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“Pressing an Ear against the Hive”

Reading Literature for Complexity

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I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

— Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry”

In Billy Collins’s poem (1988), the tension between how the speaker wants “them” to read poetry and “all they want to do” captures a central concern in literary studies: how readers approach literary texts. In “Preparing Graduate Students to Teach Literature” (2001: 516), John Schillb notes that literature pedagogy’s “chief goal” is “to strengthen students’ willingness and ability to court subtlety and nuance,” echoing Collins’s later poetic exhortation that readers “drop a mouse into a poem / and watch him probe his way out.” Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue in *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty* (2005: xiv–xi) argue that we should “encourage students to see those moments in their reading when they feel stymied or confused as gateways rather than barriers to understanding” so that students might approach literature as literary scholars do, “find[ing] such work valuable and liberating, pleasurable and intellectually fulfilling.” They say that “the identification (description and naming) of difficulty” is “an important precursor to understanding,” just as Collins asks readers to “walk inside the poem’s room /

and feel the walls for a light switch.” Even “The Joy of Teaching Literature,” the final chapter in Elaine Showalter’s *Teaching Literature* (2003: 141–42), begins with Laura Nash’s affirmation that the last class of a semester should “break out of the frame, . . . direct attention to the next logical question, and most of all . . . leave the students not in panic but in perplexity” to inspire “the rebirth of intellectual spirit that one hopes to encourage in students.” This “courtship” of “nuance” and “probing,” reframing of complexity, difficulty, and confusion as “pleasurable gateways” or “joyful” invitations to meaning—rather than frustration, silence, or what Collins sees as “[tying] the poem to a chair with rope / and tortur[ing] a confession out of it”—is a signature trait of literary studies and effective literary pedagogy.

However, many students have learned to offer flat, reductive readings that torture the “one true” answer literature might confess. When these students are confronted with a difficult¹ text or complex idea, instructors may experience them as shutting down and refusing to venture an interpretation or even to continue reading. Salvatori and Donahue (2005: 2) describe this response to ambiguity by citing *The Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry for “difficulty,” which contains a 1716 quotation by J. South: “They mistake difficulties for impossibilities.” Given this challenge in the classroom, it is useful to try to recognize its sources—not to blame but to understand in ways that would lead to a more informed and effective response. Of course, this problem is larger than literary studies alone. As Helen Regueiro Elam explains in “The Difficulty of Reading” (1991: 73),

American culture does not take well to the idea of difficulty. Our penchant is for one-step, one-stop solutions to problems, and we expect and demand in all areas of life, including reading, an ease of achievement that is antithetical to thought itself. . . . Difficulty is there to be overcome, disposed of, certainly not to become the invisible partner of our daily lives.

Indeed, reducing a text to a singular, unambiguous message that may or may not actually emerge from the language itself both reflects and informs the students’ perspectives about the world around them. Robert Scholes’s “The Transition to College Reading” (2002: 165–66) diagnoses students with what may be called textual narcissism: the complexity of the text is lost as students conflate what they are reading with their own lives and fail to appreciate the text, the author, the characters, and indeed everything outside of the students themselves. “We have a reading problem of massive dimensions,” he writes. “One is a failure to focus sharply on the language of the text. The other is a

failure to imagine the otherness of the text's author." These related failures in reading, he argues,

can themselves be read as a symptom of a larger cultural problem. We are not good, as a culture, at imagining the other. After 11 September 2001 we have begun to learn, perhaps, that this deficiency is serious. . . . It is our responsibility as English teachers to help our students develop this form of [empathetic] textual power, in which strength comes, paradoxically, from subordinating one's own thoughts temporarily to the views and values of another person. (167–68)

Our students and the culture at large ultimately are unaware of and even resistant to what Joanna Wolfe calls the "literary community's shared value of complexity" (2003: 407).²

This essay emerges from a collaborative research project responding to the challenge of teaching students to acknowledge and appreciate complexity through (and beyond) literary texts. Our project responds to Hazard Adams's observation that "the difficulty of difficulty is not that it is difficult but that we do not face the difficulty soon enough" (1991: 46). This delay has several consequences for literature teachers, according to Adams. Pragmatically, we make learning difficulty even more challenging "in the same way that we increase immeasurably the difficulty of learning a foreign language when we delay it past the earliest grades in school"; more generally, we forfeit "the fascination of difficulty itself, . . . prolong . . . ignorance[, and] applaud superficiality" (46). In addition, if we do not make these values more explicit, we simply reward students who have already internalized these disciplinary moves and punish students who have been trained to value one correct answer. Yet how, exactly, do we teach students to value complexity? This essay documents a study based on a particular lesson designed to address these problems³ in teaching and learning — and, we hope, a lesson that introduces students to the pleasures of difficulty, complexity, paradox, ambiguity, and the multilayered meanings in literary texts. Our lesson also taught us, as instructors, about our own pedagogical practices and about the need to make our values more explicit for students who are not yet experts.

Although this project builds on previous scholarship, we do not offer a detailed argument for the importance of this reading practice. Such publications already exist, and the literary community — indeed, the academic community at large — already agrees. We also do not offer a collection of readings for students, because these already exist as well. Instead, we offer an account of how a single lesson can serve as a springboard for larger disciplin-

ary conversations about the values we share with our students in the literature classroom and those we keep implicit. We describe the results of that lesson, reflect on how the process forced us to examine our pedagogical processes, and offer questions for further research. A more immediate purpose of the current study is to extend the scholarly discussion of the pedagogical values in the literature classroom and instructional strategies that support them in visible and intentional ways.

