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The Revolutions in Knowledge and Literary Theory: Their Impact on English Classrooms

Since teachers, scholars, and scientists began in recent decades to study people who were previously marginalized or totally ignored, revolutions have occurred in knowledge and in literary theories and criticism. An increasing number of literature teachers acknowledge that they cannot ignore these significant changes. Indeed, they recognize that because of multicultural and global awareness, new questions are constantly being asked, new kinds of research are being done, and new approaches are being taken to subject matter.

What factors set these academic revolutions in motion? As a greater and greater portion of the world population became educated and, therefore, articulate, rising expectations nourished the political movements of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. In our own country, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, lesbians, gays, and women in all segments of American society sought a redistribution of power that would move our multicultural society closer to becoming a true democracy. Now, in the '90s, the wider consciousness that has emerged from these gradual shifts in power continues to have a profound influence on research and theory in all the disciplines.

Theories of knowledge (epistemologies) are not "value-neutral" or "objective" (Cole 81). Indeed, they are "embedded in complex networks of politics and power" (Cole 83). The traditional epistemologies have served to privilege certain groups over others — for example, men over women and whites over blacks. These theories of knowledge are, therefore, being challenged. These challenges to how we know what we know probably affect the literature classroom more than any other. Most subjects focus upon one aspect of life, but literature calls upon our knowledge of multiple realms including history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, political science, cultural geography, economics, botany, mythology, art, and popular culture. The greater our knowledge of multiple disciplines, the more intelligently we interpret literature. Likewise, by bringing a variety of disciplines to bear upon a particular topic, interdisciplinary fields — for example, women's studies, international studies, gay and lesbian studies, and ethics — enrich our reading and teaching of literature. As these academic disciplines and interdisciplinary fields are transformed by epistemological revolutions, so too will our interpretations of literature be altered.

Until recently, American classrooms featured only what had been said and done by the wealthy, educated, white elite, usually in the United States or Great Britain. Now that most of us recognize the limits of that approach, we have begun to revise courses and curricula in order to teach about the lives, the spirit, and the values of *all* the people. We struggle to validate the experiences, joys, and tensions of women as well as men, minorities as well as majorities, the colonized as well as the colonizers, the poor as well as the rich, peoples of all races, nationalities, and beliefs. Thus, when we teach southern literature, we include works by slaves and women as well as white men. When students approach world literature, they read not just European works but also literature by Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. Teachers and anthologists include the so-called "new" literatures from former colonies, including those of the British

Commonwealth. Although some literature teachers refuse to change, many have learned to think multiculturally and globally.

The statistics about the composition of the world we live in suggest that multicultural and global perspectives are here to stay. We can no longer deny that both North Americans, taken as a whole, and Caucasians around the globe are minorities on this planet. Moreover, those people who are labeled "minorities" in the United States are, on a global scale, the majorities. If we were to view the population of the world in terms of "a village of 1000 people, there would be 564 Asians, 210 Europeans, 86 Africans, 80 South Americans, and 60 North Americans" (Stewart 10). Within the United States, the number of Americans from a minority background (African, Asian, Latino, or Native American ancestry) rose from 1 out of 5 in 1980 to 1 out of 4 in 1990 (Barringer). Even the other 3 out of 4 — those with European ancestry — are, as Catharine Stimpson jokingly called them, a "motley crew" (Stimpson 7).

Simultaneously, the makeup of the student bodies — not only in the public schools but also in the universities — has changed radically. As early as 1988, 62 percent of the freshman class and "half of the undergraduate student body" at UCLA was minority (Mooney A.11). "In 1989, 55% of the undergraduate population at Berkeley was 'minority.' In 1991, 40% of the entering class at Stanford was 'minority.'" At Harvard, 35% of the class of 1994 is minority; at Princeton, 25% of the class of 1995 is minority (Stimpson 7). In addition, women now make up 51% of the college students nationwide. Responding to this increasingly multicultural environment, one-third of the colleges and universities in the United States now offer gender and ethnic studies and require multicultural general education courses (Levine and Cureton 25). At Old Dominion University, for instance, beginning literature courses must include a substantial number of works by women and minorities; and every English major must take one of these three courses: Women Writers, Literature by Minorities, or Literature of the Developing World.

