the sisters?

Why are they important? It also suggests a cluster of connotations. Not only does *sisters* denote female siblings or perhaps a religious order, but it also suggests such qualities as nurturing and sheltering. The opening clause ("There was no hope for him this time") yields much as well, particularly in the form of questions. Who is he? What is wrong with him? The second question seems to be answered by the following clause ("it was the third stroke"), but the first will be sustained for some time yet, together with the increasing suspicion that something other than a stroke has caused Father Flynn's decline. Also present in the opening clause is the suggestion of some repeated action in the words "this time" and, within the next clause, in the mention of a third stroke. This reference also points to a body of medical knowledge about the usual physical effects of stroke, the importance of which becomes gradually clearer as the rereading progresses.

On one occasion, this passage also served to introduce the limits of private associations. Two students commented on it, one saying that it made her think of her grandfather (who had suffered a stroke), another saying that it made him think of baseball ("three strikes and you're out"). Several audible groans from the class made it possible (without overtly imposing the authority of the teacher) to ask why they were willing to accept one personal response as more valid than the other. Thus the concept of a community of readers was introduced as an almost tacit group of assumptions that might be consciously examined.

The next division of the text provides more questions and more repeated actions. It reads: "Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly." At the very least, the passage raises two important questions. Who is the narrator? What is his relationship to the first figure mentioned? The first question is answered partly with the special knowledge that "vacation time" identifies the narrator as a student. The second question, however, is one of the crucial issues of the story. It is important that students discover how quickly the text poses the question and the related question of the cause of the priest's decline. It is still more important that they see that their fellow students have a variety of answers about its eventual resolution. In this case, the very fact of these differences not only evades the simple consumerist attitude of a single meaning per text, but it also suggests the importance of unanswered questions in the story. Although the language itself is unambiguous, the enigma posed is sustained throughout the story, and the text consistently refuses an explicit answer.

This same division of the text introduces a set of repeated actions that help point the way to a possible answer. The narrator twice mentions looking up at the lighted window and trying to find some meaning in it. The repetition is emphasized with the repetition of the words "night after night" and the references to "light." Because we are rereading and can look forward to later passages in this story, this pattern of seeking understanding from observing closely begins to emerge as an action that reveals something of the narrator's character. This scene is also highly suggestive when contrasted with the narrator's walk in the sunshine and his inspection of the house the following day. Those students who are already disposed to hunt symbols are not quite sure what to make of this contrast, for it disappoints expectations of a simple reversal: even though he now knows that the priest has died, the boy is really no more "enlightened" in the daylight than he was in the darkness of the previous night.

A number of other ideas emerge from this very close rereading of the opening paragraph, but the final section, which reveals the boy's fascination with such words as *paralysis*, *gnomon*, and *simony*, is particularly important. The text is quite insistent on their identity as words, and a discussion of their meaning and the realization that they recur throughout the story at key points emphasizes their place in the whole work. Their conjunction here and their repetition carry much meaning. In the discussion of these words at least two goals are achieved: students should become somewhat more sensitive to language and to shades of meaning, and their "cultural literacy" is also enriched in the talk about Euclid, geometry, and church history.

After this intensive examination, the students' eyes have begun to glaze; and to reread the whole story in such detail would be to produce another *S/Z*, a truly daunting prospect. In the remaining half of the period, the students followed out some of the threads of meaning introduced in this paragraph, identifying for themselves particularly significant episodes: the boy's exchange with Old Cotter, the boy's recollection of his dream, the priest's sister's account of the priest's collapse. The discussion provided no fixed answers, no single set interpretation of the work; but it did something much more valuable: the initially uneventful story is on some level "about" coming to know and making choices on the basis of the data obtained in that difficult process. With careful rereading, the text itself really could be seen to signal the presence of those issues.

Subsequent meetings devoted to other stories in *Dubliners* suggested that this strategy produces more engagement with the text than is often the case. Asked to read a text and then to reconsider it with these five concepts (questions, actions, connotations, patterns, and special knowledge) in mind, students were able to comment at least tentatively that an episode seemed to be important because of some pattern of repetition or contrast or that it appeared to rely on specialized knowledge that they did not yet possess. These comments provided starting points for discussion. Some of them were fairly predictable, as in the need for a good deal of attention to such specialized knowledge as the unfamiliar parlour games and the mistake in Maria's song in "Clay." It was particularly encouraging to have students note such subtler things as Gabriel's frustrating sequence of encounters with a whole series of women as a recurring pattern in "The Dead," and even to point out that, as readers, we have to sort through the relationships among these characters and re-evaluate them just as Gabriel himself finally does. Many of the items discussed during class became the basis for papers, and I was particularly pleased to find that two students used this approach to develop ideas not introduced in the class discussion. Both of them dealt with "A Painful Case": one discussing the changing significance of the title, the other showing the significance of Duffy's repeated action of placing physical distance between himself and others.

On the basis of one trial it would, of course, be preposterous to claim that this adaptation of Barthes' strategy solves all the problems of introducing students to the study of literature, but it does provide a fairly simple way of approaching the long-standing problem of rereading literature. At the same time, it begins to empower students to draw inferences from a text by becoming aware of the uses and problems of language. In confronting those problems, students must also confront what Bloom has identified as the central question of humanism, what it means to be human. The examination of the body of accumulated knowledge that is implicit in literature also addresses what Hirsch calls cultural literacy but puts it within this human con-

text. In the long run, literacy is much more than consuming, storing, and trading information. Because this Barthesian method provides some means of approaching many of the important issues in the current debates about cultural literacy through dealing with the perennial problems of textual interpretation, I am encouraged to continue experimenting with this approach.

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