The Lesson Study Approach

This lesson study project was developed by a team of five English professors from across the University of Wisconsin (UW) system, including the authors of this article as well as Terry Beck and Bryan Kopp of UW-LaCrosse. Although all of us work within the same state university system, we are from four different campuses (which include both two-year and four-year colleges), and our teaching duties vary from teaching primarily composition to teaching only literature classes. When we first met and began discussing our common challenges in the classroom, our conversation evolved into one central question: what is a crucial skill we would like our students to learn in introductory literature courses? Most of our introductory courses do not specify a particular content (other than covering the three main genres of poetry, drama, and fiction), and we agreed that *what* they read was less important than *how* they read. For some of our students, this course is a requirement for the English major; for others, the course serves as a general education requirement and may be the only English course they take. It is equally important that both groups of students learn the central moves of our discipline: those students beginning their study of literature need to understand the discipline's values while students going into other fields benefit from learning to recognize the complexities of a variety of texts. When we reflected on the kinds of skills or moves that helped students begin to offer more original, nuanced readings of literature, we quickly agreed that reading for complexity was key. Yet although each of us considered this an important disciplinary move, none had explicitly devised a lesson with this goal. What can we do to encourage students to offer interpretations of literature that show an awareness of multiple levels of meaning? How do we guide students to see language as multivalent? We decided to use the method of lesson study to investigate these questions.

In brief, a lesson study is the "observation of live classroom lessons by a group of teachers who collect data on teaching and learning and collaboratively analyze it," the method "credited for Japan's steady improvement in elementary education" (Lewis, Perry, and Murata 2006: 3). Bill Cerbin

and Bryan Kopp of the Lesson Study Project of UW–LaCrosse describe it as “a process in which a small group of teachers collaboratively plans, teaches, observes, revises and reports results on a single class lesson.” This lesson study model would allow us collaboratively to create a single lesson that could serve as a microcosm of how to teach reading for complexity. Since its first accounts in the United States in 1999, hundreds of K–12 and college and university settings have become the testing grounds for lesson studies in a variety of disciplines. Cerbin and Kopp define a lesson as simply “a teaching and learning episode that usually takes place in a single class period,” a “manageable ‘unit of analysis’”; however, the lesson’s activities may include class preparation and follow-up activities, as ours does. Although some characterize lesson study as a “teaching improvement activity” or “professional development approach,” the solid foundational research, rigorous data collection, data analysis appropriate to the study and to the discipline, and broadly disseminated products typical of lesson study expand the approach into the realm of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Cerbin and Kopp n.d.; Lewis, Perry, and Murata 2006: 3). Our actual lesson and this detailed analysis of our data serve as such products. We do not suggest that our lesson is a “best practice,” because certainly there are many ways to teach students to recognize ambiguity in literature. What we offer instead is a description of how we mindfully, systematically, and collaboratively identified a disciplinary move central to our students’ ability to analyze literature and explored the complexities of teaching this move through a systematic analysis of our students’ language. Our experiences with this lesson study and others suggest that this kind of project, in its focus on different types of data from a single learning moment, can afford a unique depth of understanding of student learning. As a handful of specialists engage in the cycle of theorizing, constructing, observing, analyzing, assessing, revising, and repeating, the results about student thinking and learning (or not) become a synecdoche for broader learning goals.

The collaborative nature of the lesson study model radically deconstructs what Parker Palmer has called the “pathology” of isolation in college teaching (qtd. in van Gelder 1999) and helps further Lee Shulman’s (2004: 140) goal of making teaching “community property.” Shulman asserts that most faculty development gatherings that bring teaching out in the open, however, treat teaching as “generic,” removed from the concerns of specific disciplines, which serves to devalue teaching in the academy (141). The sustained labor of designing, performing, and evaluating a common disciplinary lesson — and thus making explicit our goals, our pedagogical techniques, and

our assumptions about student learning—signals our valuing of pedagogical research that is intrinsically tied to our discipline and opens it to the kind of scholarly scrutiny that will lead to a fuller articulation of our discipline’s pedagogical priorities.

Our lesson begins with students reading and writing an initial interpretation of Theodore Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz” (1988). We picked Roethke’s poem in part because our collective experience has taught us that students have difficulty reading the poem’s complexity. They tend to interpret it dualistically: positive or negative, happy or sad, good father or bad father, loving son or abused son. Yet although the poem invokes such varied readings, it immediately defies them in its ambivalence. A closer reading reveals contradictions, paradoxes that do not fit a single, coherent interpretation. According to an anthology’s online supplement, “Although the word order of the poem tends to move from lighthearted words to more ominous ones like ‘hard’ and ‘dirt,’ *the poem is too ambiguous to let us pass judgment so easily*” (emphasis added; Miller n.d.). Novice readers tend to reach for one of two options: ignore those pieces of the poem that do not fit or force them out of the poem itself and into their monolithic interpretations. In the past, when we taught this poem in our courses, we usually discussed it as a whole class, with the instructor drawing students’ attention to particular lines. Students who had not considered the poem’s images of abuse seemed surprised, sometimes debating with other students in the class, insisting that the poem was really about a loving relationship. Unless the reading was tied to a writing assignment or unless such responses were part of class discussion, we did not know exactly how students’ initial interpretations of the poem had changed and what they made of the conflicting readings. Did they assume that they had been wrong in their interpretations? Did they look to the instructor for overt or subtle signs that one interpretation was correct? Where did they locate the meaning within the text? We wanted greater insight into the ways our students made meaning out of the poem as an example of the many literary texts with such multilayered meanings and ambiguities. We intended to design an exercise that prevents students from dismissing what does not fit and requires them to acknowledge these textual tensions. We wanted to challenge students to move toward a more sophisticated understanding of language, of relationships, and of how they approach literary texts.

