



**“NOTHING HANGS TOGETHER”
OR USING *AMERICAN PASTORAL*
TO TEACH LITERARY THEORY**

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When Seymour Levov thinks: “*Nothing* hangs together—*none* of it is linked up. It is only in your head that it is linked up. Nowhere else is there any logic,” he, of course, is referring to his daughter Merry’s continued rebellion and his interminable search for its cause [ROTH 1997 : 368-369, emphasis in original]. In the absence of “logic,” understanding, and linearity, Seymour confronts the realization that any narrative of Merry’s life, and by extension his own, comes through the idiosyncratic construction of its trajectory. The lives of both Merry and Seymour are open events, resisting authoritative interpretation and “link[ing] up” only through theoretical suppositions dependent upon perspective. This movement from confusion and frustration to uncomfortable awareness of multiplicity, openness, and point of view repeats itself throughout Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997). Like Seymour, the novel’s readers often follow the same emotional path as they confront a similar, but different, difficulty of interpretation. Since this repetition works both inside and outside the text, I would like to suggest that using *American Pastoral* to teach literary theory increases the effectiveness of both ventures. Their mutual difficulty reinforces one’s need for the other; whereas literary theory demands an object of analysis, *American Pastoral* necessitates organizing theoretical structures. The goal of each, as Seymour and his readers learn, is to show that what “hangs together” in our world, our literature, and our lives is dependent upon our lenses of perspective and their philosophical underpinnings.

I use *American Pastoral* to teach literary theory in the United States. Specifically, I am an Associate Professor of English at Shippensburg University, a mid-sized state university in Pennsylvania. *Literary Studies II* (ENG-111) is a required course for our undergraduate English major; its precursor, *Literary Studies I* (ENG-107), focuses on genre, and both courses are requirements for our 300-level coursework and beyond, which assumes

exposure to research methods and literary theory. An excerpt from my course description reads:

This introduction to the major schools of literary criticism emphasizes perspective-taking as a tool for understanding how literary theory informs the analysis of literature. Reading Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* through these various lenses and examining their accompanying critical discussions exposes students to the multiple interpretations and conversations that surround any literary work.

As this overview indicates, my section of *Literary Studies II* makes specific decisions about the teaching of literary theory. Though it is certainly an overwhelming mass of difficult material, I believe that the teaching of literary theory must include overviews of each theory, primary readings of each theory, applications of each theory, and literature to analyze. Not every instructor of literary theory builds a course in just this way, though sensitivity to both my audience and my pedagogy demands the planning and instruction of a course that includes all four aspects of literary theory.¹

Through the 1980's and even mid to late 1990's, when curricular and programmatic debates plagued English departments on both side of the Atlantic, only selected English majors were exposed to literary theory in preparation for graduate school. This, however, is not my audience, nor does this limited exposure model dominate in the twenty-first century. In my twenty-five student class, which I taught in both Spring and Fall 2012, I have a microcosm of Shippensburg's English major: half of the class will be divided between our "straight" BA English major and those students pursuing an English major with a Writing Emphasis and the other half of the class will receive dual degrees in English and Secondary Education with Pennsylvania certification. Future English teachers, then, make up the majority of my audience.

Many of these students already know me as part of the "Secondary Education Team" in our department. I routinely teach what English educators call "Methods": *Teaching English in Secondary Schools I* (EDU-421) and *Teaching English in Secondary Schools II* (EDU-422). Considered the capstone course for Secondary Education students, "Methods" is a six-credit practicum in the teaching of English during the semester before Student

¹ Please see *Critical Theory and the Teaching of Literature: Politics, Curriculum, and Pedagogy*, eds. James F Slevin and Art Young, for various approaches to teaching the standard "introduction to literary theory" course.

Teaching (EDU-495) and required coursework for their eventual state certification (permitting them to teach grades 7-12). My primary concern in “Methods” is the joining of theory *about teaching and learning* with the practical methods of *implementing such theory* in a secondary classroom. As I emphasize the practical use of pedagogical theory, each “Methods” class includes a practical workshop component in planning lessons, sequencing assignments, constructing assessments, or differentiating the classroom. I am passionate about teaching and about teacher training, yet I am also committed to literary theory, specifically psychoanalysis, which daily informs my reading, research, and teaching.² Teaching *Literary Studies II* enacts the nexus of my professional life, for in this course, I represent my own strong commitment to literary theory, bring difficult material to resistant students who will one day teach difficult material to resistant students themselves, and apply my own pedagogy to content that has been notoriously challenging for professors to teach and students to learn. After giving an overview of the difficulties of teaching and learning about literary theory, I will present some overarching structures that frame my course, and then I will conclude by focusing on specific strategies for using *American Pastoral* to teach literary theory.

