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# Using the Novel to Teach Multiculturalism

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# Using The Novel To Teach Multiculturalism

*Michelle Loris*

## INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism, though not exclusively an American phenomenon, finds its roots in the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and develops its agenda during the Student Movements of the Vietnam Era. Following the paths of these movements, multiculturalism sought tolerance, inclusivity, and justice for women and racial and ethnic groups in America's educational, business, religious, and political systems.

Within the schools and universities, multicultural education, by demanding representation of these marginalized groups in the curriculum and pedagogy, challenged the American canon and its primarily white, Western, and male authority. Some forty years later the impact of multicultural education is perhaps nowhere more evident than in literary studies, especially American literature, in which the inclusion of multicultural literatures has increased at an unprecedented rate. Another hallmark of change at colleges and universities within the last third of the twentieth century has been the development of women and gender studies and ethnic studies programs or departments and the inclusion of women, African American, and ethnic writers in literary anthologies, curriculum, as well as faculty syllabi and research.

For some educators, the impact of multicultural education in the schools and universities represents positive change and an impetus for continued development. For others, whose understanding of democracy emphasizes more what we have in common than in what makes us different, the aims and assumptions of multicultural education are not so easily celebrated. Yet ethnic and racial diversity is a fact of life in America and it is becoming more so if we consider the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), which reports that approximately 30 percent of the population identifies itself as coming from different racial and ethnic groups not to mention the increasing portion of the population which identifies itself as "mixed."

Despite the lamentations of those who cling to the notion of forming a harmonious "melting pot" in America, enough recent events—consider the post-September 11 rhetoric of patriotism, recent immigration debates, legal and religious debates about Constitutional Amendments to bar gay marriage, and proposed legislation in various states regarding school integration—point to the cultural gaps that continue to exist in America and present us with the challenges facing multicultural education today.

In her recent seminal essay "Multiculturalisms Past, Present, and Future," Marilyn Edelstein tells us that multicultural education "is faced with a number of challenges, many of which entail balancing or integrating two seemingly binary choices":

1. How to teach about multiple cultures without homogenizing them ... or essentializing them.
2. Whether or how to move beyond "the single group studies" model of multicultural education.
3. How to teach classes that achieve our desired outcomes for both white students and students of color.

4. How to explore whiteness as a racial identity without recentering whiteness.
5. How to teach about histories and current practices of racism, oppression ... without ignoring practices of resistance. (15)

I had read Edelstein's essay a few months after having taught a semester-long course titled *Recent Ethnic American Fictions* and I realized that, for better and worse, I had used novels as well as some short works of fiction and contemporary literary theory to "engage students in critical thinking, discussing, and writing about some of these "binary choices" as well as literary theory, pedagogy, and the literary canon—all issues germane to multicultural education.

## **APPROACH TO THE NOVEL**

I teach courses mainly in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novels. When I teach these courses, my focus is to provide students with an understanding and appreciation of the form and aesthetic elements of the novel. My critical approach is mainly New Criticism, but I also give attention to the novel's relationship to its historical and cultural context. I want students to see that literature and social history are related, and so I make an effort to help students understand the historical and cultural context of the novels by presenting a general background of that context and by having students research historical events, social issues, or cultural phenomena referenced in the novels. My assumption is that the novel is both a literary work of art and a representation of human experience, including specific experiences of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. This approach—teaching students to read the novel both as literary art as well as a literary representation of social reality—lends itself to examining the historical, social, and political complexities inherent in any discussion of novels by multicultural writers.

In this course on *Recent Ethnic American Fictions*, I added to my repertoire by introducing students to several concepts from contemporary literary theory. It was my assumption that these different theoretical perspectives would give students the tools to become critical readers, which would then provide them with a deeper understanding of these multicultural novels and their particular cultural contexts. It was not my aim that students should acquire an in-depth expertise with any single theory but rather that they would have enough of an understanding of the general concepts or principles of the different perspectives that would allow them to "use" or "apply" these concepts to their reading of the novels. My work then was to translate sometimes dense and esoteric theoretical material into language that would be accessible to my students.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