This lesson occurs early in an introduction to literature course, one that is designed for freshmen, and it assumes no prior knowledge of literary terms or strategies. To help students begin with their own impressions of the poem, we ask them to read it for homework, write down their initial interpre-

tations of the poem, and bring to class these writings. Once in class, students begin by writing down the patterns (or themes) they see in the poem and the elements of the poem that do not fit one or more of these patterns, and then form small groups to annotate each of the group's patterns on separate overhead transparencies — underlining elements of their patterns and crossing out elements that do not seem to fit, a low-tech illustration of the poem's layers of meaning. The purpose of the annotation is for students to work at linking themes to the concrete language of the poem. Each group then presents its transparencies while explaining to the class the accompanying interpretations of the poem. After the group presentations, the professor overlays all transparencies at once as a visual representation of the poem's layers of meaning and complexity, and students write about how they see the patterns relating to each other, how it is possible for these patterns to coexist in one poem, and how they explain the elements that do not seem to fit the patterns. A whole-class discussion of these questions ends the class period. After class, students reflect in writing on how their initial interpretations of Roethke's poem have changed and, more metacognitively, what the class activities suggest about the process of reading literature.⁴

Our approach to data collection and analysis in this project emerges directly from our discipline and our disciplinary training: as literary scholars, our expertise comes from closely reading, interpreting, and analyzing written texts, so as literary teacher-scholars researching and disseminating what Shulman (1986: 9) calls “pedagogical content knowledge,” we closely read, interpret, and analyze the written texts from students. Salvatori and Donahue (2005: 70–71) have noted that a key technique of research in English studies has been “discussion of *student language* and the status of *student text*” (emphasis in the original). They also explain that a “baseline for scholarly work” in English studies scholarship is the “deployment of dominant styles of inquiry and methodologies — for example, textual interpretation and critique, discourse analysis, historical analysis, theoretical formulation” (2002: 82). Consistent with our disciplinary values, then, our methodology of close reading, textual interpretation, and critique is also consistent with the goals of this project regarding reading complex texts for complex meanings.

Pressing Their Ears against the Hive:

Students' Initial Interpretations

The sixty-five responses (taken from two iterations of the lesson on two campuses) fell into several general patterns that illustrate the pedagogical challenge faced by teachers of literature in introducing students to the art of com-

plex, multidimensional interpretations of literature. As we expected, based on previous experiences teaching this poem, the majority of the students (thirty-seven of sixty-five) initially interpreted the poem either as expressing the speaker's loving, nostalgic memories of his father or as remembering abuse. As they "press[ed] their ears against the hive," they heard either the buzz of danger or the hum of honey processing. Consequently, students' pre-class responses to Roethke's poem fell into two categories: those who identified a single layer of meaning in the poem and those who saw more than one meaning or even multiple tensions and ambiguities suggested by the poem.

Many of these initial responses illustrated this proclivity toward flattening the poem or attempting to reduce it to a clear, definable, single explanation, which confirmed the hypothesis our research team initially proposed. Usually these readings were cursory and impressionistic, offered without textual evidence or what Joanna Wolfe (2003: 402) calls those "academic features such as . . . the elaboration of ideas through explicit textual references, and movement between textual details and a context outside the immediate text" valued in literary studies. Although their inclination to read with a singular lens is a common novice approach to literature, reading the poem closely enough to identify the specific textual details that suggest violence or abuse is a more sophisticated strategy, especially when contrasted with the students who glossed over the undertones of violence altogether. For example, two students saw the poem as a nostalgic homage to Roethke's childhood relationship with his father, writing that "his father was not prone to displays of affection with words or gestures — yet when the father does come forth with attention, the boy clings to him" and "the father seems to be very affectionate towards his son and I think the author sees this as a happy memory." Each of these readings elides the poem's subtext of violence and hardship. A similar oversight characterized the other students who fell into this category of single-layered reading. They focused on four miscellaneous patterns: the poem as mourning the father's death, the poem as fond memory, the pattern of dancing, and a specific focus on the rhyme scheme. Although each of these patterns offers insight into the poem, focusing solely on one of them is not reading for complexity, nuance, and ambiguity, the skill at the heart of this lesson and certainly at the core of literary studies. Regardless of the interpretation this group of students generated, their preclass writing suggests they interpreted the poem as possessing a single meaning.

The rest of the students offered a more advanced initial reading: some identified tension within a single pattern, and other students were able to see competing patterns and paradoxes within the poem. Each group approached

the tensions differently; a few were content to let them lie but most strategically attempted to resolve the paradoxes, ambiguities, and tensions. Fahnestock and Secor (1991: 87) have argued that “the more elusive object of the critic’s search is the paradox,” upon which “critics seize . . . with special delight.” This “unification of apparently irreconcilable opposites” is a particularly important habit of mind of literary studies. Students who address more than one pattern or acknowledge tensions, ambiguities, or contradictions that coexist in the poem are approaching the lesson’s larger goal of engaging the complexity and multilayered meanings in a work of literature. A large group of students in our study (twenty-six out of sixty-five) were able to pick out a pattern and puzzle over its relationship to another pattern. For example, one student noted that although the poem “seems to tell the story of a young girl or boy dancing with her father, certain phrases can be thought of as seemingly violent.” Another wrote that she saw an “abusive” pattern evident in the poem but later mused that “it shows that the father cared and put him to sleep.” Often these students acknowledge more than one layer of meaning: “It’s such a difficult poem to decide what exactly is being said because it could be interpreted in two different ways.” Another student noted the apparent contradictions in the poem, stating that the immediate response was “that of a young boy with an abusive father” but later acknowledging that “the child is alternately enjoying and slightly fearing the experience.” Although these students did not directly address or even use the terms ambiguity or tension, they did acknowledge the poem’s richness and that it is conducive to multiple interpretations. This proximity to the lesson’s pedagogical goal suggests that a significant number of students are poised to move their readings to a more advanced level with the guidance and support that such a lesson would offer.

