

LITERARY INTERPRETATION AND WRITING-TO-LEARN: COMMENTARIES IN A MILTON COURSE

Anne Whitney

Introduction

Classroom genres support student participation in a discourse community, and they shape the interpretive options available to students. The “English paper,” for example, is a familiar convention in high school and college literature classes: it is a genre in which almost everyone has written even while few can define it clearly. Although too often a teacher’s or professor’s expectations for such assignments are left unspoken, most students nevertheless learn to produce a “term paper,” an essay in which a literary text is explicated or analyzed. The term paper usually comes at the end of a quarter or semester, and it usually represents a kind of final statement of achievement in a course: it demonstrates a student’s understanding of course texts and his or her interpretive ability, much as a final exam might in another subject area.

Of course, not all writing that students do in English classes performs this assessment function. English instructors sometimes assign informal writing, freewrites, short homework assignments, and other less standardized genres, especially as writing-to-learn has become more embedded in college teaching across the curriculum. These writing assignments are meant to be formative rather than summative; they serve to support students’ reading of texts and the development of interpretations rather than demonstrating or defending “final” readings of those texts. When

literature courses take up writing for the purpose of developing interpretations (rather than only for the purpose of demonstrating them or of demonstrating that the teacher's interpretations have been internalized), how does it work? How does this writing differ from the writing students do in more conventional papers? And, most importantly, in a course in which the main work of the quarter is to engage in the thoughtful study, discussion, and interpretation of literary texts, how does student writing actually connect to students' understanding of those texts? To the discourse of the classroom?

To explore these questions, I examined student writing in an undergraduate Milton course. In particular, this classroom community used the "commentary" as a pedagogical genre, a written form that both supports and makes visible students' learning to produce literary interpretations. I will make four claims. First, students used commentaries to make four distinct types of interpretive moves. Second, the commentary genre not only regulated the shape that students' written products took but also supported students' developing interpretive competence. Third, that range of interpretive moves, while particular to this one classroom community, resonates with existing theoretical models of literary interpretation. Finally, the commentary genre facilitated teaching by serving as a window into the "black box" of students' emerging competence.

Background: Writing-to-learn in the college literature classroom

The commentary, like many of the other forms of classroom writing assigned in English classes, such as response logs, reading journals, and quickwrites, exemplifies the notion of writing-to-learn. That notion, perhaps expressed most influentially in Emig's landmark claim that "writing represents a unique mode of learning" (89), has stimulated a widespread movement to better understand writing processes and to make use of them in supporting student learning in every discipline. As this movement has grown, its focus at the college level in the United States has

increasingly tended toward a writing pedagogy situated in specific disciplines, where writing both supports learning in that field and is practiced within the particular set of rhetorical situations and expectations appropriate for that field (McCarthy; McLeod).

Since this movement began, scholarly work presenting teaching strategies has included English among these disciplines—for example Fulwiler’s influential *The Journal Book* devotes a full quarter of its chapters to “Journals and the Teaching of English” (99-216), or see Young and Fulwiler’s collection *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature*, in which teachers describe and comment upon classroom practices. Mayher, Lester and Pradl’s *Learning to Write/Writing to Learn* similarly advises teachers across grades and subject areas; the text includes language arts as part of “the arts” in a chapter on writing across the curriculum but does not address the role of writing in teaching literary interpretation. In *Readers, Texts, Teachers*, Corcoran and Evans offer essays exploring the import of reader response theory for literature classrooms, and these essays (the essays by Adams, Young and Robinson, and Stratta and Dixon are notable examples) make clear the utility of classroom writing as a way to access student responses and to move response into interpretation.

Subsequent work has addressed informal or low-stakes writing in college classrooms more particularly: in undergraduate American literature classrooms (Fulwiler, “Writing and Learning American Literature”), in e-mail exchanges and online fora (Gillespie), or in rewriting short stories in ways that accessed students’ own experience (Klopfenstein). These contributions emphasize the importance of low-stakes writing that occurs while students grapple with literary texts as opposed to writing composed after reading, and they reveal the relationship between students’ developing interpretations of texts and the development of a classroom community in which those readings can be shared and compared.

