

Objectivity in Literature

Learning to read properly is the cornerstone of most Literature classes in college. In the article "Toward a Composing Model of Reading," authors Robert J. Tierney and P. David Pearson "...argue that readers [as well as writers] also compose meaning (that there is no meaning on a page until a reader decides there is)" (569). In other words, finding meaning in what we read is essential to proper reading, we must go beyond plot and simple enjoyment to try and understand what we read. Tierney and Pearson sum it up as "From a reader's perspective, meaning is created as a reader uses his background of experience together with the author's cues to come to grips both with what the writer is getting him to do or think and what the reader decides and creates for himself" (568). However, some people use their background as creative license to effectively twist the meaning of what they see and hear to fit their prejudice, personal bias and even their bigotry.

When we seek meaning in what we read, it can lead to brilliant insights about a piece, but it can also lead to assumptions like "since *Tom Sawyer* contains the word 'nigger' it must be a book promoting racism." This is acceptable if it is only a personal insight, since what we read can theoretically mean anything at all, but it is disrespectful to Samuel Clemens. The book, and its author, are far from promoting racism in content. Faulty assumptions like these simply do not apply for most people and can preclude a reader from seeing deeper shades of meaning within a book. It can be dangerous as well, because this kind of logic has been used as a lever to promote censorship of many good works.

Sometimes readers will pick personal symbols out of their background to determine meaning. Personal symbols can be components of biased reading as easily as prejudice. A reader cannot assume for example, that since a church he or she attends uses white candles in its services, anytime a white candle shows up in a story it means the story is about religion. It could be taking creative license too far--especially if the story is about a candle store. The main problem with personal symbols is that one tends to see the same ideas repeatedly in everything one reads. That kind of analysis can severely limit the broad spectrum and variety of themes in the literary works out there and can lead to a "can't see the forest for the trees" problem.

In my Writing About Literature class, our teacher found symbols of Christianity in every story. She saw a theme pertaining to religion in each and every story we read, even if there was only one "symbol" of Christianity mentioned once in the entire story. Certainly, some of the stories we read did pertain to Christianity, but not all of them. For instance, in "A Small Good Thing" by Raymond Carver, a couple who has just lost their son break bread at the end of the story with a formerly hostile baker. In this 17 page story, breaking bread is the only action that could be considered symbolic of Christianity. Our teacher immediately zeroed in on it even though there simply isn't much evidence in this story for a Christian theme. Regardless, class discussion circled around this theme for quite a while before the topic was changed to a theme of false expectations. This new theme was better supported than the teacher's theme, which could be considered farfetched or obscure.

There are times when the meaning a reader assigns a story is definitely wrong, though. When we judge the author of a fictitious work by his writing or assume that the narrator of a story is the

author, we are probably making a mistake. For instance, we cannot assume that D'Arcy McNickle is the narrator of *The Surrounded*. The work is not the author's life on paper. It is all right to take the author's background into account, but we must use caution here. If we assume an author who has experienced poverty can write an accurate novel about poverty, that is all right. But, assuming that the author is badmouthing rich people or the middle class, just because he or she has an impoverished background, would be wrong. Our assumptions about an author's background and what his stance will be can be prejudiced and bears careful examination.

When an author learns his work has been interpreted, it's certainly not new to hear him or her say, "but, that's not what I meant at all! How can you take a story about boyhood and turn it into a story about skydiving when no one even put on a parachute in the story?" Or, "I never wrote that story intending to have it picked apart!" After all, it is impossible to know exactly what an author is trying to convey through a story, but a good educated guess can mean the difference between angering an author and encouraging a smile. It is interesting to read a story and feel as if you are tapping into the subconscious of an author as well as the time period when the story was written, but it is not respectful to allow nonobjective reading to twist the meaning. It is also disrespectful to basically say that one's cultural interpretation is more valid than the author's; that, in essence, is ethnocentrism.

The issue becomes very important when it evolves into a dangerous one, when fiction crosses the line into non-fiction. Our myths can morph into a kind of quasi-reality with a life of their own. When a threatening myth crosses that line, reputations are trashed, books are burned, and people are assassinated. One man alone managed to invent a cultural myth about German Jews that became real enough to kill millions. People hunted down and almost killed Salman Rushdie for writing the novel called *The Satanic Verses*, because they seemed to believe his book was single-handedly promoting Satanism in the real world. (Seems to me there's no difference between that and altering the bible to fit your prejudices) Perhaps he was, but it could've been handled with less of a mob mentality. "Thou shalt not kill." It is happening today with Pagans and Wiccans. Many have had crosses burned on their lawns and their children taken away because many people believe the baby-killing, lightning throwing, blood thirsty, evil old women portrayed in the movies and books are representations of reality. In actuality, Wicca is supposed to be a peaceful, nature loving religion centered on a Mother and a Father concept. All of these myths became real enough for people to believe and act on them. It may not be extremely likely that one person, in getting the wrong idea from a book, is going to do much damage, but it is definitely not impossible. Wrong ideas can kill.