Only three of the sixty-five students explicitly identified multiple patterns and pushed further to speculate about their coexistence within a single poem. One student wrote that “the poem could actually be about love, abuse, and dancing,” suggesting that the tension does not frustrate him; instead, the student grants that the poem maintains internal equilibrium between the competing patterns. Two of the three students explicitly referred to the concept of paradox: one mused, “Sometimes the purpose of a poem is to convey multiple messages and represent the struggle of internal paradox within us. Do you hate the man who causes pain or love the only father you’ve ever known?” and another commented, “In almost all of the passages it is a conflicting love-hate relationship between Roethke and his father. Roethke wants the love of his father, despite their conflicting, paradoxical relationship.” Again, however, the majority (thirty-seven out of sixty-five) recognized

only a single layer of meaning—the more troubling reading practice our lesson study addresses. That such a small number of students enter our classes ready to “do” literary studies in the ways we expect points to the urgency of disciplinary conversations about our pedagogical values.

“Holding It up to the Light / Like a Color Slide”:

Small Group Discussion

What happens when students’ individual interpretations of the poem are challenged (and reinforced) by those of other students and when they more closely examine parts of the poem that do not fit their interpretations? In this next step, students share their individual preclass interpretations in small groups and then together annotate patterns and parts that do not fit these patterns using overhead transparencies that overlay the poem. As they annotate the words of the poem—both the elements that contribute to patterns and the elements that do not seem to fit—they actively and directly engage with those words. Also, each transparency represents a layer of the students’ meaning in, above, beneath, or surrounding the poem but always connected to the actual words in the text. After all, in *On Poetry and Craft*, Roethke himself (2001: 120) reminds us that “the most difficult thing to remember [is]: that a poem is made of words.” If part of the “reading problem of massive dimensions” identified by Scholes is “a failure to focus sharply on the language of the text,” this step in the lesson is crucial (2002: 165–6).

In our two classroom iterations of the lesson, twelve groups (fifty-six students) identified thirty-five patterns of meaning in the poem, most of which continue to fall into dualistic responses. Indeed, each set of class patterns provided an almost even split. Specifically, twelve of the patterns could be categorized as positive (“dancing,” “father-son relationship,” “child’s admiration for his father,” and “positive language”) and thirteen negative (“drunk,” “abuse,” “violence,” and “negative language”), with nine best described as neutral (“rhyme scheme,” “tone,” and “writing to father”).

After the preclass interpretations in which students’ initial readings were more heavily weighted toward the negative (twenty-eight students focused exclusively on the abuse, violence, or difficult family relationships, and nine focused strictly on positive interpretations, missing the violence altogether), their in-class, shared interpretations were more evenly balanced. We propose that two factors contributed to this shift in interpretation. The first is the collaborative nature of the lesson’s in-class component in which students hear their classmates’ interpretations. Students who had settled on a single meaning of the poem were confronted with others, perhaps even new

meanings they had not considered. These moments of listening to their classmates complicated the simplicity with which some students began, especially because some were already applying the more advanced skill of referring to textual evidence, as illustrated in some preclass writings. When these more sophisticated students shared their responses in class, some of their classmates likely perceived them as offering the “right” interpretation and thus abandoned their previous response to the text, replacing it with what they now assumed was the correct response.

The second factor for the shift in interpretation from a preclass focus on the negative elements in the poem to a more balanced set of interpretations in class is the lesson’s prompt that now urges students to identify patterns *and* elements that do not fit these patterns. Students who begin with one interpretation come to their groups, hear interpretations that may not match their own, and then must officially acknowledge these others by devoting a transparency to them. Then, even beyond noting others, students must find textual details that resist their own interpretations, forcing them to engage with, complicate, and add depth to their initial, flattened-out responses. They must look for parts of the text that are similar to their interpretations but different, parts that are related but not alike, connected but perhaps contradictory. For many, this prompt may be their first encounter with the idea that a text may contradict itself or have pieces that “do not fit” by design. Many will resist paradox and ambiguity as often as they resist complexity in general, such as the two groups that identified a pattern without annotating a single element of the poem that did not fit, perhaps a last stand for unity and simplicity.

Most of the transparencies from our lesson, however, illustrate some significant moments of “holding [the poem] up to the light / like a color slide.” Our goal in this lesson is for students to recognize the multiple possibilities of meaning in the poem and then transfer this awareness to other texts. At this stage of literary learning, though, such a noble expectation for an entire class is aiming too high, especially through a single lesson. However, the lesson does actively engage students with the specific sites of tension within the poem, especially as they work together to identify and create meanings, and thus represents one way to include more intentional and explicit activities that help students practice this key disciplinary move.