In 1989, the Virginia Commission on the University of the 21st Century concluded its work with a report entitled *The Case for Change*. This document declares: "We need to prepare students for a world in which old rules and assumptions no longer apply. For instance, in the year 2000, only 15 percent of the new workers entering the American job force will be Caucasian men" (4). It asserts that the best response higher education can make to this situation is to offer students a global perspective in whatever they study. A global perspective "suggests an attitude, a way of looking at things, rather than merely a new reading list" (4). Students "should be aware of and, if possible, experience for themselves the diversity and richness of human experience, a diversity rooted in culture but also in gender and race" (5). The report emphasizes the importance of faculty development: "The transformation will have to begin with the faculty because we are suggesting that they see the world and the disciplines in which they specialize in different ways. Only when faculty begin to rethink the premises upon which their teaching and research have been based and are given the time, resources, and rewards to do so, will it be possible to transform the curricula" (5). The report calls for a review of the entire undergraduate curriculum centering on this question about each course: "To what extent does this part of the curriculum help students to comprehend the variety of human cultures and the wide range of human experience that result from it?" (6; see Bazin, "Transforming" 43).

So far, the United States has had the space and the abundance of resources to at least tolerate — and sometimes even welcome — immigrants. However, white supremacist and anti-immigrant groups springing up in California and elsewhere suggest that shrinking resources can rapidly convert generosity into hostility. As we gaze out at all the countries currently torn apart by ethnic conflict, the necessity to create in the United States what Catharine Stimpson calls a

"cultural democracy" becomes increasingly apparent. The great American poet, Walt Whitman, saw the need to understand and appreciate those different from ourselves; for example, in 1855, he wrote in "Song of Myself": "Whoever degrades another degrades me, / and whatever is done or said returns at last to me" (Quoted by Stimpson 10).

The feared "otherness" of people of a different ethnic group, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality becomes the basis for efforts to denigrate members of other cultures. But people also discriminate against individuals within their own culture. Indeed, in daily life, people habitually compare themselves to others, judge the other inferior in some way to themselves, thereby nourishing their self-esteem. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, a young, black girl, is victimized by her own people because she is poorer and darker skinned than they. Referring to Pecola, the narrator clarifies the psychological process: "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent.... We honed our egos on her" (159).

Reading literature is one of the best ways to learn to empathize with the Pecolas of the world. As we imagine ourselves in the place of the "other" and encourage our students to develop such empathy, we can identify with alternate perspectives. The Asian-American critic, Amy Ling, claims that "reading literature is really all about — getting inside other people's skin and experiencing their lives, regardless of the color of their skin, time period, gender, sexual preference, class, or ethnic background" (740). A heavy responsibility, therefore, falls on literature teachers to help students learn about how it feels to live other people's lives, not just by imagining the events that different people encounter and the cultural values they embody but also by risking the effort to grasp their perception of what we are as "other." Mutual respect is more likely if we share one another's stories, fears, hopes, and points of view, including perceptions that question the assumptions of the majority.

In addition to revolutions in knowledge and readers' perspectives, revolutions in contemporary theories are exploding traditional assumptions about what, how, and why we teach. In "Cultural Criticism," Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins rightly assert that theory is "a name for the reflective or second-order discourse that breaks out when a community's previously unspoken assumptions are no longer taken for granted" (428). They note that "literary theory emerges when critics and teachers of literature no longer share agreements on the meaning of terms like *literature*, *meaning*, *text*, *author*, *criticism*, *reading*, *aesthetic value*, *history*, *teaching*, *discipline*, and *department* — and, of course, *culture*" (428). Although the labels are slippery and overlap in meaning, deconstructive, psychoanalytical, and postmodernist analyses of texts illustrate some of the new ways of reading.