One area where preconceived notions has really led to problems in Literature is when it involves Native American cultures or Native American individuals.

Even twenty years ago, it was common to see television western portrayals of the "bloody savage" brand of stereotyped Native American. "Bloody savage" liked to deck himself out in lots of tan leather, red war paint and plenty of feathers. He rode on the back of a horse screaming for war, waving his ever ready tomahawk and scalping settlers left and right.

The "bloody savage" is a stereotype, and a damaging one at that. His appearance only opened the doorway a little wider for lily white portrayals of historical figures like Columbus or the

Inquisitors. The screenwriters and authors responsible for "bloody savage's" proliferation, obviously not alive at the time America was settled, took this violent creature from stories they'd heard and interpreted. The reader, or listener in this case, interpreted a story his or her way and propagated a harmful myth by becoming the writer. To the ignorant majority of white people, "bloody savage" became a true-to-life historical figure. He was the evil bad guy who made a full-time career of threatening the settlers. He was the "demon" of the old west. He was the "barbarian" even though whites were the ones who called truce and then tried to wipe them out after declaring peace. The ones not wiped out were and still are being gratuitously ripped off.

The myth became real enough to go down in some history texts as fact. For example, in *The Epic of America*, published by Little, Brown and Co. made the statement, "Cruel and vengeful, [Native Americans] could school themselves to stand pain as a matter of social convention, although when unsustained by that, they were childishly lacking in self-control" (Adams 6,7).

The myth is still real enough today to draw up a vivid picture in many people's minds. It does in Andy Rooney's mind; "In spite of the fact that [Native Americans] surrounded the wagon trains and shot flaming arrows into the stagecoach carrying the new schoolmarm, Indians were always considered to be brave, strong, stoic, resourceful, true to their word, and unconquerable."

Undoubtedly, this "bloody savage" figure has some basis in fact--the conflict between the, white settlers and Native Americans is well documented and still occurring, in a supposedly less violent form, today. But the mythology-cum-facts dodges the real issue. A lot of settlers scalped Native Americans too. They cheated and lied to get their way. Up until recently, it was only a misdemeanor to murder another human being if s/he was Native American, and white people are still taking children away from Native Americans to prevent them from handing down their religions and traditions--never mind that God could've spoken to them a long time ago in their own language, too. The Bible tells us "Do not profane the Spirit," yet it is still going on. Regardless of facts, generations have handed down diluted or ethnocentric tales full of myths that grow more biased with each generation.

The "savage" (as applied to Native Americans, as well as the ancient Celts) still exists in our cultural mythology--but recent trends have turned him from a "bloody savage" to a "noble savage." "Bloody savage" probably phased out, thanks to the protests of some of the more outspoken Native American activists. He was too violent to be real. But, then again, the "bloody savage" is a myth too out of touch with American romanticism as well--after all, white people "ought to take some of the blame." (It seems a bit like this change has grown into the great white male American guilt fest to me, maybe just a bit incestuous in flavor.)

The "noble savage" stereotype always fights for the Earth--he is a real stand-up guy who is always in harmony with nature even if he is a little backwards or a bit of comic figure of naiveté when it comes to white culture. But the problem with "Noble Savage" is that he "can't" fight his own battles. "Noble Savage" always seems to have a white spokesman in books and movies, a white good-hearted man to fight off evil white people (Seals 34). In many of the movies and books about Native Americans we see and read, like *Dances With Wolves* or *Last of the Mohicans*, the hero is the white person who "saves" his adopted tribe of Native Americans. They actually do much of the physical battle, but it is the white hero they rally behind. The white hero

gets a considerable amount of credit as well. After all, "Noble Savage" is too ignorant and backwards to fight such "intelligent" bigots.

In the article "The New Custerism," David Seals claims this trend is merely a new form of the "old Custerism" that spawned the "bloody savage" archetype (34). People who write books and screenplays portraying Native Americans falsely haven't really improved things by changing the "bloody savage" into "noble savage." Seals says, "Instead of creating a great new cultural paradigm, *Dances with Wolves*, by its huge success, is spawning more of the same old cliches. Where the Old Custerists didn't mind blatantly stereotyping Indians as savages, for New Custerists, the sentimentality and romance must not be sullied" (35). Maybe its audience should try watching *Thunderheart* or *Broken Rainbow*, movies about real Native Americans involved in modern life/tragedies/horrors on the reservations.