“It’s a difficult course and a lot of work” (Student X)

On the first day of *Literary Studies II*, I gather preliminary information from my students by asking, “What have you heard about this class?” Not surprisingly, the students’ responses reflect not only the reputation of the course in my department at Shippensburg, but they also echo the generalized student response to literary theory. Even with little to no exposure to the actual content, students come to class armed with resistance. They have heard that this hard class—and theory in general—will work them in circles and make them feel dumb while they’re doing it. They are told to put the class off as long as possible and often withdraw from it or fail it at least once. Worse, they often decide, before even coming through my door, that they can never understand theory and therefore scapegoat their presumed lack of future success onto other reasons: unbought books, unread articles, and unattended classes.

To be fair to these undergraduates, we can understand the origin of these urban myths of the “introduction to literary theory” course. These students often find comfort in teacher-centered classrooms where the master presents

² See my article “‘Every Word She Spoke Was a Bomb’: Merry Levov’s Anamorphic Stutter” for a psychoanalytic approach to *American Pastoral*.

an interpretation of a literary work and requests its regurgitation on an assessment because that is what has been expected from them for many years and is often *still*, sadly, requested of them. They have never been encouraged to authorize their own readings or question their origins. They have probably not been encouraged to read texts as sociocultural documents, uncover the conflicts in a text's scholarship, collaborate with others to make temporary meaning, or systematically relate literature to what we call the real world. They certainly have not been presented with philosophical jargon and then asked to apply those concepts to literature. These students, and those who have survived to warn them, don't find any of these changes comforting and definitely don't feel like they have been saved from years of scholastic oppression. They find themselves unprepared for the difficulties of these enormous changes and listen when their peers say, "Don't take that class." The fact that so many of my own students are future teachers who hold these views makes this repeated scenario particularly unpalatable to me. Teachers need to find ways to bring difficult material to resistant students. In my case, that maxim holds especially true when applied to literary theory.

I can attest that teaching literary theory is no easier than learning it; not only is the material still difficult for those of us who teach it, but the same difficulties that plague the students afflict the teachers trying to inspire those shifts. The stakes are high and the pitfalls are many for a course such as *Literary Studies II*, and so I begin with the same questions I ask of my students in "Methods": What am I really teaching? How should I teach it most effectively? What products will prove that my students have learned? In a literary theory class, these questions are especially pertinent because theory and practice must always coexist or else the entire enterprise crumbles; likewise, *what* I teach must be inseparable from *how* I teach, or I will not be upholding my own pedagogical imperatives. Just as there is no dividing line between theory and practice when it comes to the act of teaching, neither should there be one when the content of that act is literary theory. Teaching is pedagogical theory in practice, just as reading is literary theory in practice. To present either the theory in isolation or the practice as uninformed robs students of the necessary awareness of the mutual dependency of theory and practice.

Using the backwards design model, I envision the final product of the sixteen-week semester first. With that final assessment in mind, I can start at the beginning and reconstruct the skills each student needs to satisfactorily complete it. The instruction of these skills becomes my objective, using scaffolding, explicit teaching, student centrality, and, always, the joining of

theory and practice to fuel my own purpose-driven teaching. What we work toward is an eight to ten page paper that I describe in the following words on its assignment sheet:

In this section of ENG-111, we have tried, as a class, to build a bridge between literary theory and its application to fiction. In your *The Turn of the Screw* paper, you proved that you already read from a unique personal lens; in your *Love Medicine* paper, you chose to respond to a theoretically-specific question I devised; in your *The Bell Jar* paper, you brought your own theoretical lens to symbols I presented. Now, in your culminating final paper, you will make your own interpretation of an aspect of *American Pastoral* from the lens that you choose and articles that you find yourself.

As this assignment sheet maps, students in my section of *Literary Studies II* move through three escalating levels of difficulty before producing a cumulative final paper that represents their semester-long accumulation of content and skill, theory in practice.

I choose to conclude the course with *American Pastoral* because I know it pushes the students' accumulation of theory and practice to a challenging endpoint. The difficulty of the novel reflects the difficulty of theory in general, yet literary theory is the one tool students can use to find a perspective while reading *American Pastoral* and perhaps gain a fleeting moment of clarity. Combined with my deliberate pedagogy and the novel's lack of teaching resources, my decision to conclude with such a dense and indeterminate text determines how I proceed from the start.³ While there is an absence of material on teaching *American Pastoral* specifically and anything by Philip Roth generally, I also acknowledge a similar dearth of materials on teaching literary theory in a way that joins with practice.