M. Elizabeth Sargent places students in peer groups to respond to low-stakes, informal writing; she emphasizes this strategy as a way of getting students response to their writing in classes too

large for her to respond to each piece herself. At the end of her essay “Peer Response to Low Stakes Writing in a WAC Literature Classroom,” she cites among the benefits of this practice that

My students begin to lose their assumption that literary interpretation is magic or arbitrary; they begin to see how readers gradually build interpretations of texts in public negotiations with other readers—they begin to understand how the wider conversation that is literary criticism works and how they might go about joining that conversation, particularly as they develop the skill of grounding all they say in the text. (50)

While an exploration of students’ interpretive processes is not Sargent’s main project in this piece, she foregrounds an important feature of shared student writing in a literature classroom: it mirrors on a smaller scale the sharing of ideas and interpretations that occurs in the scholarly community through journals and conference presentations. Scholars do not read in isolation and formulate elaborate insights about literary texts in a vacuum; they bounce ideas off of one another in conferences, via email, and in hallway conversations, seeking out others’ points of view at every stage. This is a point that proved important in students’ uses of the commentary in the present study. Interpretations arise gradually from social interaction in a community of readers, not magically and in isolation.

Students have been more frequently encouraged to access this notion of the interpretive community in the composition classroom than in the literature classroom. Weaver discusses his desire to help students adopt the same stance in literary interpretation that they had done in his writing classes, classes in which texts were understood to be constructed in their reading rather than imbued with hidden meaning and in which students (as authors of the texts under consideration) had readily claimed the authority necessary to engage in critical interpretation of texts. Finding that students either resisted or felt unable to adopt that

stance when it came to interpreting literary texts, he changed the writing assignments he was using in the literature course: “Rather than asking them to argue persuasively for their interpretation, I would ask them to compare their responses of the text to the responses of other readers and to account for similarities and differences” (205). The resulting discussions of the differences between classmates’ competing interpretations prompt students to consider the sources of their own readings and to relax their typical expectation that the instructor will supply the “correct” reading for students to adopt.

It makes sense that the advent of writing-to-learn would profoundly influence the teaching of literature, as English has traditionally been the departmental home of those working in composition. At least since the advent of writing-to-learn and the related shifts in English studies away from New Criticism as the dominant mode of criticism and pedagogy and in composition studies away from the “current-traditional” paradigm (Hairston), scholars and teachers in English and composition have called for changes in the way literary interpretation is taught (e.g. Jacobs; Railey). Yet the “English paper” at the end of a term still typifies student writing practice in most college literature classrooms, and in the main, classroom approaches to the teaching of literary interpretation seem to have been slow to change.

The factors making this so are many and complex. They include the politics of relationships between composition studies and literature studies. They also include the delay in assembling a clear empirical research base to support such a shift (which is itself related to composition’s historical relationship to English studies and its research traditions). Generally speaking, the scholarship on writing-to-learn in literature (like that cited above) has consisted of practitioner-based arguments for favored classroom practices, humanistic essays about teaching approaches born of the research traditions that inform English departments. These essays are important, thoughtful discussions of a teaching practice, but only rarely do they cite student work directly (Fulwiler’s case study is a notable exception); almost never do they examine that

student work systematically to document whether and how the stated processes are in fact occurring. Only occasionally has that scholarship included empirical analysis of what students actually do in their writing. While student texts have appeared in the work as examples, they have only rarely been analyzed in systematic, empirical fashion (articles in *College English*, for instance, typically do not have an explicit methods section). The result is that while a rich body of research literature about writing-to-learn has become available for teachers in disciplines as varied as computer science (Hartman), biology (Cannon), physics (Audet, Hickman, and Dobrynina), nursing (Cowles, Strickland, and Rogers; Gillis), and psychology (Radmacher and Latosi-Sawin), to name just a few examples, observational research has rarely focused particularly on writing in the literature classroom. The present study represents a small step toward providing such an analysis, toward making available to English a research base of the type now available to those other fields. If we can observe how writing functions to shape the skills and identities of architects or engineers, we can similarly observe how writing functions to shape interpretations and interpreters of literary texts.

If a goal of writing across the curriculum is that students learn to write for a discipline by participating in the actual writing tasks practiced by those working in that discipline, and if a central task of the discipline of English is the task of literary interpretation, it makes sense that writing tasks in an English literature classroom should engage students in acts of literary interpretation. How and when do students learn to interpret literature through classroom writing? This study is an attempt to catch them in the act, to unpack the ways in which one classroom genre, the commentary, supported and shaped students' emerging competence as interpreters of literary texts.