"Noble Savage" is too pretty to be touched by poverty, racism, groundwater poisons, uranium mines (and their radioactive spillage) or intertribal conflicts. Seals brings it to our attention that glossing over Native American issues merely hurts the efforts many activists are making to improve conditions. When we identify Native American cultures with the "noble savage" archetype, we miss the problems and the reality (35). We often get a bizarre and inaccurate mix of tribal customs. We have to remember that "Noble savage" is no more real than the "bloody savage" of the old westerns.

The damage done by this archetype is a little more insidious and subtle than the old one. How does one fight something made of marshmallows (remember the Sta-Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters*)? How do people fight problems that aren't acknowledged as being real by the media and subsequently by the population; especially when those problems are covered in fluff and romanticism? It's become okay to swim in the guilt of the past, but that cesspool draws people's attention away from the problems that are occurring for many Native American's today. Both archetypes also seem to have the mystical power to push many of the real accomplishments of Native Americans into the shadows. Subsequently, the truth grows more and more obscure.

This type of problem was drawn sharply to my attention one day when I was several years younger and talking to a Blackfoot friend of mine. He was explaining how, when he lived in Montana, people called him, among other racial epithets, a "prairie nigger." I was so surprised that I said, "I didn't realize that kind of racism against Native Americans still existed." He just looked at me and went on to explain that, while living there, his white girlfriend was beaten up and gang-raped for going out with an Indian as well. She left town, and he never saw her again. In a later conversation with the same friend, I learned that a close Blackfoot friend of his was murdered right in front of him. Some stranger came up to two of them during a riverside party they threw right after a speech. The stranger then shot this juvenile civil rights speaker (a child, in case you're confused) in cold blood. No one was arrested. Also, in California they killed his dog by cutting out her eyes, cutting off her paws, and leaving her to bleed to death. He was attending college.

His tale shocked me, although it shouldn't have. My half-Cherokee adoptive mother never said a word about experiencing racism, but the other little white kids had something to say. They harassed me, ostracized me, and beat me up. One kid, three times my size, actually stuck worms

in his mouth, pushed me down and spit them down my shirt. The other little white kids in my neighborhood stoned a crow to death in front of me and my mother in the backyard while laughing and the girls in my Campfire group, (or the group leader) stole all my Campfire candybars and wrapped up rocks in their place. My mom had to pay for all of them. I had nibbled off of one in the middle of the night, but I certainly didn't eat all of them. To hear my father and his wife talk, I grew up barbaric wild "Indian" style. Huh, my mom was the only one who never lied to or hit me in my family. Which tribe are the savages here, anyway? I need clarification....

The media never gives it away either. It shocks me that so many people still hate Native Americans. Apparently, his tale would shock Andy Rooney as well; in his belittling editorial "Indians Have Worse Problems," on the concerns of Native Americans over common slang-names and the use of their words, sacred symbols, and dumb stereotypical "Indian chiefs" icons to support our bottomless pit of consumerism, he says "American Indians were never subjected to the same kind of racial bias that blacks were. They were never forced to sit on the back of the bus." Maybe he's not ignorant, maybe he's just a bigot?

"But, it's only a 'figment of my/their imagination'" says my white therapist living on Lummi Island, in not so few words.

This kind of stupidity rolls downhill through the media, but it also travels into a kind of quasi reality that people accept as being true. Literature has a stronger influence than many people think, and stereotypes born there proliferate and travel from listener/reader to new stories. It's a cycle that can certainly be traced to, in many cases, taking creative license too far when interpreting and analyzing books, short stories or movies. Although, sometimes it's just a deliberate warping of the truth.

"Noble Savage" also creeps up on people when they examine literature written by Native Americans. I've noticed that this archetype has two faces when s/he comes from people's interpretations. He is either an "ecowarrior" or a "race warrior" type (They're all out to get us, I guess. Not that I would blame them) The "ecowarrior" is the quintessential "in-harmony-with-nature" spokesperson for Mother Earth. He wants to chew out everyone, especially the whites, for treating the earth like shit. The "race warrior" is still very angry at the whites for being the evil Invaders, and simply wants them to all go home--immediately. The problem with these stereotypes is that humans are all individuals with unique motives, desires and intentions, even if some people do fit, badly, into the stereotypes.

The ecowarrior made an appearance when we studied a couple of stories in my Literature classes this quarter. The first time I saw him was in a class discussion of "Storyteller" by Leslie Marmon Silko. "Storyteller" is about an Aleut girl who takes revenge on a shopkeeper who killed her parents by baiting him out into the cold Alaskan weather until he falls through the ice on top of a river. Several unusual things happen throughout the story, like her older roommates repetitious telling of a particular story, the sun stopping dead in the middle of the sky and the non-linear time line. Regardless, several people immediately decided that the story's theme must be about "nature winning in the end." Considerably more was going on here than nature related incidents, but the class discussion centered on that topic for quite awhile. Though many of my classmates admitted to not understanding the story in the least; it "had to be" about Mother Nature winning

in the end. After all, we were all told it fell under the classification of Native American Literature.