Contemporary literary theories emphasize that each author and each reader approaches a text from his or her particular perspective. The individual's perspective is roughly a composite of the sociological groups — class, race, gender, nation — to which she or he belongs. Perspective is also determined by the structure of the language we use. Deconstructionists point out our habit of thinking in terms of binary opposites, the first term of which is "privileged": for example, white/black, straight/gay, colonizer/colonized, gentile/Jewish, man/woman. Jacques Derrida attacks the binary oppositions, because this kind of thinking creates the "other" we then seek to subordinate, exploit, discriminate against, or violate. Terry Eagleton explains the binary concept man/woman in this way: "Woman is the opposite, the 'otlier' of man: she is non-man, defective man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male first principle. But equally man is what he is only by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite,

defining himself in antithesis to it" (132). As Eagleton explains, "Woman is not just an other in the sense of something beyond [the man's range of knowledge], but ... she stands as a sign of something in man himself which he [is trying] to repress" (Eagleton 132-33).

An excellent work of fiction that illustrates this fear of otherness is Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Jean Rhys, born on the Caribbean Island of Dominica, wrote this novel in response to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* in which Brontë views Caribbean women as "other." Rhys suspected that Charlotte Brontë chose a Caribbean woman as Rochester's "madwoman in the attic," because she stereotyped Caribbean women as more likely to be savage, wild, and mad (see Gilbert and Gubar 336-71). Brontë's protagonist, Jane Eyre, did not question why that woman had become mad or whether Rochester might have had a role in causing her "madness." In Jean Rhys' novel, Rochester marries his Caribbean wife, Antoinette (whom he later renames Bertha), out of greed for her money. Then, hating the kind of sensual person she is, he rejects her but keeps her under his control by locking her up in the attic of his English mansion. At her family home in the Windward Islands, he had feared mysterious, uncontrollable natives; the unfamiliar smells, plants, and insects in that tropical world; and Antoinette's sexual abandon. He claimed no "sane" woman could offer herself to him so totally: "She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would — or could. *Or could*" (165). Afraid to abandon his British need for self-control, order, and reason, he quickly represses his own sexual passion and any inclination to enjoy what he cannot understand. Locked in his attic, Antoinette symbolizes the wildness in himself he must repress and deny. Rhys' Rochester acknowledges his suppression of the "other" within himself with these words: "All my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it" (172).

Contemporary psychoanalytic criticism is an "hermeneutic of suspicion" — that is, the interpretation depends upon reading "the text of the unconscious and, if possible, uncovering the processes, the dream-work, by which that text was produced" (Eagleton 182). For example, in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), a novel acknowledged to be autobiographical, Anita Desai, an outstanding writer from India, discusses a family of three children who are almost totally neglected by their card-playing parents who spend every evening at the club. Although a bottle of the father's liquor is mentioned, no explanation for the parents' behavior is ever given. Combined with other evidence in the text that Desai is familiar with alcoholism, the narrator's and the characters' blatant silence about *why* the parents neglect family and work suggests that Desai is still guarding a childhood secret. Similarly, Marguerite Duras — a writer born in Indochina to French parents — wrote an autobiographical novel called *The Lover* (1984) in which there are odd silences about sibling relationships that an occasional, subtle phrase suggests were incestuous. In these novels by Desai and Duras, the members of the dysfunctional families cannot bear to communicate about the "secret" that haunts their lives. Similarly, in Nadine Gordimer's novel *My Son's Story* (1990), silence oppresses the middle-class, black South African mother and her teenage son and daughter. The mother and her two children are well aware of the father's lengthy affair with Hannah, a white woman. Yet, because they never mention it to him or to one another, each thinks at first that he or she is the only one who knows this secret. Even when they realize that the others also know the secret, the "truth" is too painful for discussion. The pretence continues.

These painful literary silences — about alcoholism or incest or the impact of a parent's infidelity on a family — speak to many readers who are silent about these or similar topics in their own or their friends' families. Yet the novels reflect the lives of people from a Caribbean island, India, and South Africa. At the same time that students can identify with problems of

alcoholism, incest, and infidelity also found in our American society, they experience the jungle-like forest on a Caribbean island where former slaves set fire to a white family's home, the dust storms and Hindu-Moslem conflicts in the region near New Delhi, and the daily impact of politics on private lives in South Africa. Characters' lives reflect cultural differences; yet, when readers identify with their feelings and psychological needs, they are less likely to regard people different from themselves as "other."