### **New Criticism**

I had students purchase *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* to learn the theory. This text provides explanation, applications, and examples of the theories and concludes each section with a statement of the limitations of each theoretical approach. I began the theory section of the course with a discussion of New Criticism for three reasons: first, this is the critical approach with which students are most familiar, second, it is the approach they have been taught to use to examine the aesthetic form and style of a novel; and third, this is the main critical approach to which postmodern theories react. I explained to them that New Criticism posits that a great literary text is an objective, autonomous work possessing a central unity and integrity of form and theme and that it is the reader's responsibility to interpret this theme or themes through a close reading of the literary elements of the text. For the follower of New Criticism, theme in the text is paramount, and the more complex, ironic, or ambiguous the themes, the richer the text is in meaning. Meaning, according to a New Critic, is inherent in the text, not in the author's

intention, or in the historical context, or in the reader's experience of the work. According to New Criticism, the more a text achieves a coherent unity of form and meaning, the greater the text is valued and the more probable the text will be included in the literary canon of great literature. At this point, I asked students to consider what makes New Criticism both a valuable and a limited critical tool and I asked them to consider what other criteria or ways of reading a novel might be valuable.

## **Deconstruction**

I taught deconstruction next because somewhat like New Criticism, deconstructive theory focuses on a close reading of the literary elements of a text, but quite unlike New Criticism, deconstruction aims to de-center our assumptions about the Western tradition and its literary canon. Deconstruction is impossible to define satisfactorily, but I explained to my students that what is central to understand is deconstruction's skeptical examination of the binary and hierarchical thinking (for example male/female, white/black) that has formed the basis of Western culture and that is represented in language. Deconstruction posits that language is indeterminate and to deconstruct a text is to show how that text undermines binary and hierarchical claims, arguments, or concepts. It is not the intent of deconstruction to dismantle meaning *per se* in a text; but rather, by employing a careful rhetorical analysis of a text, a deconstructive reading strategy aims to tease apart the claim to unequivocal or dominant meaning and to propose multiple meanings in a text. Such a reading strategy teaches students to examine closely the inconsistencies between what a text may say and what it does, to look at ambiguity and obscurity in a text, or to observe incompatibilities between what may be prominent in a text against what may be more subtle. A deconstructive analysis engages students in an active and critical reading of a novel.

Reading multicultural novels deconstructively challenges and de-centers students' assumptions about gender, racial, or ethnic identity. This critical theory asks students to think: about whether identity is a material, objective, essential entity or if it is a social and linguistic construction with many meanings. It engages students in considering how categories of identity are created, used, internalized, or changed. And it pushes them to examine the human consequences of binary and hierarchical modes of thought and language.

## **Cultural Studies**

For students reading multicultural novels, cultural studies forms a good link to reading deconstructively. Like deconstruction, cultural studies is not easy to define. In fact, it is less a unified theory and more a diverse, interdisciplinary set of perspectives and approaches to a text. It combines literary theory, social theory, sociology, popular culture, film and media studies, feminist and gender studies, racial and ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, as well as postmodernism and poststructuralism to its loose federation of thought. But what it is, I tell the students, *is* politically engaged. So, for instance, if deconstruction asks students to examine the linguistic construction of say, "racial identity," cultural studies prods students to interrogate the power structures underlying the linguistic construction that would privilege one race over another. Cultural studies challenges students to investigate the practices of oppression that might prevail against a racial or ethnic group. Its emphasis on the present allows students to examine issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity in a novel and to relate these issues to existing power structures and social inequities.

## **New Historicism**

I introduced new historicism because it examines the relationship between a text and its social, political, and economic context and because somewhat like cultural studies, it aims to demonstrate how society maintains control or domination over a group through the interaction of power structures within the culture, or through the creation of language that posits what is "natural" or "universal." For new historicists, history and literature are both viewed as texts that tell us stories about a culture's problems, issues, struggles, and hopes. Thus, new historicist critics may interpret a novel within its historical contexts, just as they may understand the social history of a given time period through reading its novels. I also explained that new historicist critics emphasize the importance for self-awareness on the part of the critic so that he or she understands how their reading of a text is influenced by their own assumptions and values. I tell my students that they need to be critically aware of the social and cultural context from which they view the world as they read multicultural novels.

## **Feminist Theory**

While its focus is on critiquing the marginalization and disempowerment of women, feminist theory has been in the vanguard of interrogating issues of power and social inequities related not only to gender and sexuality, but also to race, class, and ethnicity. Feminist literary theory emerges from this model. Feminist literary critics have unearthed, assessed, and promoted women's writing; they have examined the cultural, sexual, and psychological stereotyped roles and images of women in literature; and they have interrogated and expanded a literary canon that was dominated by male writers. Furthermore, in the past half century many approaches have evolved under the general category of feminist literary theory and it now includes such perspectives as Marxist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, cultural studies, gender studies, multiculturalisms, and others as well.