Research context and method

To investigate the function of this classroom genre in students' learning literary interpretation, I conducted research in an

undergraduate course in Milton at a large public university. This class of approximately 35 undergraduates was taught by a senior professor. The class met for an hour three times a week, and the term lasted for ten weeks in Spring 2003. Over the course of the term, the class read and discussed several of Milton's prose writings along with the poems *Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

My role in the class was that of participant observer. I attended every class meeting, having been introduced as "a graduate student in education who is interested in both Milton and in your writing." I read assigned readings, took part in discussions, and wrote commentaries and a final paper as a regular student. In addition, I took observation notes during class meetings and collected all of the weekly writing assignments (called "commentaries") handed in during the ten-week quarter, which I later analyzed using content analysis. All students in the course consented to my using their work for this study with the condition that their names not be attached to their comments.

What this professor calls a "commentary" is much like the "response papers" or weekly writings used in many other literature classrooms. On the first day of class, commentaries were assigned as follows:

Weekly commentaries (1-2 pages in length) will be invited from students in weeks 2-8, addressing some passage or problem or issue in the text under discussion for that week. A commentary may be an explication or analysis of a complicated idea, an exploration or inquiry into a problematic passage or concept, a meditation on a narrated event or theological doctrine, or a reflection on some lines or scene of interest. (course syllabus)

These assignments were collected and responded to (though not evaluated) by the professor each week. Most weeks they were also read and discussed with peers in small groups, and on some occasions they were also read aloud by the professor as discussion

starters for the class as a whole. While my analysis focuses on these particular students writing in this one classroom in response to this one assignment, their writing resembles that in which many teachers aware of writing-to-learn concepts ask their students to engage.

The commentary's particular function was as a tool for teaching literary interpretation. With the goal of eliciting and shaping interpretations in a community of readers, the commentary assignment positioned students as able interpreters of texts. The audience for the commentary was the academic community of the classroom, and commentaries were written with the knowledge that they might be read aloud, that they would be responded to in discussion. Thus commentary writing (or other similar assignments used by instructors in similar ways) serves a function for a class that mirrors the function of an academic article for the scholarly community: the pieces of writing represent turns taken in an evolving discussion about interpretive questions that are of persistent interest to members of the group. Commentaries both move the individual students forward as interpreters of texts and the class forward in its collective project of working on a single text, just as a single scholarly article represents an advance in that scholar's thinking about a literary work and a contribution to the body of general understanding of that work.

Interpretive Moves Within a Commentary

The instructor's assignment above gives an idea of the range of options available to students as they prepare commentaries. However, anyone who has spent time in schools knows that what we ask for and what students actually produce are not always the same; in fact they're never the same. Students determine through experience the range of responses available within assignment parameters; in the best situations they find ways within that range to meet not only the assignment expectations but meet their own needs as well. In other words, students use assignments to say what they need to say, and they often do this in ways that surprise the designers of assignments. What, then, did students in this

class actually do in commentaries? What sorts of interpretive tasks were executed using that genre?

To determine this, I sampled from the complete set of commentaries the subset that was turned in during Week 8, the last week in which commentaries were due. I thus worked with a sample of 22 commentaries. I read each piece of student writing several times, stating for each the central questions that paper seemed to be exploring, answering, or trying to answer. The resulting list of questions could then be divided into four overall types. The types represent not distinct categories into which papers can be sorted but instead a taxonomy of interpretive moves students made in their writing. Students made four types of moves: working on a line, resolving seeming inconsistencies in the system of the text, applying the text to a life problem, and exploring “the big questions.” Although the moves resemble a hierarchy in some ways (as I discuss below), I wish to emphasize that students do not move stepwise from one move to the next across a quarter or semester, and no move is valued more than any other. Over the course of the quarter, as commentaries were written and shared with the class, commentaries making any or all of these moves were rewarded and responded to by classmates and/or the professor; the four moves constitute the range of ways students worked through texts in their writing and, consequently, the range of problem types they identified and took on in their reading. In addition, approximately the same number of students made each move. Thus this set of moves does not represent a hierarchy of objectives, in which the most successful students have moved by the end of the quarter past the earlier moves and into the later ones; instead, it represents an interpretive repertoire that students developed through their writing and used throughout the course.