One exception is Deborah Appleman's *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (2000). The imprint of Appleman's insightful and inspiring work appears throughout my course. A former secondary English teacher who now, like me, trains preservice teachers, Appleman advocates for the use of literary theory in secondary classrooms where the teaching of literature too often reflects the singular interpretation of the teacher in charge. In the secondary classroom, literary theory may be used to give adolescents what they most want but often feel inadequate to exert: power. By decentralizing teacher authority, literary

³ The Philip Roth Society website, rothsociety.org, includes a collection of teaching resources, though materials for *American Pastoral* are notably scarce.

theory, according to Appleman, exposes students to multiple perspectives, relates literature to questions about the world, highlights collaboration with others, and authorizes student agency. More importantly, Appleman enacts the theory in her own practice and models how to do it for us. I frequently use teaching techniques that work for secondary students in the college classes I teach, so her approach resonates with me, especially because these techniques are particularly effective when the content is so difficult.

Wearing Sunglasses in Literary Studies II: Days 1-4

I take the sunglass metaphor that frames my undergraduate theory course from an activity in Appleman's appendix that offers her secondary students a "sampling" of literary theories which she likens to viewing the world through the lenses of different glasses [APPLEMAN 2000: 155]. Simple enough to make sense to beginning students, complex enough to support different theoretical points of view, and shocking enough to engage apathetic undergraduates, the metaphor of changing lenses to alter perspective endlessly repeats itself through my course. Taking Appleman's lead, I first introduce students to literary theory through the concept of perspective, an action they can both recognize and enact on the first day of class. I then use their understanding of perspective to demystify literary theory by showing them that perspective-taking enacts literary theory, that perspective-taking is already something they do daily apart from literary study, and that they already do read literature from a self-chosen perspective whose precise ideology is likely to be undeveloped. Since course resistance is high at the onset, beginning with what students come into the room knowing or being able to do is an important pedagogical imperative for me, especially on the first day of class.

On Day 1, then, I begin by exposing students to a piece of writing that is sufficiently open enough to engage a range of different lenses of perspective but narrow enough to reflect each lens when examined specifically. Like Appleman, I have had great success using Sylvia Plath's "Mushrooms" (1959) for this purpose. I provide students with the complete poem minus its title, author, and year of publication and ask simply for a one-sentence mini analysis of the poem that interprets its meaning. Oblique and ambiguous, "Mushrooms" forces students to choose a lens of interpretation, albeit unnamed, to draw a conclusion about the poem's meaning. The one-sentence analysis, then, requires students to support that individual response with the words on the page. This activity asks students to practice literary theory without calling it as such, and students do, in fact, make

meaning in that messy overlap of text and reader that is the purview of the semester-long class. I then generate notes on the board and cluster similar responses together. "Mushrooms" leads to interpretations relating to its content and form that often align with topics such as vegetation, reproduction, and oppression, in addition to other unique responses. These clusters, then, get linked to what students focused on as they read and constructed responses. Here, I provide only six options, each of which ties to one of the six literary theories we will study in the course: symbols (New Criticism), emotional impressions (Reader Response), historical events (Historical Criticism), language sense/nonsense (Deconstruction), speaker's psyche (Psychoanalysis), and gender (Feminism).

Using explicit teaching and induction, I then explain that what they have already done in the first fifteen minutes of class is perform literary theory: they have viewed the poem from a preferred lens dependent upon personal inclinations that are supported by philosophical approaches to viewing literature. Perspective-taking, point of view, and lenses of interpretation are acknowledged and duly noted in an effort to show students that they already perform literary theory, increasing their early sense of competence. From here, students take a Literary Interest Quiz that asks them to rank approaches and preferences when it comes to literature. They rank statements about how likely they are to, "consider the gender of the author and/or characters" or "prefer works that leave readers in a state of confusion," for example. As should be obvious, these quizzes aim to show students that they do already have preferences that align with established literary theories. This class intends to deepen those early preferences, expose students to additional theories, and, most importantly, make these tentative analyses systematic and deliberate. Here, I introduce the lens, or sunglass, metaphor that coheres the course. Students leave Day 1, I hope, with new awareness that they already view literature and the world through a specific lens, that this class will make the view from that lens clearer, and that they will be wearing various lenses throughout this semester.

Day 2 begins with the reinforcement of this awareness, but this time the lenses are applied to photographs. After practicing on an image I display from a child's birthday party, students exchange the pictures they brought with someone else in the room and make an interpretive statement based on concepts that align with the literary theories we will study. Here, for instance, they make an interpretation based on one picture's representation of social class; they exchange that one for another on which they interpret its artistic composition; for the next one they interpret its display of individual or communal relationships, etc. After a number of exchanges, the picture

owner receives his/her own photograph back, along with a list of interpretive statements aligned with focal points of the various literary theories we will study. In addition to repeated reminders that this activity, once again, proves that they can already shift their lenses of interpretation of the world based on whim or need, this whole-class instructional strategy also opens into other areas of complexity that are important to our more in-depth study of literary theory. For instance, lack of context is a repeated complaint when it comes to the picture swap, especially when the interpretations are blatantly wrong. Likewise, students report that some pictures obviously lend themselves to some perspectives completely and others not at all. Whether the picture taker's identity should be considered is a major point of contention as well as whether the picture is arranged or candid. These acknowledgements, concerns, and debates, of course, reflect the selfsame issues pertinent to literary theory and its various lenses. Using nonliterary texts and responses generated by students brings these issues to the foreground without making their philosophical distinctions overwhelming. This pedagogical strategy allows the students to raise these points themselves in a nonthreatening way.