The most contentious and controversial interpretation of both classroom iterations was centered on the word “romped” (in the line “We romped until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf”) in a way that no other group acknowledged. This group identified “(sexual) abuse” as a pattern and was nearly laughed — and later, argued — out of the classroom. This group identi-

fied the familiar passages of “whiskey” as “causing abuse,” “held my wrist” as the “control of the father,” and “battered” as “direct ref. to abuse,” as well as the subtler “I hung on like death” as “fear of what’s to come,” the mother’s inability to “unfrown” as “feels helpless,” and “still clinging to your shirt” as “never got over it.” However, the crux of their interpretation of *sexual* abuse was the word “romped.” The group reporter—and defender of this interpretation—pointed out the sexual associations of this term, such as a “romp in the hay.” The rest of the class simply would not accept this interpretation, even though they acknowledged familiarity with this phrase. They would not consider this kind of abuse, and the others in this group were visibly shaken and even angry with the student who insisted on this possibility. (The group’s other patterns were “child’s admiration” and “taking care of Dad immediately prior to death,” pointing to their vision of the father as either a positive figure or a sad, helpless character deserving of pity and care. Such a father would never sexually abuse his child, or so they insisted.) The possibility of a boy thinking positively about a man—indeed, his own father—who had molested or raped him was simply too much. The complexity of that kind of relationship is out of the question for many students, and they believed that poetry certainly cannot represent such possibilities.⁵ The “romp” controversy, while troubling for students, represents one of the enormous benefits of structuring discussions around such discomfiting moments; until explicitly confronted with readings that so dramatically challenged their own, many students would not have allowed for these deeply contradictory readings or ways of thinking.

Another group was successful in their recognition of the presence of tensions coexisting in the poem but less successful in their ability to build a bridge between them, suggesting that students asked to read in complex ways may not successfully negotiate this task simply because we ask them to. The marginal notes for “positive” include “fun,” “negative word,” “dancing—fun,” “playful,” “so excited, not paying attention,” “scrape associated with pain,” “not soft, gentle, tender, etc.,” and “hope.” Their marginal notes for “negative language” include “drinking is negative,” “death is negative,” “waltzing is graceful, sophisticated, beautiful,” “upset mother—negative,” “battered is a word associated with violence,” “scraped is also associated with violence,” “beat also negative language,” and “clinging represents/suggests hope.” The group effectively identified the details of the poem’s complexity, its capturing of the tensions between positive and negative emotions and language. However, their transparencies annotated this complexity in black and white, as only both extremes rather than the ambiguity of the shades of

gray that should result from recognizing these patterns within a single poem. Specifically, their interpretations of the poem's language lack ambiguity: the only markings that appear on both transparencies are interpreted in the same way, despite the opposing patterns. For instance, "death" is always negative, "waltzing" is "graceful, sophisticated, beautiful" on one and "fun" on the other, "scraped" is "associated with violence" on one transparency and "associated with pain" on the other, and "clinging" "represents/suggests hope" on both. Every other marking of negative language on one sheet and positive language on the other is exclusive to one transparency—revealing that the group did not recognize the ambiguity or multiple meanings of Roethke's language, the possibilities that "waltzing" is a euphemism for fighting, that "romped" is not just "playful" but also violent, that "beat time" is rhythmic and not just "negative," that "clinging" is fearful and not just full of "hope." The group managed to capture the dualistic interpretations—positive and negative—but did not make the interpretive leap to considering the *implications* of the simultaneous occupation of the positive and negative within the same poem. Again, there is movement toward the appreciation of ambiguities, but the progress is halted.

Significantly, the group that most concisely captured the poem's contradictions was also the one with the most interpersonal tensions of all twelve groups in both of the lesson's iterations, echoing the "romp" debate in its intensity and introducing us to a new sort of intellectual dissonance emerging from the exercise. As the lesson study's video footage and observer reports reveal, this group of five was dominated by two students: Lori,⁶ who insisted that the poem is a kind of homage to a working-class "rough" guy who does not know how to express love very effectively, and Tom, who asserted that the abusive and violent elements of the poem were as significant as the more "positive" images. Lori resisted reading any anger and violence in the poem and seemed especially disturbed by a "negative" reading of the text, attributing those interpretations not to the text but to a reader who "must be a negative person" to make such assumptions. Interestingly, Lori frequently made statements such as "this is my first literature class" and "I don't really like poetry," appearing invested in "marking" herself as a novice reader, even as she retained her own reading of the poem, in contrast with Tom's more sophisticated interpretations that garnered admiration from this group.⁷ Tom did seem to see the different readings of the poem as a function of interpretation and an inherent property of literary texts, and over the course of the discussion, Lori was more inclined to open up her reading to include the "negative" elements raised by Tom. At one point, however, she did joke (as they

were marking a “positive” pattern on their transparency) that she “had forced Tom to see the poem positively.” Despite this lively exchange, the group did not appear to see a relationship between the layers of the transparencies, as they were very attached to a binary reading of the poem — positive and negative — and were not able to produce a relationship between these two readings. The Lori-Tom debate points to some larger questions raised by the reading for complexity activities: how do we intervene when students bring not only intellectual but personal objections to methods of reading literarily and to the literature itself? How much do these affective dimensions influence students’ learning to read with and for complexity?

There were other instances of such reaching toward but halting on the road to complexity. Even the formal element of rhyme scheme generated such a response. One transparency, for instance, juxtaposed the poem’s melodic pattern that “sound[s] like a waltz” with their interpretation of the violence: “It is an up-beat [*sic*] rhyme scheme, but is it fitting because we assume that he is being beaten.” Their marginal comment as an implied or hidden question — using a period instead of a question mark — suggests a lack of confidence with their questioning of the text and with their observation of this tension between form and meaning. As documented in many of these in-class artifacts, some students were beginning to struggle with the complexities of the poem but were still unable to create meaning through this struggle. Again, as we recognize the limits of a single lesson and a single class period, we still reach toward our ultimate disciplinary goal.