By introducing these different critical models, I was attempting to give students the tools they needed to help them analyze the issues of power, dominance, and social inequities embedded in the novels. I was attempting to give them pathways for thinking about the complex issues of racial and ethnic identities, and I was hoping that this critical material would enable students to better understand the historical and cultural contexts of multicultural novels. My aim was to provide my students with basic critical approaches and perspectives that would help move them (and me) beyond our traditional and canonical reading of literature and that would help create for us, as Helen Grice puts it, "a transformation of ourselves as readers and as people in the world beyond the classroom or lecture hall" (6).

## **PEDAGOGY**

### **Student Background**

This fourteen-week course, *Recent Ethnic American Fictions*, was an elective for English majors. Fifteen students enrolled in the course, and fortunate for me, they were top-notch students—Dean's List and members of Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society. They were typically a homogenized group—white, middle class, mostly (at least nominally) Catholic, approximately twenty years old, and residential students from the suburbs of New England, Long Island, and New Jersey. Before the first class I had e-mailed the students and asked them to prepare, for the first class, a brief introduction of themselves including their racial and ethnic origins and their family history and heritage (at the time I did not know they were all white). I also asked them to include in their presentation some explanation of how they thought their background may have influenced their attitudes, goals, and life perspectives.

At the first class, I found out that their parents and most all of their grandparents had been born in the United States. These students identified themselves as having Irish, Italian, German, or French Canadian or mixed ethnic backgrounds. A few students had one or both grandparents or great-grandparent who had emigrated from Italy, Ireland, Germany, or England. As a group, they seemed generally socially liberal (regarding attitudes about women's roles, gay marriage, immigration regulations, and school integration) and community minded (several had participated in one or more than one of the University's many social service learning opportunities). Some of them said that they had registered for the course because they wanted to learn more about multicultural issues and that the course seemed like it might be a good complement to their minor or second major. Three of them said they thought the course would be useful for graduate school. Two students enrolled because they had electives to fulfill.

## **Assignments**

### ***Blackboard Discussion***

Students were required to read all the material and come to each class prepared for discussion. To help facilitate this requirement and to sustain discussion outside of and between class periods, each week I posted one or two questions on the Blackboard discussion board site. The questions were based on that week's reading. Students were asked to respond to a question by formulating and posting at least a five-paragraph essay and to cite the readings to support their responses. In addition, they were to respond briefly to one of their classmate's responses, thereby starting a discussion. This assignment worked well; sometimes a few students became quite engaged in the discussion and posted more than one response to a classmate or carried on an ongoing dialogue with a classmate. I often began the next class by referencing the Blackboard question to initiate discussion in class. One of the themes that began on Blackboard and that continued throughout the semester was the question of the social construction of racial identity.

### ***Class Discussions***

At the beginning of the semester I had randomly assigned the students to three-person groups. For weeks two to four of the semester, each student in the group had to be prepared to present and explain at least one of the critical approaches we were studying (this is when the Blackboard discussion on race began and spilled over into class). From weeks five to twelve, as we would discuss the fiction of different ethnic and racial groups, students were required to use a different critical approach, apply it to their reading of the novel or short fiction, and be prepared to discuss their reading and analysis.

As I have already indicated, the first and overriding issue was the question of the creation of racial identity. I had posted on the Blackboard the following quote from *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* and asked them to consider the implications of this quote and to discuss, too, that if "race" is a construction, then how is "white" not a construction among many other constructed races.

[E]volving identities of racial and ethnic groups have not only claimed a place in the mainstream of American life, but have challenged the very notion of "race," more and more seen by social scientists as a construct invented by whites to assign social status and privilege without scientific relevance. Unlike sex, for which there are x and y chromosomes, race has no genetic markers. (287)

Student responses ranged from Brendan's thoughtful "I had never considered this idea or its implications and what that might mean about me as a white male" to Jared's more defensive or incredulous response "but people have different skin color, types of hair; they even smell different." It was clear from both the Blackboard and the class discussions that the students were being challenged. They had grown up assuming that race was an unchanging biological and permanent

fact, and they were further assuming that physical differences in skin color, hair texture, and facial features implied distinct genetic and biological differences. They had grown up assuming "white" to be a colorless, neutral, but "prior" human nature or standard by which other groups were measured.

