

Comment from Professor J. Hillis Miller, Past President of the MLA; also, Professor Emeritus of English and Distinguished Research Professor of Comparative University of California at Irvine.

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The two previous posts have given me a lot to think about and have guided my own thinking and this response. I especially agree with the choices of "narrative" and "rhetoric."

I read sometime ago, with some careful attention directed to the crucial parts, the Common Core document.

On the one hand, who could be against their project? It sets ambitious standards and goals that are much needed in the present somewhat chaotic and distressing situation. It is the product of much earnest thought and investigation. It is going to happen anyway (many state governors love it), so the MLA is right to try to improve its implementation.

On the other hand, my heart sinks a little in confronting the Common Core and the hopes for its implementation. My anxieties lie in several areas:

1) The one size fits all aspect. The Common Core allows for a good bit of divergence and improvisation, but its goal is still a more or less uniform advancement through a set of stages, to be evaluated by uniform texts. An enormous diversity of students exists in the US from K-12 through graduate school. Many now have English as a second language. Knowing Spanish, Chinese, Korean, etc. as native speakers is a precious national asset, but it makes problems for English Language Arts. Fewer and fewer of our students come from homes where reading literature is part of family life. On the other hand, most of today's students have enormous and enviable skills at using iPhones, Twitter, Facebook, and playing complex video games, etc. A teacher would need to capitalize on those, even though such students are likely to be indifferent or hostile to "literature." They are unlikely to curl up with a copy of *Middlemarch*, even a Kindle version, but they delight in spending hours playing World of Warcraft or some other video game. As any teacher knows, you must tailor your way of teaching to the students that happen to land in a particular class. They differ a lot from year to year even in the same school, college, or university. At the moment I am writing this, a big to do is going on in New York, with teachers protesting the standardized Common Core tests. I worry that the Common Core, in spite of its demurrers, will, especially when implemented, as is quite likely, with local or state lesson plans, lead teachers to say, "Today is November 5. I must be teaching the comma splice." That is not a recipe for good or successful teaching, which always requires free improvisation, playacting skills, etc., wholehearted commitment, interpersonal genius, etc.

2) Good teaching is idiosyncratic, *sui generis*. No single mode of good teaching exists. I had a wonderful eighth grade algebra teacher, a formidable and lovable woman who carried a big paddle stick around the room and shook it at us, though she never used it. She made learning algebra immense fun. Terrific teacher, though I am sure her methods were not in the lesson plans, nor in what she had been taught in pedagogy classes. I revere my memory of her. Mike Holquist and Margie Ferguson, I happen to know, are both brilliant teachers, but their prescriptions differ markedly (narrative for Holquist; rhetoric of tropes for Ferguson). These

days I'd be likely to use speech act theory, for better or worse. An immense amount of brilliant, faithful, and dedicated teaching exists at all levels in the US today, for example among those countless adjunct professors who do over seventy percent of the teaching in all fields in US colleges and universities, often with marginal pay and meager or no benefits. College teachers and their colleagues in primary and secondary schools must improvise what works for them as a teaching method in the particular classrooms in which they find themselves. The Common Core drafting committee perhaps needed more evidence from those actually doing the work (down in the trenches, as they say). Many of the students in rural coastal Maine are children in hardworking lobster-fishing families. These students expect to lobster fish or to marry a lobsterman themselves. Some are intelligent readers of literature, but many of them apparently ask themselves, not unreasonably, why in the world they need to know anything about how to read literature or how to write correct English. Implementing the Common Core is going to be quite a different challenge for their schools from implementing it in an affluent Chicago suburb.

Now, at last, "complexity." I focus on literature, setting aside for my purposes so-called "informational" texts, such as weather reports (not all that easy to understand, by the way). I can understand the Common Core's penchant for the "quantifiable." How can you measure success or failure if you cannot quantify it? Quantification of the complexity of a given literary text is, I suspect, a hangover from information theory, which measured complexity by how much new information was conveyed, 0% for a tautology up to near a 100% for a text like *Finnegans Wake*, meaning it conveys so much new information it is incomprehensible. A text that works for teaching is down around 30% or less, according to information theory, if I remember correctly, but it does lead to such absurdities as concluding that *Grapes of Wrath* is just right for third-graders because it uses simple declarative sentences. This theory used to be used, by the way, to grade textbooks.

