

Frye in the Classroom: Teaching Shakespeare with Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom

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AS FRYE OBSERVED in the “Polemical Introduction” to *The Anatomy of Criticism*, teaching literature is actually the teaching of criticism of literature and aims at developing in the student a fluency in terms, categories, and critical approaches that permit a vision of the coherence of literature. But how do you do this without relying excessively on secondary sources and displacing the primary text? At the same time as one is setting out to accomplish lofty goals, a major challenge in college-level teaching is practical: how do I encourage students to read and make sense of the primary text without their feeling that they need the guidance of secondary sources in order to understand it? This is perhaps especially acute with a writer like Shakespeare, whose language can be difficult for many of us without the benefit of explanatory notes. Above all, I want students to read and take naïve pleasure in the stories, characters, and themes of the

Note: This text is based on a paper presented to the Association of Core Texts and Courses (New Haven, 14 to 17 April 2011), a conference encouraging papers on approaches to teaching. The conference theme was “The Quest for Excellence: Liberal Arts and Core Texts.” What two critics better embody that quest for excellence—and can inspire our own pursuit of excellence—than Northrop Frye and a younger critic he strongly influenced?

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plays, to discover literature itself and its intense pleasure and not simply other people’s readings of literature, and to experience what overreliance on secondary material can shut students’ minds to: the liveliness of the text right here, right now, in this classroom, and inside our own minds, and the openness of great literature to competing interpretations unprompted by secondary material. Aside from their both being major critics, and Frye the major influence on Bloom’s own criticism, Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom are both useful in the college classroom because they focus on literature and the aesthetic, because their central critical insights are easy to summarize and share with students, and further because these insights can be keys that help students unlock the primary texts for themselves. Frye and Bloom offer the teacher a way of introducing criticism while keeping the primary text primary.

Frye’s criticism is everywhere rich in flexible schemes and categorizations (presented with Frye’s habitual great wit) that can open our imaginations to literature, and many such schemes are condensed in *Fools of Time*, on Shakespeare’s tragedies, and *A Natural Perspective*, on his comedies and romances (and on which I focus below). In turn, Bloom’s criticism in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* can generate exciting debates. Bloom is a passionate and opinionated reader whose insights are crystallized in helpful sound bites that students can then argue for or against. For all the interconnections of their work, Frye and Bloom also strongly contrast. Bloom’s focus is character rather than the play, and he treats the characters as real people, while Frye describes the dramatic structure of the comedies and romances considered as a whole, and he warns of Bloom’s kind of inquiry that “criticism devoted to the vividness of characterization in Shakespeare may get out of proportion ... Shakespeare tells a story that stylizes his characters” (13–14). In short, whether I want a discussion within or outside of proportion, Harold Bloom and Northrop Frye are my constant companions when I teach Shakespeare.

The opening of Frye’s *A Natural Perspective* begins my unit on *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Scholars often approach subjects making broad distinctions, Frye says, and while acknowledging that “these statements are clearly oversimplified, rhetorical rather than factual,” he makes a similar broad distinction when it comes to literature and literary criticism: “All literary critics are either Iliad critics or Odyssey critics. That is, interest in literature tends to center either in the area of tragedy, realism, and irony, or in the area of comedy and romance” (1), and “This distinction rests on a much broader one, the distinction implied in the traditional view of the function of literature as twofold: to delight and to instruct. On the most

naïve level of literary study there is the contrast between the person who reads to improve his mind or his command of the language and the person who reads detective stories in bed” (1–2).

Shakespeare’s comedies and romances belong to the *Odyssey/delight/reading-detective-stories-in-bed/concern-with-form* side of literary experience, while of course institutions of education emphasize the *Iliad/instruct/improve-the-mind/concern-with-meaning* side. Frye speaks to that side of many students who feel that in literature classes there’s too much concern with meaning: “Do we have to think about what it means. Can’t we just enjoy it?,” many students ask, even if not of Shakespeare, then of other literature we study. This nugget of Frye suggests to students that if they feel this, perhaps they are “*Odyssey*” critics, whose main critical interests could be in literary convention, form, and structure—for Frye what critics with attraction to comedy and romance attend to when they get serious, or in his words, when they stop “reading detective stories and get out of bed” (3).