Working on a line

In one set of pieces, students focused their writing on individual lines from Milton. Here students worked on problems with single lines (or occasionally small groups of lines). In some cases, these

commentaries simply worked on Milton's syntax to untangle the literal sense of the line; this approach appeared nearer the beginning of the quarter, but as time passed it became less and less common. Instead of working on lines to figure out their sentence sense, students worked on lines to consider the implications of Milton's word choice or repetition of words or phrases in earlier lines. Thus the students spent some time on lines in the beginning of the course simply learning how to decipher Milton's often-difficult constructions, and in a course on a more contemporary author that work might not take as long. However, the more substantive work on lines, in which students explore things like word choice, would be of equal importance regardless of the set of texts under consideration.

The change in the Milton students' working on lines, from decoding near the beginning of the quarter to more substantive analysis near the end of the quarter, can be explained in two ways. First, students got better at reading Milton as time went on and no longer had trouble working out Milton's long and complicated sentences. Second, they had more pressing things to write about by the end of the quarter and so did their decoding work elsewhere (alone or in conversation with classmates rather than in their commentaries). I speculate that the change in practice was a combination of this last factor and the fact that the instructor rarely selected this type of paper to read aloud; though class discussions did take up those problems, they appeared rarely in the later papers. That few papers dealing with understanding at the level of decoding only were read aloud or commented upon by the professor or peers is unsurprising: it reinforces the writing's function as contributing to a classroom discourse. Problems with lines that arise from misreadings or from unfamiliar vocabulary are private, individual problems; such problems can be solved by rereading, asking for help, or consulting a reference source. The problems in lines that students chose to bring to their writing, on the other hand, were public problems, problems that classmates were likely to be experiencing also (and in fact, most of these are also problems critics have

worked on at length as well), thus they are taken up by the professor and classmates in public discourse.

Usually, commentaries that worked on a line were dedicated to exploring Milton's use of a word or phrase that seemed surprising. For instance, one student cites Milton's ending of *Paradise Lost* in which Adam and Eve leave Eden: the pair "hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way" (*PL* book 12, line 750). The student notes,

It seems odd that he would choose to say that their path and future was a solitary one, for they had each other. Is Milton implying that since the fall, love and companionship can never be the same, as seen with the changed nature of their sexual relations, so much so that Adam and Eve are truly alone?

The student identifies a troublesome line and offers the interpretation above. However, it is characteristic of the commentaries that the interpretation is not left to stand pat, but is itself subject to interrogation. Thus the paper continues,

This also seems not quite right, because they still have the care of God and his divine providence to guide them through their hard future. Perhaps the purpose of describing their way as "solitary" was to emphasize the overwhelming nature of their situation, faced with the vast unknown, two small figures struggling for grace and unsure of their future role in the fallen outer world.

Many of the "working on a line" commentaries take on an inconsistency in the line: words that seem to be opposites are used together, or a line seems to present two mutually exclusive ideas. The line is surprising or troublesome not simply because of its syntax but because it seems to contradict itself. For example, one writer notes, "One line proves particularly challenging to me: 'His weakness shall o'ercome Satanic strength' (*PR* 1.161)." The

student points out the paradox of weakness overcoming strength, a seeming reversal of opposites. She then begins to work out how it might be true, beginning by calling on class discussions:

It is my understanding that weakness is synonymous with humility. We have discussed that Adam and Eve's prayers were more pleasing to God after the fall than before it...Their acknowledgement of their fault, and subsequent repentance, is their sign of humility.

She then fashions a possible answer to her question using both that insight and a relevant passage from a later book of *Paradise Regained*. She finally concludes with a working solution to the problem of the line:

By understanding that weakness from God's point of view translates into humility, we are able to see how the paradox works—how weakness will overcome Satan's power. Our humility rids us of our pride and keeps us in the grace of God.

It is important to note that working on a line is not the lowest form of commentary; it is simply the nearest to the student in that these lines can act as sticking points that must be worked out before other moves can be made productively. Yet as the above example shows, the work that students do on lines is not only preliminary work; the lines that are “sticky” tend to be lines in which the text's more problematic concepts are presented.

Resolving seeming inconsistencies in the system of the text

Another move student writers made in their commentaries was to explore features of the texts that seemed inconsistent with their understanding of the literary work as they had read it so far. These explorations are in a way extensions of the move made above—exploring a troublesome inconsistency in a line—but here

extend beyond a single line or passage to a more conceptual level. These commentaries chew on conceptual problems; for instance, they try to reconcile how God can take a particular action in a text given his commands in earlier books or to make sense of an event in the narrative in terms of earlier events.