After reading an overview of our six central literary theories in Steven Lynn's *Texts and Contexts: Writing About Literature with Critical Theory* [2011] the night before, Day 3 sends each student on a focused visit—or tour, to extend the sunglass metaphor—to one theory. On this day, students pick a random pair of child's party favor sunglasses from a bag and arrange themselves into six groups based on their selected colors. The small-group portion of this jigsaw activity requires that the members of the group become experts of their own lens and the general information they have read about it thus far. The passport handout that I created to support this activity lists three important beliefs and a handful of key terms for each lens underneath a passport image that grants travel privileges. Each group prepares explanations of its important beliefs and key terms and teaches them to the rest of the class during the whole-class theory tour. Continuing with the touring theme, each group is finally asked to come up with a logo and slogan for its lens, easy visual reminders and catchy phrases to aid student memory and retention of basic foundational concepts that reinforce our vacation brochure theme. For example, students from my Spring 2012 offering of *Literary Studies II* came up with the following promotional materials for their selected lenses: a yin-yang symbol displaying the slogan, "New Criticism: Where Binary Oppositions Go to Find Their Unity"; an iceberg proclaiming, "Psychoanalysis: Come Discover what Lies Beneath"; a traveler holding a suitcase bearing the inscription, "Reader Response: Please

Bring Your Own Baggage.”

Finally, this introductory sequence ends on Day 4 when students, armed with their passports, images, and slogans, are asked to analyze children’s books and magazine advertisements from each of the six lenses for which we have laid a foundation. Concluding the introduction to the course, this application activity forces students to take the first step toward analyzing difficult literature using literary theory. They are asked to problematize the assumptions behind textual productions that are often read unselfconsciously, to fill in the gaps that emerge between the codes of the writer(s) and the codes of the reader(s), and to question the perpetuation of or resistance to philosophical beliefs about the world they inhabit, reproduce, and have been produced by. Suddenly, children’s classics such as *Runaway Bunny* and marketing pulp for products such as Ax Deodorant Spray become representatives of literary theory in action as well as objects requiring that theory for the purposes of critique. Our six lenses and the students’ increasing ease with exchanging their perspectives have thus far been presented cursorily and superficially, though my main pedagogical objectives have been met. Students, by the end of these four days, have become aware that they already read the world through a particular lens, can easily exchange that lens for another, dramatically different point of view, and can apply those lenses to small, nonliterary bits of text.

This early framework lays the primary scaffold to my course, and the lens metaphor is continually reinforced as we move onto primary readings of each theory, applications of each theory, and literature to analyze. Likewise, the confidence, competence, and collaboration that I instill and encourage in my students in this opening segment of the course are continually strengthened as the material gets harder. Acknowledging the difficulty of the material and of the course is necessary, but so is inviting students into the difficulty through paths that they already traverse. My scaffold may begin in a low, simple place with my emphasis on exchanging lenses and using catchphrases and nonliterary texts, but I believe students will only meet the high expectations of a course such as this one if the foundation is laid with the difficulty of the endpoint in mind. Convincing students that they can get to that endpoint and they will feel rewarded when they do is integral to my pedagogy and their motivation. Though I may begin with a slow start, we accelerate quickly, and when I ask students in an eyeglass graphic organizer to tell the next semester’s class what to expect in my section of *Literary Studies II*, I routinely get comments such as, “Be prepared to read and find yourself challenged throughout every step of this course. However, if you make it through, what you get out of this class is very

rewarding” and “Expect to be taken to your limit. You’ll be asked questions that will force you to delve into your thoughts. Eventually, you’ll ask yourself and others those very questions.” As these representative comments illustrate, after the first four days, we wear our sunglasses and travel to places of challenge, difficulty, and transformation. Not surprisingly, these three words are excellent descriptors of *American Pastoral*, the novel that marks the class’s conclusion.

“Chaos from start to finish”: American Pastoral and the Demand for Literary Theory

After this initial foundation is laid but before the final novel is introduced, students read three other novels and focus on all six theoretical lenses. We read primary works of literary theory, use literary theory to interpret the fiction we read, engage in critical controversies surrounding each work, and write about the theories and the fiction under consideration. By the time *American Pastoral* appears roughly one month before the end of the semester, students have delved deeply into six literary theories, simultaneously embracing and rejecting them, but always working hard to understand them in an effort to mount their support or opposition to their philosophical suppositions. At the same time as they are locating themselves in relation to the theories, they are learning by using the lenses as they steadily accumulate necessary skills.