More important is Frye’s contention that Shakespeare’s comedies and romances will not necessarily open themselves as fully to readers who approach them with an “*Iliad*” mindset. Instead of looking for life-like characterization, incidents close to real life, and high seriousness in theme (as we might when reading the tragedies and as students and even critics often do when writing on the comedies), we need to recognize the formulaic, the stylized, and the improbable in the plots and characters of the comedies. One study question that I have designed encourages students to identify such often repeating devices as “the storm at sea, the identical twins, the heroine disguised as a boy, the retreat into the forest, the heroine with a mysterious father, [and] the disappearing ruler” (7). Specifically, students are encouraged to identify puzzling, improbable, or under-explained events in the two plays we are reading: the decision of the two heroines to dress as men; the sudden conversions to good of the wicked Oliver and the usurping Duke Frederick in *As You Like It*; the improbable plot complications of *Twelfth Night*; the fast resolutions in the final scenes of both plays, together with the appearance of the god Hymen in *As You Like It*, which students always bring up as an outstanding instance of the improbable and unrealistic. Students can learn through Frye to appreciate that these are not shaky bits of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy that need to be explained away or for which we need to apologize but are key markers of the kind of popular and conventionalized play that he is writing.

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Further, Frye eloquently argues that Shakespeare's main aim in so writing is to "strive to please ... [us] every day," in Feste's words at the end of *Twelfth Night*, which Frye cites as revealing Shakespeare's unvarying attitude toward his audience—he wants to entertain rather than to make his audience think (38–39). Simply put, students approach reading for a literature class necessarily as reading for serious content, for meaning, for instruction; this attitude is probably even more severe when they approach Shakespeare. But at the same time, students can protest that studying literature runs counter to enjoyment of it. Specific to Shakespeare, the idea that he can be and should be read for pleasure in the same way as *Harry Potter* and that much great literature falls into the same comedy and romance category—that great literature is not always serious—is a new one for most students. In short, by encouraging students to see that Shakespeare's dramatic tradition is entirely popular (the thread driving the first two chapters of *A Natural Perspective*), Frye introduces the radical notion that the most responsible and serious way to read him—the comedies and romances especially—is for pleasure. Frye's defense of comedy and romance against critical depreciation was a corrective when it was first advanced in the 1950s and 1960s; in the classroom of 2011, Frye remains timely by insisting that the appreciation and criticism of form is a critical task as valid as the interpretation of meaning. Even more, he continues to prompt us to see that the true meaning or vision of literature—the meaning of a single work or the vision of literature as a whole—can only properly be focused when one has attended to and enjoyed its form.

Because, of course, Frye does not leave meaning out of criticism, and for all their griping about teachers "dissecting" literature to get at its "deeper" meaning, even students don't want us to leave all consideration of meaning aside. Having applied Frye to open ourselves to the "Odyssean," we then also consider the way in which *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* may transcend their genre—particularly in the realism of their characters, the interior life or inwardness of character—and may appeal differently to the "Odyssey" and "Iliad" parts of ourselves. One of my essay questions invites students to reflect on the Odyssey/Iliad distinction and themselves as readers while responding to one of the plays. Frye's book itself moves from questions of form to the vision of comedy: his discussion through the remaining two chapters of the book of "the mythical or primitive basis of comedy" as "a movement toward the rebirth and renewal of the powers of nature" (119), of comedy as child-like and "irrational" based as it is in "wish fulfillment" (123), of the world of the final festival of the plays as a "world where reality is created by human desire, as the arts are created" (115) is

for me spiritually renewing when I reread it myself or share parts of it with students. These chapters take us into the heart of the vision of comedy and the heart of Frye's critical thought as a whole, his vision of comedy and tragedy as two halves of a total myth—both emerging from the archaic form of drama that Frye posits as a type of romantic and even melodramatic spectacle toward which Shakespeare gravitates, most markedly in the final romances, making them the natural evolution of his dramaturgy.

