**Teaching Literature Using Seven Types of Writing**

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Robert Scholes, in his controversial 1998 book *The Rise and Fall of English*, says that our field of literature is doomed to become small, as many other liberal arts departments have on campuses throughout the nation, unless we change how we teach it. At the time he wrote this, he was Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Brown University; he also is a past president of the Modern Language Association. In *Rise and Fall*, Scholes proposes that we teach literature not just as critiquing and theorizing, not just as appreciation of great literature, but also–and especially–as a writing course.

Our field of literature currently is in a new ferment. While many older and more traditional faculty teach literary theory and train English majors–and even students in introductions to literature–how to theorize about and in the field, younger English faculty are bringing into their teaching, especially at the undergraduate level, more current and more popularized ways in which students might consider literature.

This presentation today has two segments. One is a brief background description both of the new methods entering the teaching of literature and of Robert Scholes’ discussion in his book about why literary studies are failing to attract students. The other segment is about my own practice developed from Scholes’ recommendations: I teach literature as seven methods of writing. I simply will give you the background description as a handout: you may view it at your own discretion. I also am going to give you another, longer handout describing how I teach an Introduction to Literature course using seven different types of writing. It is this latter handout that I would like to workshop with you today.

The first handout is below. It includes two reviews. The first originally was a review of the article “What’s Wrong with Literary Studies” in the July-August 2017 “MnWE News.” The second is combined from what originally were three reviews of Scholes’ book in the three January-June 2015 issues of “MnWE News.”

**Segment 1: “Review of Marc Parry’s 2016 *Chronicle of   
Higher Education* Article ‘What’s Wrong with Literary Studies?’”**

        In the 2016 *Chronicle* article “What’s Wrong with Literary Studies?” Marc Parry describes how Virginia professor Rita Felski and others posit a new culture war of sorts. On the one hand, older or more modern-traditional scholars have a “habit of approaching texts like suspicious detectives on the hunt for hidden meanings,” says Felski. On the other, a loosely composed “post-critical reading” group of younger and less traditional scholars are accepting “humanist” ideas related more to enjoyment of reading and to students’ current sociological and psychological interests.

        Parry says that Lisa Ruddick, whose 1990 psychoanalytic study of Gertrude Stein established her in literary studies, calls the old-fashioned studies a “kind of professional groupthink.” Parry further delineates such studies by adding, “Felski’s message boils down to prefixes. Literary critics have emphasized ‘de’ words, like ‘debunk’ and ‘deconstruct.’ But they’ve shortchanged ‘re’ words – literature’s capacity to reshape and recharge perception.”

        According to Parry, Felski believes teaching of literature should involve people in why they are attracted to certain literary works, what these works have to say to them, and how they communicate with generations of readers in positive ways. Felski says, “Critics should describe the full range of motivations that drive people to take up literature.” She adds, for example, that people read for “recognition” (“self-understanding”), “enchantment” (“escapism”), and “shock.” She says, “Our attitudes to artworks are much more unpredictable and surprising than a lot of social theories allow for…. And therefore we need to look at these specific examples of a relationship to an artwork. A lot of specific examples are going to explode our [old] theories rather than confirm them."

        In addition, along with Parry, we might consider how most beginning literary students want to write about a work of art. Often they hope not to debunk or otherwise tear it apart, but rather to explain why and how it works well, placing in their own milieu.

        Critics of Felski, Ruddick, and the post-critical reading movement say, according to Parry, that only the worst of traditional critics are groupthink bound in always finding something negative to interpret or find hidden in literature. For example, Bruce Robbins of Columbia says the post-critical reading movement scholars do not look at positive manifestations of traditional critiquing: Felski is “not paying attention to the many varied and extremely interesting ways in which people’s positive appreciation is part of their critical practice.” Others suggest that the post-critical movement is, in part, bending to pressures to gain more students in English departments whose offerings –and students’ interests –are dwindling.

**Segment 2: “Review of Robert Scholes’ *The Rise and Fall of English*”**

Introduction

Robert Scholes’ critically acclaimed, controversial *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998, Yale UP) certainly was and is not without controversy, especially in a discipline, English literature, in which, it sometimes seems, every one of its practitioners seems determined to have his or her own way about how to “pass on” knowledge about literature. Scholes’ wishes to rearrange all of our thinking about this by suggesting that literature courses become constant lessons in *writing*–about and to literature–rather than merely reading, studying, and critiquing or theorizing about it.

Scholes clearly comes to the argument with excellent–if slightly different–credentials. *Rise and Fall* was one of his thirty books. At the time he wrote it, he was Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Brown University; now he is semi-retired. Earlier in his career, he was an English professor at several schools, including the University of Iowa, and is a past president of MLA. He intended the book to help us understand our disciplinary roots and future.

He starts the book not with answers but with an extensive interpretive background. To understand why English is failing, he believes, we must first consider its practical historical beginnings, and then its turn to the modern “English Department.” Only then might we understand its current fall–the declining undergraduate enrollments and declining interest in it as a field among graduate students. (If you are looking for answers rather than history, feel free to skip to the final section: “The Resurrection of English.”)

The Rise of “English”

How did the U.S. discipline of “English” start? According to Scholes, it was not in appreciation or scholarly study of literature, but rather as writing and as what we now call critical thinking. Speech and Philosophy of Art at Ivy League colleges were turned into literature-focused English departments.