Just as the students’ knowledge of theory accumulates over time, so too does their ability to use it for interpretive purposes. Their writing on *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, is personal and reflective, as it asks them to interrogate their own conflicted readings of this ambiguous work and analyze the source of their persistent lack of clarity. Their *Love Medicine* paper forces them to adopt a specified lens as they take a stance amidst a critical controversy surrounding the work. And their *The Bell Jar* paper requests an analysis of a contentious aspect of the novel from a lens they choose. At the course’s conclusion, then, they have built up content, skills, and writing that lead to the work of *American Pastoral*, which engages the skills and theories we have worked on thus far in isolation. Now, armed with their Overview Guides—sheets I design to scaffold their learning of each individual theory complete with important terms, main beliefs, and author/reader roles—students dive into Roth’s masterpiece, or at least the first chapter, pages 3-39. Told to read, and not much else, for the first night, students return frustrated and complaining, not unlike the unravelling Seymour, many pages later who laments, “Madness and provocation.

Nothing recognizable. Nothing plausible. No context in which it hangs together" [ROTH 1997 : 371]. Despite having all the tools of literary theory at their disposal, opposite this novel of great difficulty, my students feel as shattered and destroyed as the broken glass that dons their magenta covers. Not necessarily surprised by their confusion, I begin my own instruction of *American Pastoral* with gradual release of responsibility in mind. I guide them through the first half of Roth's novel and then remove my guiding hold on the text through their individual pursuits of the final paper.

"What are your initial reactions to the first chapter of *American Pastoral*?" I'll innocently ask to start class. I typically get back the same uninitiated responses I previously received before our painstaking, deliberate work on literary theory all semester. "I hate it," "I don't get it," "I'm confused," "I'm lost," and "What's the point?" are all repeated around the room. "Yes," I say, "I understand why you have those initial reactions, but please remember that the work we have done this semester on literary theory has given you the tools to work with a text that opens—and continues—with lack of precise clarity and even 'chaos'." I then tell the class that we will address the first chapter by examining it from each of the six lenses we have studied this semester. This close-up examination of perspective may not tell us where this novel is heading, but it will help us orient ourselves to our six poles of interpretation from the start. Temporary, ambivalent meaning may chart our course through this difficult American masterpiece that practically demands the use of literary theory to combat its indeterminacy.

We begin with the lens of New Criticism, as we have throughout the course. On the board, I draw a crude T-chart: on the left, I write TITLE with *American Pastoral* beneath, and on the right, I write FORMAT with *Paradise Lost* beneath. Students then are asked to freewrite on one or both of the literary references invoked by Roth through his title and organizational structure. A follow-up question asks students to consider possible purposes for Roth's reference to important literary tradition. Not surprisingly, students are more familiar with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, via allusions to the Bible, than they are with the pastoral tradition of British literature. Beginning with what they do know, then, under the FORMAT column of my simple board graphic, students add associations, as I catalogue them. Here, it's important for students to acknowledge that *Paradise Lost*, or the Bible story to which it refers, includes the paradise of the Garden of Eden enjoyed by Adam and Eve from which they are eventually expelled. We then quickly thumb through the three sections of *American Pastoral* and note that they are titled "Paradise Remembered," "The Fall," and "Paradise Lost," respectively.

To briefly remind them of the pastoral literary tradition that aligns with Roth's title, I present them with the well-studied companion poems by Christopher Marlowe and Sir Walter Raleigh. Accompanied by printed copies and YouTube renditions, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" clearly render the point and counterpoint of the pastoral tradition that I would like my students to consider as we use our New Critical lens early on. Under the TITLE column, then, we list the positive, self-sufficient, loving plenty of Marlowe's poem in contrast to the biting opposing reality of the lover in Raleigh's poem. Each poem then easily aligns with the positive and negative realities experienced by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and upon their expulsion. Forcing students to draw some generalizations about Roth's invocation of literary tradition in both title and format, I remind them of New Criticism's injunction to draw in traditional works of the canon to change them in the present time. This sequence usually brings students to a point where they see that Roth is likely to expound on an idealization that is shattered as a unifying feature of the novel. If Eden's paradise and Marlowe's pastoral are both exposed as false, or at least too good to be true for any length of time, then perhaps the Swede's American Dream will shatter too. After all, the story they have before them recounts his "counterpastoral [...] the indigenous American berserk" [ROTH 1997 : 86].