Indeed, Frye's presentation of the structure and vision of comedy parallels and contrasts in many places point for point with his discussion of tragedy in *Fools of Time*, unifying our class discussion of comedy and tragedy. While Frye reads the plays in terms of genre, he moves close to Harold Bloom's frequent assertion that Shakespeare's greatest plays transcend their genre and that his largest characters transcend their plays. In other words, the natural evolution of Frye's criticism is toward Bloom's. To apply a paradox from Bloom's own theory of influence, perhaps Bloom actually wrote the last two chapters of *A Natural Perspective*.

Bloom's thesis, that Shakespeare "invented" the human by inventing a new mode of representation of character, excites students' interest, and the particular readings that fill *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* provoke intense discussion. To wit: "To reject Falstaff is to reject Shakespeare" (278). Having opened my Shakespeare course with *Henry IV, Part 1* for the past twelve years, students who do *not* reject Falstaff on their first reading are a small minority, unless it's simply that more do enjoy him but can't admit to it openly. Provoked by my reading aloud of some of what Bloom says in celebration of Falstaff, the class often dissolves into a heated Falstaff debate—do we love, loathe, pity, or fear him? And is Hal's process of maturation a good thing or a bad thing if it leads him to reject Falstaff?—without which I wouldn't feel the teaching of the play complete. I'm not sure if this is a victory for Bloom or for freedom of thought or for Falstaff or simply testifies to the coerciveness of my own love of Bloom's reading, but by the time they write their papers on the play, only a few (but thankfully, usually a few) dare to reject Falstaff.

"Did Shakespeare or nature invent the emotional inferiority of men to women?" Bloom asks (210), while discussing Rosalind in *As You Like It* as analyst and teacher of love (and of Orlando), just as Falstaff is teacher of freedom (and of Hal). Bloom's praise of the remarkable Rosalind and of other great Shakespeare heroines can open up discussion of Shakespeare's presentation of women as ahead of his time—and even of our time. (Students are also sometimes either delighted or aghast that no matter what play or character Bloom is writing on, he is often writing on Falstaff.)

“Lear is lovable, loving, and greatly loved” (479), Bloom asserts as the crucial foreground of *King Lear*—hardly an inevitable starting point for students given Lear’s treatment of Cordelia. As in his essay on *Othello*, Bloom is often at odds with current academic fashion by working to restore dignity, glory, and authority to Shakespeare’s male tragic heroes. “My students are unlikely at first to perceive [Lear’s grandeur],” he comments, “patriarchal sublimity now being not much in fashion” (478). I’ll confess that I sometimes find it embarrassing to emphasize the initial grandeur of *Othello* and *Lear*—it’s more comfortable to poke holes in their self-images. But it simply makes more sense to start the plays as Bloom suggests, since the plays themselves undercut the hero in due course. In short, Bloom’s criticism sometimes provokes a healthy discomfort; discomforting and even scorching is his bleak condensation of the theme of *King Lear*: “Shakespeare’s intimation is that the only authentic love is between parents and children, yet the prime consequence of such love is only devastation” (483). I don’t for a moment present Bloom as if his interpretations are gospel (although my students would probably dispute this). I respond to him because he’s outspoken and provokes debate. Once the students are sufficiently conversant with the plot, characters, and themes of a play, try slipping in a Bloom sound bite with a “What do you think of this interpretation?” But be warned: the use of Bloom’s ideas may cause intellectual frenzy in the classroom!

Northrop Frye opens our imaginations by encouraging us to see the coherence and simplicity of great literature and its forms; the vision of literature, and of comedy and tragedy; their place in society, their spiritual value. Minds more fully opened to literature can then safely be brought to the boil. Harold Bloom has faithfully over the years set me and my students a’boiling. The excellence of Frye and Bloom help me inspire my students’ excellence, and then I can set the critics aside and luxuriate with my students in the excellence and the joys of the primary text.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead, 1998.
- Frye, Northrop. *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*. New York: Columbia UP, 1965.