I choose literature to discuss because teaching it presents special problems. Though literary works are tied to the "real world" in all sorts of ways, a given literary work functions primarily to grant its readers access to an imaginary world, a different one for each work. This happens by way of the words of the text. Those words generate access to the world of the work, or function to "reveal" that world. A novel is in this like a video game, except that the latter uses sounds and images as well as words. You can encounter Dorothea Brooke only by reading *Middlemarch*, just as you can encounter a given set of "avatars" only by playing World of Warcraft. Human beings seem to have an innate need for virtual realities. Literature satisfies, or used to satisfy, that need, though we are now in the midst of an epochal shift to new digital media that means print literature plays a smaller and smaller role in most people's lives. I'm not saying literature should not be taught as an "English Language Art," but students from K through college might also benefit from courses in the genres and gadgets they actually use every day: film, MP3s, video games, iPhones, iPads, Facebook—media that more and more play the role of teaching ethics, how to behave in courtship and marriage, etc., that was played in Victorian England by printed novels.

Complexity in literature, as MLA members already know, exists in many different and scarcely quantifiable ways. The Common Core authors probably had logical and syntactical complexity most in mind, that is, challenges just to making sense of a given text. Here is a no doubt incomplete suggested repertoire of complexities in narratives. All of them operate in one way or

another in even the simplest story or poem. Unfortunately they don't make a hierarchy, so you can't just teach #1 in the first grade, and so on up to six. You must teach them all at once, as best you can, for the work at hand. All are always present in any story, from Dick and Jane on up. Wonderful stories for children like the Grimm fairy tales are extremely complex and sophisticated narratologically. (They are also usually read and taught in translation in the US, by the way, as Mike, Margie, and I know from Lit X at Yale.)

1) Semantic complexity. Ordinary words often have a bewildering variety of (often) contradictory meanings. Hard to decide whether a given dictionary meaning is apropos in a given case. "Abroad," as in Twain's title, *Innocents Abroad*, means "in a foreign country" all right, but "abroad" also means "not on target, astray, in error" (6th meaning in Am. Heritage Dictionary). Could Twain have been invoking the latter meaning too? I haven't even got beyond the title, and I'm all abroad already. If the two meanings operate, by the way, the double meaning is ironic. Irony is a major trope in all literature, so a sense for irony is a requisite in understanding literature, even at the semantic level, even with Dick and Jane, where sexist presuppositions are visibly at work. I doubt if Dick and Jane are used any more, perhaps for that reason, but they were the texts used for our children. Among other things they taught girls to know their place. Boys too.

2) Syntactical complexity: subordinate clauses, Margie's hyperbaton, etc., everything complicating simple declarative sentences that have subject, verb, object, in that order. This is perhaps the most quantifiable of complexities, but it is, even so, an immensely complex complexity. Deciding whether a hyperbaton is more or less numerically complex than a subordinate clause strikes me as difficult or arbitrary.

3) Complexity introduced by figures of speech: all sorts of these are everywhere in literature, from metaphors, similes, metonymies, synecdocies to catachreses like "face of a mountain" or "leg of a chair." "Dick and Jane each pulled at a chair leg in their fight over the chair." Understanding literature is not just a matter of spotting tropes and naming them, but of assessing their contribution to the meaning of the work and to its performative force..

4) Complexity in the narrative voice, often an exemplification of irony. Even poems have a "speaker," not necessarily identifiable with the author. In any case, the poem or novel is usually taken as a primary means of access to the "author," in an obvious circularity. We spontaneously say, "George Eliot says," when we really mean "George Eliot's narrator, an invented personage, says."

5) Complexity in the characters presented. This complexity is generated not only by what the characters say and do but by the way the narrator presents them. Almost impossible to quantify. Is Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* more or less complex than Georg in Kafka's "The Judgment." Kafka of course brings up the issue of translation once more, as in most of Mike Holquist's admirable list of progressively more complex stories.

6) Complexity in adducing evidence for an ultimate evaluation or "reading" of a story. "Does Conrad's Lord Jim redeem himself by allowing himself to be shot dead at the end of the novel?"

I'm not sure what, if anything, this implies for any statement the MLA might make. I guess I'm suggesting remarks about a mixture of narrative complexity and tropological complexity as something that might go into an MLA statement helping to fill out what is implied in the Core's commitment to teaching complexity. But a Core committee might well say this is unnecessarily complicating things. "Anybody who is literate can read the Grimm story, 'All Kinds of Fur.' Let's not not make a big deal out of that. We mean complexity in vocabulary and syntax." I'm not in favor of complexity for its own sake (give me Occam's razor!), just trying to report complexities I find through a candid look at literature as such. They have fascinated me ever since I shifted from physics to English in the middle of my sophomore year at Oberlin. I found, and still find, Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears" quite baffling, though I have a reading now that satisfies me somewhat. But what in the world did Tennyson mean by "tears from the depth of some divine despair"?