This is not to say that commentaries working on lines don't also work on concepts. The above example on weakness and strength, for example, certainly considers the meaning of those words not just for the line but for the text and the world as a whole. The difference has more to do with how the student frames the problem; in the above category, the student locates the problem in a specific line even if it is also present in a more general way; in this second move, the student articulates the problem as conceptual.

This difference is important because it reflects an interpretive move outward; the second reading is more transpersonal as it gets at concepts that apply in situations beyond the line (and which foregrounds the move in the next two types of commentaries toward application outside of and beyond the text). Furthermore, the difference lies not just in the conceptual application but in the degree to which the student writer appears conscious of having made that connection.

One student, for example, asks how it is that Satan is not forgiven for his Fall while Adam and Eve are. In doing so, the student contrasts a situation in one part of the text with another, finding that the two seem inconsistent:

After examining the falls of Adam and Eve the past two weeks, as well as God's decision to forgive both of them, I was suddenly struck by the hypocrisy of that act. Satan too was cast out of God's graces but, unlike Adam and Eve, was never forgiven for his transgression.

He goes on to reason through the logic of the text around those two events. He examines and discards one solution discussed in class (the distinction that Satan was self-tempted while Eve was

not), introducing new evidence to complicate the problem: Satan's followers, who like Eve were tempted not by self but by Satan. "This is a group of beings that were tempted by Satan, much as Eve was tempted in the garden, yet they also receive no forgiveness or grace from God," he writes. "If Eve was forgiven because she was not self-tempted, because she was tricked/convicted to fall, then why not extend the same forgiveness to the fallen angels?"

Similarly, another student questions a later part of the same scene, in which Adam sees his future descendants ruled by tyrants. The student writes:

Would a God that is loving and just, as described, do such a thing to his children? Would a parent allow a child to get hit by a drunk driver in order to teach the child not to drink and drive? This is one of the moments where I notice a contradiction in Milton's description of God.

The passage suggests that this fate is part of God's punishment for Adam's sin, but the student finds it inconsistent with the character of God in the rest of the poem.

Applying the text to a life problem

A third interpretive move students made was to directly and explicitly seek to apply Milton to the real world. Again, this is not to say that commentaries in the earlier categories do not speak to life concerns, but that writing in this third category does so self-consciously where the others have been more primarily concerned with the poem itself. To make this move is to ask, "What does Milton have to say about ___?" where inserted in the blank is some current topic or concept of interest in daily life.

One student, for example, begins in a specific passage in which God scolds Satan for his lies. For most of the first paragraph, the student works through the passage, suggesting a "working on a line" approach. However, the end of the paragraph shifts to consider lying not just in the text itself but more generally:

God follows [a comment of Satan's] with 'Yet thou pretend'st to tell the truth' which to God is worse than just lying. Not only does Satan lie to everyone, he pretends to be telling them the truth. There is a difference between lying to get away with something and lying to convince someone to do something.

The rest of the commentary explores this range of types of lying and attempts, through application of passages from both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, to determine what Milton's work has to say on the matter.

A more ambitious example seeks a solution in Milton to the problem of oppression and violence in human history. The piece opens with a direct statement of the type of reading she will attempt:

I have been attempting to connect what I am reading in Milton to the world around me, hoping this will bring a meaning to the lines beyond a purely biblical one... I have been reading a lot about the colonization of peoples and land, by a country that assumes to be more powerful and more advanced. Although I was already familiar with this history (it doesn't really matter which, since all colonizing countries behaved in similar ways) I still feel very moved and perplexed on what drives one to feel such actions are reasonable and even "civilized." I must ask these questions because I am curious as to what separates me or anyone from such decision makers.

Noting that colonizing forces have leaders, the writer asks how such leaders get their power. The resulting discussion draws parallels between Satan and abusive dictators and Adam and Eve's temptation to human complacency in the face of oppression. Leaders only get their power when followers are there to be led:

Until individual man learns to nourish himself, and trust in his own inherent knowledge and reason, he will continue falling for one like the serpent. One who seeks souls that are hungry, and an army that will act for him in subjection to his will. There will always be one to “aspire above his brethren, to himself assuming authority usurped, from God not given” (*PL* 12.65-67).

Thus the commentary bringing the text to bear on a life problem starts with an issue in the world and then explores how the text might help to shed light on that issue.