Next, students are given a three-page lens graphic organizer, where all six lenses are represented. Each of our six focal lenses includes a question relevant to the first chapter, which we will examine with the intent of orienting perspectives to "hang together" as we move forward with the novel. Next to the New Criticism column, I list Reader Response with the following questions: "I'm confused. Whose perspective am I reading this book from? Who is 'I,' and is he more or less important than the Swede?" Here, we pause to talk about the difficulty Roth imbeds in his text for readers as they struggle to understand the many layers of this story, the confusing timeline, and the author's role in their manipulation. How is their real reading experience reflecting Roth's ideal reading experience? This initial foray into Reader Response perspective opposite *American Pastoral* incites students' anger and frustration, for they already feel as Seymour later will that

reading this stuff is like deep-sea diving. It's like being in an Aqua-Lung with the window right up against your face and the air in your mouth and no place to go, no place to move, no place to put a crowbar and escape. [159]

Unreliable narration, polyvocality, and the slippage of Roth to Nathan to

Seymour are foundational points here. Reminding students that they are having emotional responses that may be constructed for them usually helps move them from passive states of resistance to active states of purposeful reading.

The Historicism column asks students to consider important background information referenced by Roth in relation to not only Old Rimrock, New Jersey but also the world: World War II, the Depression, Vietnam, etc. All emerge early as potential focal points of interpretation. *American Pastoral*, they note, appears to be about a particular moment in history but also about the production of that moment and the aftermath of that moment. As Roth writes, “People think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing” [87]. History, then, emerges as a concept to analyze in terms of its production. Next to this column stands an opposing pole, Deconstruction. Where Roth’s historical markers may link together in a chain to provide explanations for the events of the life of Seymour, the apparent lack of sufficient causality, order, or sense unravels those historical cords. For the first chapter, students are asked to take note of significant binaries and wonder about their subsequent reversals. These contrasts include the differences between an American and Jewish identity, the Swede and the boys who idolize him, the United States and the Japanese, factory workers and factory owners, etc. Eventually, though, these binaries dissolve and more attention will be placed on lack of signification, lack of meaning and quite simply the fact that “[Seymour] had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense” [81]. The Psychoanalysis and Feminism columns will be studied in depth during the next day of class.

Students are then asked to select what they have chosen as their preferred lens at this point in this semester and sit with like-minded others in small groups. In the next section of reading, which will conclude the “Paradise Remembered” section and take them up to page 113, students are asked to individually come up with four questions to add to their organizers, three will associate with their preferred lens and one will align with another lens that they did not choose. At the start of our next class, students reassemble in these groups, and we collectively add focal points to our six lenses. I hope that my overview of how each lens might apply to the first chapter will allow them to build on those perspectives as they read. Not everything will “hang together” in a postmodern novel such as *American Pastoral*, but they can still make meaning despite its difficulty if they remember to wear their literary theory lenses and shape meaning based on a focused perspective.

Students return the next day after having finished reading the “Paradise Remembered” section, though their discussion questions and points of

interest often fail to galvanize into structure-shaping driving forces of analysis. They note key interpretive passages and moments of insight that align with our theories but seem to be at a loss for what to do with them. The New Criticism group notes references to literary tradition via Roth's allusions to Tolstoy, Proust, and Keats, though their interpretations end there [ROTH 1997: 30, 47, 78]. Likewise, the Reader Response group notes Nathan's writing of the manuscript about Seymour's life but fails to penetrate the significance of our reading an interpretive construction of the Swede's life that likely reveals more about Nathan Zuckerman—the writer who “think[s] about the Swede for six, eight, sometimes ten hours at a stretch” than it does about our protagonist [74]. The Historicism group attaches to the proclamation that “[Seymour] is our Kennedy,” but not much else [83]. The groups focusing on Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Deconstruction, the more attractive lenses and the ones that make up the majority of my class, routinely overlook key passages for analysis, perhaps out of their refusal to face discomfort directly. It is, of course, in the overlap of these theories and their interpretive questions that I attempt to move the class from noting isolated references to subject matter and toward their own systematic use of a theoretical perspective.

To make this shift from small points of interest to the purposeful use of a theoretical lens to give meaning, structure, and purpose to *American Pastoral*, I need to help my students shape the “Paradise Remembered” section into something more manageable than the disorganized mess of material which they see. Not surprisingly for a professed psychoanalytic theorist, I go right for Seymour's daughter Merry. Her character allows us to first yoke together Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Deconstruction, and my students can then unravel them as they see fit. For what the students have read thus far, the concept that unifies Nathan, Seymour, and Merry is the search for cause. Getting students to anchor themselves on this sturdy centerpiece allows them to accumulate and organize the information given to them and then utilize their preferred theory for deliberate analysis. I make sure that this anchoring point draws on all six lenses to start, so, once again, students can see literary theory in practice in its general manifestation, but they can quickly attach to one theory and continue with that interpretive structure for the rest of the novel. Though I get dumbfounded stares and silence when I ask, “What seems to be the purpose of this book so far?,” it doesn't take them long to begin articulating it and its difficulty when I point to the following passage:

Yes, the cause of the disaster has for him to be a transgression. How else would the Swede explain it to himself? It has to be a transgression,

a single transgression, even if it is only he who identifies it as a transgression. The disaster that befalls him begins in a failure of his responsibility, *as he imagines it*. [88-89, emphasis in original]

With this anchoring excerpt, we can begin to give shape to this postmodern mess. Now, of course, we need to peel back the layers of this key passage, which in itself marks the multivalence of not only these lines but the book in total. Through some carefully scaffolded questioning and leading by me, I want to students to ascertain that the search for transgression is sought by different individuals, and, as such, the transgression is different depending on the perspective one adopts to view it. Not surprisingly, these differing perspectives may also align with the literary theories the students have at their disposal. From Nathan's perspective, he is interested in the transgressions of Seymour's life that are unseen from the outside but had some cause in the behavior of Merry whose rebellion eventually occasions his fall. From Seymour's perspective as Nathan writes it, he is interested in the cause of Merry's rebellion which he locates in her stutter. Nathan, then, wants to know what Seymour has done to wreak this havoc on his life, whereas Seymour wants to know what he has done to cause his daughter's stutter which causes the rebellion that wreaks havoc on his life. "What then was the wound?" asks Nathan slipping into Seymour as the search for transgression commences [92]. Drawing on all six lenses, this anchoring search for a wound gives students something to hang on to even if the search itself is constructed through confusion, nonlinearity, and impenetrable "imagined" prose. After this anchoring point is thrown and earlier references to New Criticism, Reader Response, and Historicism can be galvanized together to relate to this key structural feature, more time can be spent on the three heavily-favored theories.

For Psychoanalysis, the kiss scene between Seymour and eleven-year-old Merry becomes a focal point, as it marks the first potential wound that sets off the unalterable course of events as well as Seymour's interminable "torment of self-examination" [92]. For Feminism, Merry's refusal to align herself with the expectations of gender, sexuality, and decorum that Seymour demands becomes a strong organizing structure: "Vehemently she renounced the appearance and the allegiances of the good little girl who has tried so hard to be adorable and lovable like all the other good little Rimrock girls—renounced her meaningless manners, her petty social concerns, her family's 'bourgeois' values'" [101]. And for Deconstruction, perhaps most distressing for students early in their study of literary theory, we raise the possibility that there is no cause that would sufficiently explain the chain of events: no cause for Merry's stutter, no cause for Merry's rebellion, and no

cause for Seymour's concluding pathetic state. Like his nighttime visions, perhaps the "whole of [Seymour's] life [was] without cause or sense and completely bungled" [93]. Maybe no cause can be found and therefore no wound or transgression can be labeled as such and blamed and/or atoned. Maybe the accumulation of details does not in fact lead to the meaning of Seymour's life; maybe the same will be said of Roth and his novel.

Not surprisingly, students respond well to this anchoring point and feel more secure in embracing their respective lenses for the next reading, where they are able to assign more specific meanings to Dawn's conflicted female identity, Rita Cohen's display of manipulative power and sexuality, Seymour's sense of production and artistry at Newark Maid, and the events leading up to Merry's bombing of the post office, such as the immolation of the monks and her hatred of America. They also have the race riots and Seymour and Dawn's respective reactions to Merry's stuttering, bombing, and disappearance to consider. After this third section of reading, students are asked to reflect upon the key moments from "The Fall" listed above and to explain in writing, using their lens of focus, "the unexpected thing" to which Seymour refers [176]. They must analyze the five years it lay in wait, its recent emergence, and Seymour's reaction to it using their lens, its tenets, and its vocabulary. My demand for more systematic analysis of "the unexpected thing," combined with sustained use of one literary lens and the support of our anchoring search for cause, permits students to build interpretations that are buttressed by the accumulation of their work all semester. The difficulty of *American Pastoral* necessitates this deliberate practice of literary theory, which moves students from states of frustration and confusion to empowered awareness of multiplicity and openness.

Now, in the fourth section of reading, students are asked to focus a lot of interpretive energy on the interaction between Merry and Seymour in 1973 in order to centralize their relationship and its role in the plot of *American Pastoral*. Drawing conclusions about their exchange at the dog and cat hospital serves as a microcosm for how students are viewing the whole book up until this point because in this confrontation Merry and Seymour expose aspects of their relationship that may elucidate or problematize their shared wounds or transgressions and the effects they may have had on both of their lives. Like the earlier anchoring of the search for cause, this central interaction potentially draws on all six literary theories and has the capacity to be magnified by one to the exclusion of the others. Set up as a scaffolded question sheet poised to give participation points, students are asked questions about Merry's Jainism, her physical appearance and physical surroundings, her conversation with Seymour, especially in regards to her

stutter, their physical contact, and then Seymour's internal thoughts and subsequent conversation with Jerry. The sheet's final question reads:

In light of the work we did in class last time and this encounter between Seymour and Merry, please make an interpretation about their relationship that reflects the sustained use of one of our six literary theories and considers the search for cause *American Pastoral* undertakes. What conclusion(s) can you draw and how can you support them using your preferred literary theory? Note how this sheet works you through specific areas of analysis that are relevant to the work we have done on literary theory this semester, specifically pleasure and desire, the body, language, the father/daughter relationship, and the imprint of culture. Bring these strands together to come up with a coherent interpretation that reflects your lens of focus.