The postmodernist goal is to avoid making up differences that do not exist, but, at the same time, to acknowledge and accept differences that do exist without undue fear. Contemporary postmodernist theory emphasizes diversity and the necessity to analyze the many factors that determine human lives or the lives of characters in fiction. For instance, to focus on gender to the exclusion of class, race, sexual orientation, and other possible differences is to oversimplify, to overgeneralize, to be essentialist. Complexity must be acknowledged. For example, to look for *the* cause of sexism, *the* truth, or *the* self is to be simplistic.

Postmodernists challenge many of the basic principles taught by the more traditional literature teachers. Postmodernism challenges standards set by those who mistake the white, male experience for the "universal" one, value it above all others, and, therefore, claim literature depicting that experience to be the greatest because it is supposedly the most universal. In addition, postmodernism challenges customary objections to a sociological approach to literature. It also challenges the notion that readers should discover a neatly coherent meaning within the work of art. Postmodernism suggests that, however skilled the artist, a work of art is never perfectly whole or unified.

Furthermore, postmodernists claim that the "self" is in constant movement; it is everchanging. Hence, to discuss a character's quest for his or her "identity" is inappropriate. There is no stable identity, or sexual self, for instance, to locate. Indeed, there is no single location from which a character can present his or her point of view; there can only be points of view. Nor should we conflate many individuals into one entity by effacing differences. There is no black woman, only black women; no man, only men; no family structure, only family structures; no Jewish mother, only Jewish mothers. In short, there is "endless difference" (Nicholson 8). Diversity must be respected and explored rather than dismissed or denied.

Thus, the postmodern way of seeing is radically different from the way we have been educated in schools to view the world. Today in the discipline of philosophy, "Reason, Truth, Human Nature, History, Tradition" have been "displaced by the (historical, social) questions: *Whose* truth? *Whose* nature? *Whose* version of reason? *Whose* history? *Whose* tradition?" (Bordo 137; see also Bazin, "Teaching" 10). Moreover, postmodern pragmatists like Richard Rorty and Jean-Francois Lyotard "begin by arguing that Philosophy with a capital *P* is no longer a viable or credible enterprise." There can no longer be a "universalist theoretical ground" that underlies social criticism (Fraser and Nicholson 21). The philosophical notions that the postmodernists are deconstructing are the notions that underlie much of our literature. The binary oppositions that Jacques Derrida deconstructs are the foundation for our language and our mental processes and hence very much part of our reading of literature.

Thus, what began as social movements rooted in daily experiences of injustice, discrimination, psychological abuse, or powerlessness at home or at work has revolutionized what and how we read, how criticism is written, and how theorists think. Of course, contemporary literary theory is a hotbed of debates. To assume theoretically an infinite number of selves, infinite points of view, and infinite differences undermines the possibility of making judgments, setting common goals, and taking political action. But such tensions between the complexities

of reality and the necessity for order are not new. To allow "endless difference" to paralyze us and thereby render us powerless would be not only impractical but also absurd. Moreover, we do have "profound *commonalities* ... as well as differences" (Bordo 150). Thus, now as in the past, there is no one politically correct theory any more than there is any one way to teach or write about literature. However, as students and teachers of literature, we have to be aware of these radical shifts both in the distribution of power and in interpretations of literature. Finally, although many of us might prefer to ignore or bemoan the increasingly complex maze of contemporary literary theories, as literature teachers we do so at the risk of not being able to participate in the debates that will determine which ways of thinking and which theories will guide us in the 21st century.

Revolutions are by definition upsetting. We do not like to revise or abandon what little coherence and order we have been able to devise in our minds and in our professional activities. Yet as educators, we lure our students to encompass diversities and uncertainties as they create and constantly recreate patterns for their lives. We must make the same demands of ourselves.

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