Exploring “the big questions”

Finally, a fourth group of commentaries reached even further outward. While commentaries in the previous category bring Milton to bear on a life problem or issue, seeking parallels between situations in the book and situations in life, commentaries in this last group explore life questions more directly. To make the “big question” move is to ask “What is the nature of ____?”, where the blank contains God, Christ, Satan, sin, or some other age-old and transpersonal concern.

One student, for example, struggles to understand who Jesus is, not only in the text but in general. He asks:

What exactly is the nature of Jesus?...If the position of ‘Son of God’ is based on deeds, even in part, was Jesus better created to accomplish these things? And what exactly are these deeds? Just how different is Jesus from God? From man? From Angels?

While the paper begins at the text, it asks these questions in a way that reaches far beyond the text; the author asks not “who is Jesus in Milton” but more generally “who is Jesus?,” bringing the question to bear not only on Milton but also on life and faith in general.

Another student writes about the nature of courage. This commentary refers only obliquely to the text; it is based more specifically on a classroom discussion about whether Adam's decision to eat the apple and follow Eve was courageous, for he knew death was sure to follow. The student cites the discussion, teachings from his high school classes, James Bond movies, Zen Buddhism, and the tradition of the Samurai, exploring the notion of courage and its relationship to fear in these settings and in general. He makes some progress on the question, coming to claim that courage is "acting despite fear for life or safety." He uses this standard to explore both the text and the world:

...Zen Buddhists believe in reincarnation, whereas Jews, Christians, Muslims, and presumably Adam and Eve do not. Belief in reincarnation affords Zen samurai the opportunity to privilege duty above life, because individual lives mean nothing to a soul. If you will be reincarnated anyway, what cause do you have to fear for your life?

While he does refer to Adam's situation in *Paradise Lost*, the student makes it clear that his aim in the commentary is something other than to interpret Milton, writing explicitly that "this commentary is not terribly useful in helping understand why Adam chose to disregard his own life to join Eve in eating the apple." His goal is to interpret the issue—to interpret the text that is the world, not the text of *Paradise Lost*.

I again would acknowledge the overlap yet emphasize the distinction between these various types: it's not that other commentaries don't illuminate such questions, for they do. Instead, commentaries in this last set explicitly take up those questions; their language deals with the concepts directly and the express goal of the writing seems to be to solve these kinds of problems. In contrast, a commentary working on a line might indeed shed light on the nature of God, but the purpose for writing in that case was not to understand God but to understand a particular line. "Exploring the big questions" commentaries are

more ambitious in scope. Taken as a set, these four interpretive moves represent a range of stances students can take relative to the problems the text poses.

The Role of Genre

That students in this particular class used their writing to make this particular set of four interpretive moves does not imply that these are the only four acts of interpretation that could be made by any writer in any setting, or that these are the only four kinds of things that can be said about Milton. Instead, this particular scheme of interpretive moves illustrates the way genre functions to constrain the tenable range of responses that can occur in any discourse community; in fact this interpretive community was shaped by the commentary genre as much as individual written products were shaped by the members of the community. Bazerman explains that “A genre is a social construct that regularizes communication, interaction, and relations” (62). Genres such as the commentary—or other classroom genres—support the writer in shaping a response that will be acceptable and meaningful to the group; further, they in fact limit the range of insights that are available to the writer to begin with. Bawarshi, for example, shows how genre regulates invention in writing. Prior theories of writing processes have usually characterized the writer as sole inventor, an inventor influenced by context, history and so on but nonetheless one who “has ideas” to be “discovered” (53-55), as through prewriting or freewriting (60). This view would have students contemplating the Milton texts and coming up with insights in an independent fashion; students would then think about genre as a way of shaping the presentation of already-formed ideas. Bawarshi complicates this picture significantly: where genres are understood as sites for activity, and particularly for “literate, ideological activity” (18), they constrain not only the forms that written products may take but also everything else—the topics those texts might examine, the light in which they might be examined, and, most centrally for Bawarshi’s study, the

motives one might have for composing those texts, what is invented and who does the inventing (both “who” in the sense of which individual and “who” in the sense of what identity can that individual take). In other words, “Writers invent within genres and are themselves invented by genres...genres are places in which invention (and writers) take place” (Bawarshi 7). In this way, the students not only shape their written pieces to fit genre expectations, they in fact develop interpretations themselves within generic constraints.