This activity concludes my leading of the class's reading of *American Pastoral*. After using these interpretations in class and linking them to their upcoming final papers, students conclude their reading of the novel and participate in small-group and whole-class discussions.

As students continue with their reading, I also model the scholarly writing process following the critical controversy model of Gerald Graff, who maintains that secondary conversations found in academic articles about the same text invite students into an ongoing debate about a work and give them purpose for their own interpretations, questions, and reactions. "In fact," he argues, "having a sense of what to say about a text, what aspects or problems to pick out, requires familiarity with the critical conversations about the text" [GRAFF & DI LEO 2000 : 122]. Since their final paper is the same length as the essay I contributed to *Reading Philip Roth's American Pastoral* edited by Velichka D. Ivanova, we read my essay and follow the steps of their final paper as they are outlined on their assignment sheet. These steps move students from selecting a narrow aspect of the novel's form or content to interpret, viewing the aspect from one of our six critical lenses, and situating the aspect amid its critical controversy by utilizing at least four scholarly articles that feature the selected aspect. Then students are asked to write a paper that justifies the use of their theory, incorporates the scholarship of others, and emphasizes the significance of their analysis.

Since the focus of my analysis is Merry's stutter, we spend time using the psychoanalytic lens to analyze her language disturbance, but we also read other articles that have contributed to the critical controversy. This collective reading permits me to model my own dialogue with earlier sources that also address Merry's stutter. Here, I frame the field of the controversy generally and indicate my own specific agreement or disagreement using the lens of

psychoanalysis. This helps students understand that scholarly work is always an overlap among one's personal interpretation, use of a selected literary theory, and situation amidst the ongoing scholarly debate. In miniature, we follow this process with the final interpretations they make about the relationship between Seymour and Merry that I scaffold them toward as I describe above. Students individually embark on a deeper version of this process as they isolate an aspect of the novel to analyze and view it through their preferred lens.

Orcutt's Art, Roth's American Pastoral, & Literary Theory: About Everything and Nothing

The end of *American Pastoral* returns many of my students to the emotional quagmire from which they distanced themselves after chapter one. Not surprisingly, they bemoan Roth's lack of closure, lack of clarity, and lack of stability, and there I am, once again, encouraging my students to use their tools of literary theory to impose a solitary perspective when there is none provided. After interpreting the famous ending passage—"Yes, the breach had been pounded in their fortification, even out here in secure Old Rimrock, and now that it was opened it would not be closed again"—from each of our six lenses of interpretation, we step back and broaden these narrow interpretations to consider the more generalized meaning Roth implies about art, his novel, and literary theory, which seem to reflect one another in their capacity to create "breach[es]" that will never be "closed" after having been "opened" [ROTH 1997 : 423]. *American Pastoral*, like art in general and literary theory in its multiplicity, is an open event; there is no final answer or conclusion; no smooth exit from Nathan's manuscript; no stable meaning that is *not* dependent upon one's preferred point of view. Like Orcutt's paintings that mean more or less than they appear depending upon the observer, *American Pastoral* can mean everything, nothing, or something depending upon the reader and his/her choice of lens.

Similar to the transformation of Lou Levov who revises an earlier critique of Orcutt's painting, when he says: "You know something? I like that thing. I'm getting' used to it and I actually like it. Look," he said to his wife, "look at how the guy didn't finish it. See that? Where it's blurry? He did that on purpose. That's art," I try to inspire the same type of shift in my students [325]. They may never celebrate indeterminacy, lack of completion, or overall blurriness, but I hope they are better able to deal with these difficulties after having taken my section of *Literary Studies II*. Each semester, their final papers—with topics ranging from feminist interpretations of

Merry and Dawn's relationship and deconstructionist analyses of Seymour's own language use to historicist arguments about the inverse of the Levov's American Dream and New Critical theories about Roth's sustained use of *Paradise Lost*—embrace the use of literary theory as one strategy to combat the difficulty that they experience when reading *American Pastoral*. I hope they use these same techniques in the future whether they teach difficulty or just encounter it and remember that deliberate use of a selected lens will allow them to “hang together” an interpretation and build a coherent argument even if it appears that “there is no connection” [281, emphasis in original].

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