To me, "Storyteller" showed how stories are born, and most probably stories in the Aleutian culture. The repetition of the old man's story and various other ideas implied that those were the "threads" that make up new stories. At the end of this story, the girl begins to tell her own story. "Storyteller" implied so much more than a simple "nature wins in the end" theme. It is also an awesome story of vindication (or justice) and injustice (to the female main character) that I can relate to as a woman very well.

The class pretty much dismissed Silko's story after that. Most of my classmates left that day with all of their cultural stereotypes intact. To me, this incident was an example of analysis based on using personal bias about an author's background to conclude the wrong thing. Unfortunately, ecowarrior frequently appears when people discuss Native American Literature, even when uninvited by the author. "Noble savage" strikes again.

The race warrior has appeared in my Literature classes as well, inviting himself, unbidden, into discussions. One main example happened during a class discussion of "Coyote Meets Raven," by Peter Blue Cloud. This story took place during a contest between a Raven and a Coyote. The main characters wake up Thunderbird during their dispute and, as a result, they both get punished by being placed side by side on two lesser totem poles. Though the discussion moved beyond claims that the story was about Native American dissatisfaction with white people, some of my classmates still assumed it was a race warrior type story. (Both classes were 80% white). The story does have clear references to contemporary white culture, but there is no indication of hatred towards it. The story seems to refer more to a strange intertwining of the two cultures. For example, consider Coyote's lunch near the end of the story, "Coyote opened his backpack and took out a can of pork and beans and a couple of rounds of somewhat dried out frybread." (122). The two main characters also seem to each have some characteristics of whites and Native Americans, and both are punished equally in the end. Neither is favored by Thunderbird. Therefore, it is unlikely this story has an "I hate whites" theme. (On a lighter note - at least ravens have been known to help humans from time to time)

Another story where "race warrior" made an appearance was when our small group discussed the first story told during Archilde's feast in *The Surrounded*. This story was about Coyote finding flint for all of his people by catching flint and bashing him into many little pieces and collecting them (McNickle 64-6). White people are not mentioned in the story at all, or even referred to, but the conflict in the story was used as a reason to claim the theme was about the old (and concealed present day) hate wars against Native Americans. The intriguing way Coyote caught Flint, as well as the fact that a creature was cooking some flint, were ignored in the assessment. Conflict is obviously too shallow for claiming a race warrior theme in this story.

Undoubtedly, several stories out there written by Native Americans make a statement about protecting the Earth. There are also stories by Native Americans which express a variety of opinions about white people, including hatred, anger and sorrow. Some of the stories we studied in Native American Literature had those types of themes and they were well supported. For instance, Diane Burns' poem, "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question," expresses

exasperation at some of the ignorant questions asked by a typical white American. The poem basically reenacts a Native American's side of a conversation with the ignorant person. She uses lines like "No, we are not extinct / Yes, Indian," "Yeah, it was awful what you guys did to us / It's real decent of you to apologize," and "That ain't no stoic look / This is my face" (40). These lines express a distinct viewpoint toward white people, but the tone is not really one of anger at the past and definitely not one of hatred. The narrator just seems annoyed, at best, and tired of answering the same old questions; "No, I don't know where you can get peyote" (40). This work still does not fit the parameters of a stereotypical "race warrior" theme. The narrator seems to be just annoyed at white ignorance.

The main problem with these two stereotypes, "ecowarrior" and "race warrior", is that many people assume that all Native American stories are about these things, and thus, also, all Native Americans. This is sometimes the result of picking standard symbols to look for, digging too deeply for obscurities, assuming the author is the narrator, or a combination of any of the three. Pretty ignorant thinking, since their storytelling legacy goes as far back into their history, if not farther, than our culture's does.

When people assume that all Native American stories' themes conform to those stereotypes, then it is really only thinly veiled ethnocentrism. According to that logic, Native American writers don't think about anything else but white people. And, that ridiculous assumption cheats them of their humanity, their heritage and all of the complexity and variety that goes along those things.

One might say, "Well, it's only Literature--only fiction." But that's exactly it; fiction is an influence, and a big one in this culture. Our biases when examining literature can affect those around us and can metamorphose into more widespread bias. Though one can read a book, a story, or see a movie and theoretically find any number of correct meanings, one can still get the wrong meaning by losing objectivity. Literary-spun stereotypes can work their way into "nonfiction" and mainstream culture; they have done it before. Only by examining Literature with objectivity before anything else can we come up with the rich layers of meaning inherent in every story. Only by remaining objective can we stay within the spirit of what we see and hear.

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Native American Literature