“Watching the Mouse Probe His Way Out”:

Students’ Later Reflections

After the group work and whole-class discussion, students had time to reflect on these moments of engaging with the text in new ways. These reflections point to the value of making reading for complexity an explicit pedagogical practice. The lesson asks students to respond individually to the question, “After today’s activities, how has your interpretation of the poem changed?” Many of the responses (twenty-one) indicated that the exercise did indeed develop some reading for complexity. Students stated that they now see the interpretations as connected. One student wrote, “I can see where all three patterns fit into the poem, but I just focused on the violence pattern,” and another admitted, “I can see that there is a possibility of different patterns that can overlap.” For these students, the collaborative nature of the lesson’s in-class component proved invaluable. Four students stated the importance

of sharing perspectives in interpreting literature: “Perhaps the best method of understanding literature is to be able to discuss it with others” and “I think the reading and interpreting process is enhanced by a group environment, meaning that individual interpretations are often augmented by others’ opinions.”

In contrast were nine students who claimed that their interpretations remained unchanged. Most of these students defended their interpretations against claims made in class discussion: “I think this is a relatively upbeat poem, and I don’t think it is trying to focus on alcoholism and abuse.” These students’ persistence in the face of convincing counterarguments gestures toward Scholes’s “reading problem of massive dimensions” that we believe a firmer emphasis on reading for complexity may begin to address. However, almost all of these students who stated that their interpretations had *not* changed revealed in their paragraphs that the exercise did indeed expand their original reading of the poem: “The activity didn’t so much change my interpretation. It just opened me up to other interpretations that also fit” and “hearing the patterns that other groups presented to the class may have helped expand my interpretation (although not entirely changed it).” Many of these claims imply that although students still believe in their initial interpretations of the poem (for example, either seeing abuse or seeing a loving father-son relationship), at the same time they now see other layers of meaning. In particular, seven students mentioned that they now see the father’s abuse of his son as “unintentional.” (This word occurred in each of the seven cases, suggesting that one of the discussion groups made this particular point persuasively.) The desire of many students to defend their initial interpretations—even while they admit to seeing more in the poem after the class exercise—suggests that admitting their thoughts had “changed” relinquishes too much authority for some students; however, “expanding” or “opening up” more clearly includes their own original thoughts while assimilating others and is therefore less risky, less self-effacing. It also points to a desire to be right and the assumption that there can be only one correct interpretation, illustrating the basic dualism of William Perry’s stages of intellectual development, as well as an “adversarial approach to knowledge” (Tannen 1998: 257). However, students’ responses also showed a tendency to repeat certain phrases from fellow students that seemed particularly convincing, indicating that although they want to be right, they also see the value in others’ ideas, even if unacknowledged explicitly. We hope that by the end of the course these students will gain the vocabulary of literary analysis that will

allow them both to acknowledge complexities even while choosing to maintain their own responses and to value how interpretation gains strength—not weakness—through multiple perspectives.

A small number of students wrote that the exercise caused them to reject completely their initial interpretation of the poem: “I don’t really see the father in a rage anymore,” wrote one student. Instead of enlarging their initial interpretations, the in-class exercise seems to have caused these few students to relinquish authority to other students’ more authoritatively voiced interpretations. This suggests that some students privilege what is discussed in class—even if not by the instructor—over their own readings.

The postclass writing component of the lesson asks students to explain what the in-class activity suggests to them about the process of reading literature. The responses to this question can be divided into three main categories: author-centered interpretations, text-centered interpretations, and reader-centered interpretations. Only four students mentioned the author (authorial intention or biographical criticism) as the source of the poem’s meaning, although the textbook used in the second iteration contained biographical information immediately before the poem (Collins 1988). The fact that very few students even “waved at the author’s name on the shore” or looked to the author as the source of a poem’s meaning might have resulted from the instructors’ lack of emphasis on biographical information, something the students could have inferred early on in the course.

The second most common response came from eight students who situated the site of meaning within the actual text. They wrote that the in-class activity showed them the complexity of literature, acknowledging that multiple meanings can exist within the same text: “I learned to look for different patterns first and then compare how the patterns relate to each other” and “the poem could actually be about love, abuse, AND dancing.” Perhaps influenced by the text-oriented nature of the in-class exercise, half of these students stressed the importance of close reading as a way of revealing the complexity of meaning. “It takes multiple close readings of [a] work to fully understand . . . all possible meanings,” wrote one student. Another noted, “I found that a face-value initial reading is often off-target, and only through the repeated process of re-reading and re-evaluation can I come to a . . . solution,” and “details are very important . . . even if they seem insignificant. . . . Going over the text again may bring them to light.” These comments reflect students moving away from dualistic or relativistic knowledge, toward a “procedural knowledge” that demands seeking answers that can be supported within a context—and toward more sophisticated literary thinking (Belenky et al.

1986: 95). Although only one student explicitly mentioned that literature could contain multiple meanings — “It is only when we look at literature — the conflict, the pain, the emotion, the questioning of what is really there — do we begin to see levels upon levels of symbolism and interpretations. . . . Reading literature is all about . . . looking beyond one literal meaning to see what lies beyond, what truths you can find” — this student may be one of the few who already had the vocabulary to articulate this concept.