This is not to say, however, that writers like the students in this class are entirely without agency. While genre does constrain their interpretive moves, Bawarshi also shows that “writers act as they are acted upon by genres” (91):

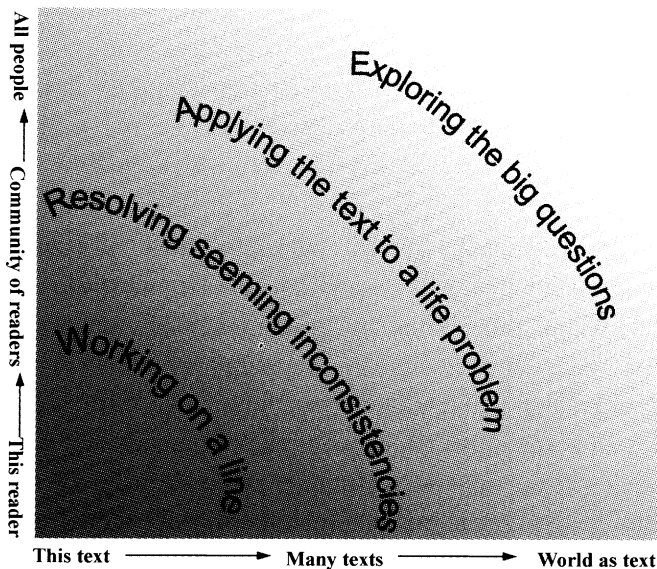
The power of genre resides, in part, in this sleight of hand, in which social obligations to act become internalized as seemingly self-generated desires to act in certain discursive ways. This does not mean, however, that writers’ desires are completely determined, as evidenced by the fact that textual instantiations of a genre are rarely if ever exactly the same. Every time a writer writes within a genre, he or she in effect acquires, interprets, and to some extent transforms the desires that motivate it...Genre motive alone thus does not “do” anything; it is a potential that requires individual interpretation and articulation in order for the motive to become actualized as social action. (Bawarshi 91-92)

There is a tension, then, between how students shape interpretations and yet are shaped by generic constraints. While genre constrains the writer at every level of composing right down to motive, writers still do something when they write; they are not only reproducing existing structures but using those structures to accomplish the aims of the community of practice in which those genres operate. Students in the Milton class used the constraints of the commentary genre to support their increasingly competent participation in an interpretive community.

The Shape of Interpretation

Considered as a system, the four broad interpretive moves that the students made can be represented graphically, and that graphic takes a familiar shape. In the chart pictured below, I plotted the four moves on one axis according to the range of readers to whom the move applies, and on another axis according to the range of texts encompassed in the reading. In this way, the four moves can be read as gradually broadening in scope, as indicated by the gradually diffusing density of the shading: from the most local (and darkest shaded) reading imaginable, in which one student struggles to decode the syntax of a single line for the purpose of getting through the text, to a reading somewhere in the middle of the chart, in which a student works on several passages in a way that illuminates some question of relevance to our classroom community, to a reading on the lightly shaded, outer edge in which the writer reads the texts and the world pursuant to a persistent human question.

Interpretive Moves



The graph also makes plain how it is that a piece of writing can take up both local and global questions simultaneously, how the best readings deal both with specific lines and passages and with theoretical and even moral concerns. Writers move freely through the system depicted in the graph, for the act of interpretation involves both synthesis and application; a student, like a critic, synthesizes evidence from the text and from the world and applies it to questions of meaning both in a particular passage and in a whole text, set of texts, or culture.

The range of moves thus graphically represented also suggests a shape that is by now familiar: it echoes both Moffett's universe of discourse and Scholes' moves among reading, interpretation, and criticism. The axes of human range and textual range indicated in my graphic are consistent with Moffett's notions of the speaker-subject relation and the speaker-listener relation; Moffett's characterization of discourse increasing in levels, distance, and abstraction prefigure the increasing diffusion of scope in my own representation. And while Moffett has perhaps been seen as tied to a romantic notion of the individual writer operating independently of anything like generic constraints, we see here that his scheme is in fact not incompatible with a socially-situated view of writing. It is in fact this particular genre as it is shaped and taken up in particular ways by the members of this classroom discourse community that maps the universe of discourse for these students.

