Why Major in Literature—What Do We Tell Our Students?

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English court and of the slow shift from feudalism to modernity that can be traced in the history of the word “gentle.” The Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles and an introductory essay on “figurative language” are the critical texts that allow students to undertake this analysis. This unit does in brief what we try to do in the course as a whole.

If we begin working for a whole day on a few words of a short poem, we end by requiring students to think about several texts at once in the context of a writer’s career. Bill Stowe has developed a unit on Lucille Clifton, whose books of poetry meditate on her relation to her ancestors who survived slavery; her poems elaborate an understanding of what it means to live and use language in a world of wonder and violence. Students read many poems, as well as her prose memoir and books for children; they also read selected critical essays on her work. They are then required to write a paper that ideally will call on all that they have learned in the course of the semester about how to read literature, attending to the formal, biographical, and historical dimensions of Clifton’s writing.

This course teaches students that critical inquiry into how meanings are produced in a text is valued and that signifying practices are worldly events. It teaches them further that to be an educated reader one must be able to write analytic and interpretive essays on literature. In this course and in the major, students learn that literature demands we take pains as readers, because reading literature teaches us the reach and hold
of language. They learn how this close encounter with language raises questions about agency: is language speaking us, or are we speaking language? Finally, students learn that language is a necessary condition for our social and subjective lives and that literature, which is enacted in language, is irreducibly social and historical.

By so teaching our students, we suggest to them that in this, the most highly mediated world human beings have ever made, the study of literature and the encounter with language such study entails are worthy of their attention. As educated readers of literature, they will be better prepared to analyze and interpret the signifying practices that make up the texture of human lives. They will learn as they major in literature how better to read many kinds of texts, from the most ephemeral to the most enduring. They will learn to ask why some texts endure while others pass away and will therefore ask questions about value: how a text creates meanings, or symbolic values, and how the value of a text itself is determined.

In asking such questions, students engage in humanistic inquiry. Majoring in literature comes down to fundamental questions of value, including the value of the human and human creativity. Humanists have for the last several decades asked searching questions about what creativity means, have questioned the very category of the human, and have acknowledged that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (in Walter Benjamin’s famous thesis [256]). As Mary Poovey has recently observed, they have done so using methods that are more interrogative than accumulative, more interpretive than quantitative, and more open-ended than progressive. She goes on to observe that the function of the humanities should be “to preserve, nurture, analyze, interrogate, and interpret the human” as enacted in “the goods of living culture” (12). Though these processes of analysis and interrogation may question how the value of “the human” is determined and what constitute “goods,” value clearly cannot be determined by quantitative or positivist measures alone.

What is humanistic study worth to our majors? One answer is that an education in literature enhances one’s capability to exercise what Robert Scholes has called “textual power” (148). According to this thesis, good rhetors are always in demand, so an education in literature qualifies majors for jobs in the corporate world. Business and the professions need people who can do things with texts. Broadening this argument, one could consider how higher education works as a sorting mechanism crucial to social reproduction. The “cultural capital” students accumulate when they major in literature has a value that varies depending on whether they graduate from an elite university or from one of the second-tier, open-admission colleges that make up the majority of institutions of higher education. Cultural capital adds value to competence.

While I believe that these answers are descriptively true, I think it is important to consider the ways in which the study of literature can challenge the reduction of humanistic study to the acquisition of capabilities, even capabilities that have the valorizing power of capital. Capabilities reduce the question of value to a matter of standards and measurement, including measurement by a salary, that persuasive number. I would argue that the question of value is too complex for such a reduction and that there is a good in studying this complexity. Educating our students in literature may prepare them to take their place in business and the professions, but that is not all.

When students major in literature, they may begin to ask questions about how signifying practices produce value and about the relation of symbolic values to the order of things and everyday life. Their attention to the work and the play of language in literature, its ordering and disordering powers, its worldliness, may encourage them to value the incalculable goods of human culture while remembering Benjamin’s thesis about civilization and barbarism.
Such an education raises critical questions about valorization that cannot be answered by an appeal to quantitative measure.

That the study of literature is an engagement with the complexity of value matters even more after 11 September 2001. Acts of terrorism and acts of war are symbolic as well as material practices and are unthinkable outside language; each requires subjects who believe in terror or believe in war, and those subjects are speaking subjects, constituted in part through language and literature. I heard a speaker at a conference this fall admit to having had no answer to a student who asked why she should stay in school and continue her English major in the wake of the terror attacks in New York. Not responding to such questions strikes me as a failure of imagination that fails students. The week the United States began bombing Afghanistan, I was teaching Jane Eyre and Gayatri Spivak’s essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” Students distressed by the world-historical events of which they were necessarily a part organized a teach-in; they turned to literature professors, among others, for help. I brought to the teach-in the texts I had prepared for class.

Spivak teaches us to ask how Brontë’s domestic novel takes part in “the ‘worlding’ of ‘the Third World’” (262). The students and I read the scene in which Rochester says to the company assembled in the attic garret, “That is my wife [ . . . ] Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know [ . . . ] and this is what I wished to have [ . . . ] this young girl [ . . . ] I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout [ . . . ] look at the difference” (322). Following Spivak, the students and I did look at this little semiotic system, and we considered how that woman from the West Indies, enslaved by her passions and beyond redemption, is necessary to this young Englishwoman, the antithesis establishing Jane’s difference, ensuring by contrast her freedom and autonomy, and ultimately enabling her marriage to Rochester. Jane’s English individualism is thus predicated on a symbolic relation to the dark woman from the British colony, who is represented as a “not-yet-human Other,” as Spivak says, and British “feminist individualism” is articulated through the “axioms of imperialism” (266, 263). Moving from word (“that” / “this”) to work (the novel) to world (the British empire), students see a definition of humanity emerge, and they learn that the value of the beloved heroine is necessarily relational and comes at a cost.

“[C]ultural objects express an imaginary relation to a past that can be remembered and a future that can be anticipated,” Poovey writes; their value lies in this representational capacity (12). How is the past remembered in literature, and how is the future anticipated? This question matters now, more than ever. How do word, work, and world interrelate? It’s worth majoring in literature to learn to ask a question so vital.

WORKS CITED