Many students (seventeen out of fifty-three) focused on the reader as the site of meaning. Some of these responses demonstrated an awareness of the ways that a reader’s own subjectivities influence interpretation. Some revealed a belief that interpretation is a relativistic free-for-all, that “you must read over a poem numerous times and look at all angles . . . and choose which one is right for you.” Other responses suggest that personal experiences can obscure or create meaning because “people bring in their own baggage to their interpretation.” Because the classes had not studied reader-response theories, it is more likely that these responses reflect Perry’s concept of “late multiplicity” or Belenky et al.’s “subjective knowing,” the kind of relativism that students rely on when confronted with an area of study that lacks one correct answer (Perry 1970: 107; Belenky et al. 1986). The accompanying belief that all interpretations are correct may also have been an unintended by-product of the group work: instead of seeing that the text itself contains multiple meanings, these students focused on their classmates as the sources of the multiple responses. Ultimately, however, although this response may be developmentally appropriate for some freshmen, part of the college teacher’s task is to facilitate students’ development, not just reinforce where they are. Although this relativism may serve as a developmental way station as students move toward an understanding of literary study as grounded in the text, we do not see it as a desirable final outcome.

Introduction to Complexity:

Lessons Learned from the Lesson

On the simplest level, our analysis reveals evidence of some successes from this lesson study project on helping students move toward reading for the subtle nuances of textual complexity. For instance, although literature teachers readily acknowledge the pedagogical benefits of collaboration and hearing divergent interpretations in class, our data support the value of collaborative learning as well as students’ recognition of this value. After all, the moment of recognizing that one classmate saw abuse and alcoholism in what another thought was a loving memory of an idealized father creates the cognitive

dissonance that pushes some toward new learning and habits of mind. At the same time, later reflections revealed the seductive power of the confident classmate to sway novice readers away from their initial reading, which is a symptom of rather than a solution to their developing skill level in interpreting literature.

We also found that using overhead transparencies to illustrate layers of meaning that share the subtextual spaces of a single work was useful in opening up students to those layers. Even marking textual elements that create a pattern with those that seem to disrupt it on the same sheet not only requires students to concentrate on the specific language but also encourages them to ask about the relationships between these elements, especially when combined with other patterns that may demonstrate different relationships between the same elements. Finally, as the lesson opened up richness in these moments of complexity, some students seemed to appreciate the work of reading for complexity. What Ralph Waldo Emerson ([1837] 1994: 1025) observed as the “labor and invention” of “creative reading” — the work of close reading, the intimacy of engaging with the specific language and parts of a literary text, the joy at a poetic turn of phrase, the wrestling with ambiguous or complex passages, the consideration of larger contexts — is perhaps a literature professor’s (and a poet’s) greatest wish for novice readers.

Another lesson learned is the interplay between students’ emotional responses to literary text and their ability to form a cognitive argument about it. Many of our students had fierce opinions about how abuse could be represented, which influenced their readings and misreadings of the poem. The emotional dimensions of group dynamics also played a large role in how students interpreted the text. Those of us who were not leading the class observed different small groups, made notes on the students’ interactions, and videotaped the conversations. We observed that many groups were dominated by one or two students. In one case, a group was dominated by the silence of its one male member, which caused the women in the group to eventually pull away from their interpretations out of deference to his discomfort. Thus the lesson allowed us a unique opportunity to observe the complexity of the cognitive and affective processes of students forming their interpretations.

Of course, this experience reinforced the knowledge that a single lesson will change little in the reading habits of many of our students. As painstakingly constructed as this lesson was, we did not expect all students to experience an epiphany and value ambiguity and complexity. To bolster the lessons in complexity and ambiguity, a follow-up lesson might more closely

examine the transparencies, so students analyze the different interpretations of single words, phrases, or poetic elements — as we have done here. Repeating the lesson's in-class work of annotating texts with patterns or layers of meaning in a single text or passage would remind students of the goals of the lesson, as well as clarify that these complexities extend well beyond "My Papa's Waltz." Discussion and other collaborative activities that invite students to voice their responses to texts would continue to exercise their awareness of multiple valid interpretations, and reinforcing the expectation for textual evidence would limit the relativism that can result from discussions that do not connect back to the text. Gerald Graff's "teaching the conflicts" approach (1992: 12) to the curriculum juxtaposes competing texts and concepts, not to solve these debates and make them go away, but to stir them up and help students "become something more than passive spectators to their education." Graff's own awakening to the excitement of literature occurred in a class discussion of the critical debates about the treatment of race and the quality of the ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The introduction of contradictory interpretations by scholars and by his classmates not only led him to reread the novel "with an excitement [he] had never felt before with a serious book" but also "reshaped the way [he] read" (68). We hope our lesson might serve as the same kind of springboard toward critical literary thought for contemporary students.

Another possible follow-up to the lesson emerged as we were analyzing the students' writings. Many of the students' comments — the relativistic "there's no 'right' interpretation" or "a text means different things to different people," the insistence that their interpretations had not been "changed" but instead "opened up" or "expanded," and the comments that invoke contradictory parts of the poem without using the terms ambiguity or tension — suggest that something more thoughtful may be occurring within these students, but they lack the language to articulate it. As Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein argue in *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (2006: x–xi), students may "grasp what [some of the] sophisticated moves [of a discipline mean,] but they often [have] trouble putting these concepts into practice in their own writing." Graff and Birkenstein thus imply that we sometimes think students do not get it when they simply need the tools to "open up and clarify the academic conversation" and its "key intellectual moves" (xi–xv). The book then gives students the framework for expert thinking and for articulating this expert thinking through templates. The authors demonstrate that the templates are not "prescriptive [or] formulaic devices [that] . . . encourage passive learning" (xiv–xv); instead, they are

“generative” by showing students the gaps in their thinking and requiring the students themselves to fill in those gaps (xiii). Indeed, as our lesson offers a way for students to begin engaging with literature and risk waltzing a few steps in the spaces created by textual ambiguity, we should encourage other activities that help students learn this “series of complicated moves,” because “these deeper habits of thought cannot be put into practice unless you have a language for expressing them in clear, organized ways” (1–2).