Scholes, meanwhile, describes what he calls "the pedagogy of textual power," in which students gain both textual competence and awareness of what texts are and can do:

In working through the stages of reading, interpretation, and criticism, we move from a submission to textual authority in reading, through a sharing of textual power in interpretation, toward an assertion of power through opposition in criticism. This process is also based upon a continually widening concept of text, moving from a specific set of

printed signs to the codes and modes of thought and value that enable those signs to bear meaning. (39)

A classroom in which students move toward making all these four moves, then, as these students have in their commentaries, is one in which students are gaining “textual power,” equipping themselves for life beyond any specific work of literature or even literary study at all. Ultimately textual power, with its widening notion of text, is power to read and write the text that is the world. Students exercise that power when they use classroom writing to understand and make claims about Milton, themselves, and the world. The power of these student-produced texts, then, is not simply in the competence they demonstrate but in the competence they foster.

Implications for Teaching

The particulars of interpretive moves observed here, this specific set of four moves and the ways students in this course used the commentary genre to make those moves, are in an important sense unique artifacts of this particular interpretive community, in which students considered this particular set of challenging texts with a particular professor. Thus the findings of this study by no means point to a recipe or tidy set of interpretive moves that literature teachers might ask their own students to make, using some other text or some other form. Instead, they demonstrate the solutions one group of students developed in response to one set of texts in one context. Yet these findings shed light on classroom writing in literature courses more generally. They demonstrate how classroom genres like the commentary, in which student interpretations are tried out, made public, responded to, and made use of in the ongoing interpretive work of the class as a whole, become sites at which students’ readings are constructed. Further, even as individual students construct those individual readings, classes of students together develop repertoires of moves that are shared and that form the

common language of the interpretive community of the class. With a different professor, different students, and/or different texts, the tools in that repertoire might emerge in different forms or sequences, but the process by which those tools are arrived at and taken up will look similar.

The interpretive moves students make in the commentaries are not too different from those the best students in any literature class might make in an end-of-term “English paper.” What is their special importance taken separately? Why does the professor use the commentary to elicit this kind of work when he could just assign a culminating paper? First of all, the weekly commentaries allow both the professor and the students to see interpretations as they are being formed. They externalize and make explicit something usually left implicit and internal: students’ thinking as they work to make sense of a difficult text. Unlike scholarship in the sciences and social sciences, literary scholarship typically does not include a “methods section.” One does not ordinarily find in a critical article a sentence like “I read this poem thirteen times, underlining all the references to God and categorizing those references as follows.” The result for those who would learn to do literary interpretation themselves, in this case students, is an illusion of transparency in reading. Reading literary criticism as newcomers to the field, students can get the idea that the critic simply opened the book, read it, and through divine inspiration or genius observational talents simply “noticed” everything that will be presented in the article. That model of literary interpretation resembles a “black box”: texts are put in to a mind, something magical happens, and interpretations pop out the other end. Students are then asked to perform interpretive acts themselves, but, never having watched it actually being done (reading instead only the effortless-seeming end products), they are unlikely to get very far.

The commentary (along with other in-class writing used in similar ways) mitigates this problem by cutting a window into that “black box.” In the Milton class, students tried out interpretive moves and then heard the attempts of others. They learned

through moves and then experience in group discussion which of the commentaries helped to advance the class's understanding of a text and which commentaries simply stated things any reader would have seen. Meanwhile, the instructor was able to see these "trial runs" and offer assistance and redirection where necessary. The commentary was thus more a pedagogical tool than a product; its direction was formative rather than summative. Rather than learning interpretation in the act of drafting a final paper, alone in the computer lab or dorm, students practiced interpretation in an environment more like that in which scholars do it—in whole-class discussion of student-driven questions that mirrored the talk after a conference presentation, or in discussion and debate around published texts that mirrored the professional conversation around published articles. Also, like writing-to-learn in other settings, the commentary also made students' own evolving thinking visible to the student. Students' evolving interpretive practice was then available for metacognition. Students could ask themselves questions like "to what am I attending when I read? To what kinds of questions do I return again and again? What thematic ties unite my concerns each week that I could later use as a focus for a paper in greater depth?"

Student commentaries, then, worked in this classroom (and similar writing might work in other literature classrooms) as windows through which a professor can view a student's emerging readings of texts, and in that way they resemble the demonstrative, conventional English paper, a window through which a professor views and then assesses an achieved reading. However, commentaries not only depict student readings but also foster them, and in this way they are less performances of competence than they are sites at which readings themselves develop. Thus they do resemble published critical works, for published literary criticism reflects not only a critic's achieved understanding of a literary work but also a contribution to a critical conversation around that text, period, or author. Even further, they reflect the writer's engagement in the discipline's common project of not only understanding but also influencing

literary texts—and by extension, the societies, cultures, and traditions in which those texts operate.

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