But as we began to read the fiction of the Italian, Irish, and Jewish American writers, they became aware, from their reading and research, how many of these groups, who are considered "white" now in the twenty-first century, had not been considered "white" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. Spurred by the terms "Black Irish" and "Black Wop" from the readings, some students brought in information attempting to explain the origin and use of these terms. The sources of the information were varied (a book, an Internet search, a photo journalism text, and even a clip of Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York*) but what they all were doing was attempting to use various critical concepts to interrogate the social construction of race and ethnicity. They wanted to know: How did the binary between black and white originate, with black assuming all of the negative? By this time we were reading Morrison's "Recitatif" and *Jazz*.

In "Recitatif," Morrison's masterful strategy of never identifying the race of either character but describing each one ambiguously enough so that at times either one might be black or white completely decentered my students' assumptions about race. The students had different opinions about which character was white and which was black, and they came to realize that their opinions were based upon their constructed assumptions about racial identity. They agreed that a deconstructive reading of this text had, as Lindsay put it, "opened them up to the fluidity of identity" and to the stereotyped lens through which they automatically viewed race.

This conversation segued pretty easily to our discussion of *Jazz*. We began with the epigraph. (We began discussion of each novel from a New Critical approach). I explained that epigraphs were often the writer's key to the themes of a novel and so, I asked, what did they make of this epigraph? Nadayne was quick to respond by quoting *Beginning Ethnic American Literatures*: "to signify on somebody or something is to use language in order to change the meanings by which somebody or something knows itself" (89). She explained that "the epigraph was the novel itself: the reader was kept from ever knowing anything definite or predictable and in this way the novel was signifying on the reader." Amy jumped in:

The epigraph suggests the multiple meanings of identity we've been discussing. The "I" can mean more than one thing about a person and those meanings are all tied up with language. For instance, Violet at the beginning of the novel is not the Violet she comes to be at the end of the novel. And we never really know who the narrator is.

Michael, who was a double major in religious studies, having done some research, asserted that the epigraph, taken from The Nag Hammadi poem, was referencing an early Christian gnostic group and he explained that the gnostics were thought of as heretical by the church because they rebelled against the "institutional" church. In this way, he reasoned, Morrison's novel was meant to undermine our stereotypical understanding of African Americans. The group presentations became an elaboration of these class discussions.

### **Group Presentations**

Each group was required to give PowerPoint presentations of an assigned novel using more than one critical approach. Although different critical approaches were used, the groups seemed to focus on the theme of oppression and the resistance to oppression. So, for example, in the student group that was assigned *Jazz*, Jeff attempted a cultural studies approach and presented a clip from Spielberg's *The Amistad* to illustrate how the Middle Passage and slavery had eradicated the African person's sense of identity and humanity and how white people constructed a "slave" identity for Africans who eventually became African Americans and that this was fundamental to understanding the foundation of racism portrayed in Morrison's novel. But we also had to discuss that the film was a fiction, though



one based on history, and how that issue should be incorporated into our discussion from a cultural studies perspective. This presentation was followed by Brendan's try at a new historicist approach. He wanted to show how the context of the novel was integral to its meaning about the effects of racism on the formation of relationships between black men and women. He presented a brief history of the Great Migration of blacks to the north, its impact on northern whites' attitudes toward blacks and the St. Louis race riots. He then explicated how these events, and the racism embedded in these events, formed the historical and cultural context that affected Joe, Violet, and Dorcas's lives going back to each of these character's parents.

Similar approaches were taken with the other novels: Chris presented on Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. His discussion was about the consequences of contact with the white man's world on the Native American male. In one part of the presentation, he focused on "The Red Convertible," included a clip of Jimi Hendrix playing "The Star Spangled Banner," and provided a summary from the psychology literature on post-traumatic stress in Native American Vietnam vets. Mike took a different tack and offered an analysis of the Catholic imagery and references in *Love Medicine*. His analysis included a critical examination of Catholicism's contact with early Native Americans and concluded by deconstructing the story "Saint Marie" as a sadistic "allegory" to depict the dynamic of this contact.

Students gave similar presentations on *The House on Mango Street* and *The Woman Warrior*. Amy and Lindsay offered feminist critical approaches to discuss the themes of sexual oppression and abuse; the relation between the individual and her community; the triple oppression of race, gender, and class; and the use of writing for both these authors as a strategy for resistance. One of the most important issues these students brought up was a continuation of our discussion on whether race is essential or constructed. They asked: "What constitutes Chicano/a? Or Asian? Is there only one type? Are all Asian Americans or Chicano/Americans or African Americans or Native Americans or white Americans the same? What about issues of class? Or mixed races and ethnicities? Or geographical origins? Or origins of tribes?" Their questions about essentializing a group had raised some of the most significant conversations we had had that semester about the multiplicity of identity within a single cultural group. Lauren then gave a New Critical approach analyzing the literary elements and their relation to theme in *The House on Mango Street* and concluded with a discussion of why this novel belongs in the literary canon, which brought us to a class discussion on canon formation.