A possible next step in teaching students to read for complexity would thus be to provide students with templates for articulating a text’s ambiguities, complexities, and multilayered meanings. Including students’ own effective passages — from this article or from one’s own classes — as models would be a wonderful way to help students learn both the expert moves themselves and that expert moves are not exclusive to professional critics and scholars. For instance, as when one student wrote that “My Papa’s Waltz” “could actually be about love, abuse, AND dancing,” even offering something as simple as “the text is about ____, ____, and ____” demonstrates that a literary text can and often does have multiple meanings and that those meanings come from the text, not simply from the readers’ different experiences. For engaging in the multiple meanings of a passage, the following would be helpful: “On a literal level, the passage denotes ____, but it also figuratively invokes ____ and ____, as is suggested in other parts of the text that refer to ____,” or “On one level, ____ means _____. On another level, though, it also means _____.” Here again, these different meanings are not competing or mutually exclusive; instead, they coexist in a multidimensional understanding of the text.

In another follow-up lesson, instructors could show students examples of novice and expert readings of a poem, either student examples or published essays. Ann Dean (2003) describes a brilliant example of this type of assignment, in which she hands out an (unnamed) copy of a CliffsNotes analysis of *Jane Eyre* and has students compare it to the more multilayered analysis that occurred in class discussion. By charting each discourse on the board, her students are able to see that the CliffsNotes analysis shuts down inquiry by providing one correct answer to the questions of particular passages. Bringing these two ways of reading out in the open allows students to make more informed judgments about the values of reading for complexity.

As this essay shows, this project taught us at least as much as it taught our students. Just as our students’ initial interpretations of the poem were challenged, reinforced, and enlarged by small-group discussions, so were

our teaching moves made more deliberate, less intuitive. We had to defend our strategies against others' ideas and, ultimately, test each step of our lesson against the written responses of students. Instead of assuming that our lectures, group work, or discussions teach students to read literature for complexity, every step is measured against the text—the student text. However, collecting and then evaluating students' writing for each step of an assignment is not a manageable goal for most teachers. That is one benefit of lesson study: it is an opportunity to systematically and collaboratively examine the teaching and learning of a single, key lesson and to document the pedagogical values of a particular activity, all the while drawing conclusions about our discipline's values and how to translate those into effective instruction. New work is now emerging on the importance of articulating the basic moves or “signature pedagogies” of disciplines (Gurung, Chick, and Haynie 2009), including literary studies (Chick 2009). This new work forces us to ask ourselves hard questions about what our disciplines contribute to student learning, how we measure our successes and failures, and finally how we teach our disciplinary values.

What we have offered here is one attempt to teach students to begin to think like literary scholars. We know that it is tempting and often socially encouraged for students to tackle a poem by “beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means” (Collins 1988). As literary teacher-scholars, though, we have a responsibility to teach in ways that cultivate and clarify the values and practices of our discipline, as well as how they connect to its larger goals. Here, we have tried to meet this responsibility through our project about persisting in the face of difficulty and valuing complexity and ambiguity. We hope to have contributed to our discipline's efforts of teaching students to press their ears against the hive rather than swat away the bees.

Notes

1. The word *difficulty*, commonly used in literary scholarship and literary pedagogy scholarship, may be seen as an umbrella concept covering complexity. In *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature*, Alan C. Purves (1991: 2, 1) defines the book's central concept as the “beholder's estimate of the object as well as their estimate of their capacity to deal with that object in a fashion appropriate to any given situation” and synonymously describes examples of difficult literature as “obscure” and “complex.” Put more simply, Salvatori and Donahue (2005: 2) define “difficulty” as what is “‘hard to understand’ . . . for different reasons—because it is perplexing, obscure, mysterious, remote, strange, unfamiliar, uncomfortable, disconnected, meaningless,

- confusing, ridiculous, contradictory, hypocritical, inconsistent,” or “whatever slows down or brings to a halt the physical activity of reading, leaving you mystified.”
2. A wide range of scholarship from English studies (including rhetoric and literary history) has documented this shared value (see, for example, Fahnestock and Secor 1988, 1991; Wilder 2002; Wolfe 2003).
 3. We use the term *problem* as Randy Bass (1998) does in “The Scholarship of Teaching: What’s the Problem?”—not simply as an embarrassment, an issue of “terminal remediation,” but instead a challenge for “ongoing investigation,” “the heart of the investigative process,” and “the compound of the generative questions around which all creative and productive activity revolves.”
 4. The lesson plans, prompts for students, and other materials are available in Chick et al. 2007.
 5. In a follow-up discussion in the next class session, even the most sophisticated reader in the class summed up the interpretation of sexuality in the text with “it’s there, but that doesn’t mean it’s right.”
 6. Students’ names have been changed to preserve their anonymity according to the conditions of the signed informed consent forms approved by the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse Institutional Review Board.
 7. This student admiration, however, bordered on the “nerd stigma” common in college classes with semisarcastic statements such as, “Wow, you’re pretty deep!” documented as anti-intellectualism in Graff’s *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (2003) and Rebekah Nathan’s chapters in *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (2005: chaps. 5 and 6).

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