### ***Discussion of the Literary Canon***

Students had not, in previous courses, been much engaged in thinking about the canon. Lindsay said,

This course was the first time I was made to think about the canon. I understand now how marginalized authors may not be included in the canon because of issues of race and gender and how they may have less access to political and social power. But that means that who gets into the canon is a political issue and not an issue based on literary merit.

Chris added that he was "surprised that with all the advances in society since the 1960s that more changes had not been made in the literary canon." Amy brought up the fact that "by teaching a class on 'Ethnic Fiction' wasn't I in fact contributing to the marginalization of these authors and shouldn't I just include these works in my 'regular' courses?" Brendan said he thought that "reading the works by different multicultural authors by themselves in their own course would give students a chance to gain a deeper knowledge of each group and that he was interested in taking courses on just one group at a time." Jared said he thought that "the mix of groups was good because he had never before thought of 'white identity' as just one of many others, made up by society for different political reasons." But Aisling brought us back to important questions like, "Who decides on this canon? Who makes it up? I don't want to give up writers like Shakespeare but I definitely think Morrison belongs there." The students were dissatisfied that we never able to resolve the issues raised in this discussion.

### ***Cocurricular Activities***

Two events—one planned, one not planned—were included in the course. One event was part of the University Lecture Series and it was a talk given by Carrie Dann, Western Shoshone Elder. She spoke on the effects of mining on the land and on the livelihood of indigenous people. We followed up this lecture with a class discussion, to which Brendan brought a series of articles from the *New York Times*, which was covering the same topic. The second event was a planned "Friday Night Dinner and a Movie" at my home, which was held about three weeks before the end of the semester. The movie was *Crash* and had been recommended by Jared early in the semester. The discussion was open ended but covered the issues of power and domination, prejudice, and hate that we had discussed in class throughout the semester. During that evening's conversation, we talked about not only what was being taught in the course but also how it was being taught in the course but also how it was being taught.

### **CONFERENCE PRESENTATION**

Based on our conversation about pedagogy, three students—Mike, Amy, and Chris—wrote a proposal that was accepted as a panel presentation at the Sigma Tau Delta International Convention. The title of their panel was "Perception and Struggle: Exposing the Ideological and Pedagogical Issues in Ethnic American Fiction," A quote from their proposal states:

[S]tudents gave major group presentations examining the literary qualities, social and cultural context, and political issues embedded in a novel. Because the learning in the class was so equally dependent upon the students and the professor, the class was able to transcend traditional class hierarchies and this experience became a lesson about what we were studying.

### **CONCLUSION**

At our end-of-semester assessment, the students agreed that the course had been demanding and had required them to work twice as hard as they had expected. A few students said that they could not keep up with the pace of the course and accomplish the quality of work they were accustomed to doing. Some students expressed that they had not had a class in which they were responsible to present and discuss the material as much as this class had required. Some students found this style of learning to be enlightening. As Chris described it: "The course never let up; but we never stopped learning something every time." We all agreed that because we covered so much material that we did not cover each topic, novel, or literary theory as much as we would have wanted to do. A few students felt dissatisfied about this aspect of the course. But they all acknowledged that the readings, discussions, and class presentations had "radically opened their thinking," "made them so much more aware," "challenged their way of thinking," and "made them learn much more by teaching it themselves." For these last comments, I was ever so grateful. Had this course "transformed" the way these students would live and work in the world as Grice had proposed? Impossible to know.

But for a semester, reading and thinking about these multicultural novels engaged and challenged the students' assumptions about themselves and the America in which they live. Through their reading, research, and discussion of these multicultural novels, students had been exposed to a course dealing with more than a single group; they had grappled with the questions of identity as an essential or as a constructed quality, as well as with the issue of "essentializing" a single group; they had interrogated the forces of power and domination, of prejudice, and of hate; and they had thought about pedagogy and canon formation. Most important, reading these novels developed in the students a realization of our common humanity with all people, as well as an understanding of and respect for our multicultural society. I like to believe that this course helped my students become more critical readers of the novel and more knowledgeable and empathic human beings.

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