In the late 1700s-late 1800s, “English” was the study of rhetoric–the art of oral persuasion. “Writing” was only a rough-draft mechanism for creating such speech, and “criticism” was not literary criticism, but rather discussions of how we know art, as in Kant’s “Critique of Judgment” and other works on fine art by such philosophers as Hegel and Schelling (8).

Then came the turn that created the modern English department. From 1876-1905, Ivy League colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Brown moved from requiring Greek and/or Latin to also allowing the study of English literature. Composition for speeches became official written composition. However, written composition, lacking its purpose of early drafts of belletristic speech, turned to literature–and literary criticism–for its content: first, philology (history, biography, et al.); later, New Criticism; and more recently, Theory (10).

Scholes says that at these Ivy League colleges, the new writing about literature and literary criticism–the birth of the modern English Department–took its cue from American high religion: as a new “spirituality” of sorts, “literature offered quasi-sacred texts that could be expounded by a licensed teacher/preacher to reveal the entrance to the kingdom of light” (15). Courses in English became purposeful: its “licensed teachers” believed they created “a richer, fuller humanity” among students than did study of the classics and oral rhetoric (17).

Thus according to Scholes, our roots as an English discipline lie in the classic ancient practices of Greece–revived in renaissance colleges–of learning rhetorical persuasion and study of philosophy. In about 1900 in the U.S., this developed into writing about and critically examining English literature–which became the high pursuit of the modern English discipline throughout the 20th century.

The Fall of English

How and why does Scholes perceive that our discipline has fallen?The background for Scholes “fall of English” is the frequent reports for decades, now, about the decline in the US of English majors and courses; and of the unravelling of a central mission and vision, understood by outsiders and insiders alike, of college English departments. Essentially, Scholes says that New Criticism, deconstruction, and other “de-“ methods of analyzing–however useful as forms of critical thinking–did not adapt to the responsibility of English to meet society’s new textual needs.

Scholes says that world wars, the Holocaust, the downfall of high culture as a desirable pinnacle, et al. have created a society in which students no longer aspire to be Hemingway or Dickens, but rather “Spike Lee or Spielberg” (19)–or a rapper or business leader. Scholes says, “What this society ‘wants’ of those…with degrees in humanities…are…reliability and a high level of textual skills.” Scholes also notes how the old literary canon has been torn asunder (21): American lit long ago took primacy over British, and the study of literature now is channeled through a thousand differing streams of cultures and critical methods.

He gives credit to New Criticism and deconstruction for recognizing these changes. However, he adds, the former’s “attempt to establish a purely literary value for literature…failed to answer to our [society’s] needs…” (28). And “the American form of deconstruction [is] a still more…constricted attempt to keep the transcendent aura of literature alive…” He gives credit to the “brilliance” of the best deconstructionists but notes that they, themselves, have so well deconstructed their deconstruction that they are led to being unable to answer the question “What is real” or true and what is the responsibility of English as a discipline.

Scholes then reminds us of deconstruction creator Derrida’s own words: “Who are we in the university? ‘What’ [and] ’[w]hom’ do we represent? [The] imperative for responding” must be a “minimal requirement of responsibility” (58). We must, in other words, respond to society’s needs rather than our own narrow scholarly interests.

The Resurrection of English

Scholes’ doom and gloom in examining the traditions of our profession (and in his use of “responsibility”) are pointed toward a very workable solution. They ask for nothing less (or more) than that the discipline of English reincarnate as a textual practice–writing to and about literature in many critical-thinking forms.

Unfortunately, for decades, statistics have shown the fall of English literature: steady declines in English majors, students choosing literature course, and courses offered. Some approve, envisioning English as a much smaller, purer discipline, like philosophy. However, more of us in our discipline appear to bemoan the decline. Scholes’ says that “the remedy…is to [start] with the needs of our students” (84) and with the “great importance” of English teachers in our new “highly textualized…society” (85). English should stop being “a subject matter” and start being “cultural equipment” students need (67-8). “My answer,” says Scholes, “is to replace the canon of texts with a canon of methods…” (145): “English reconstructed as a discipline of textuality” (146)–how to “situate,” “compose,” and “read” a text (147).

Scholes believes that in current literature courses, what is “not incorporated into the communicative lives of students…fades away” (149). He adds, “Knowledge that is not usable and regularly used is lost” (148). Instead, students need “intellectual tools that they can use effectively” (149). Don’t get rid of literature, he says; rather, refocus how we study it. We should not teach “the right ideas” but rather “the most effective ways of speaking, listening, reading, and writing” about literature (65).

For example, he says, “There is no point in introducing…Derrida…if [students] finish their study unable to deconstruct a text…” (148). He asks, “What better place to apply and test modes of reading and writing than among texts that stir the passions” (153)? Teachers also must “allow the political full play” of different cultural literacies in learning textuality– though never as teacher advocacy or indoctrination.

Scholes speaks strongly for writing. He says it “should be given a serious place [and] writing …serious attention in every English course” (160). He believes “the minimal requirements include scrupulous accuracy in citation, regard for what is already known about our subject, and rigor in situating and interrogating…” (57). But we also should “offer our students the artifices [typical patterns of writing] that work, a rhetoric that will enable them to gain the respectful attention of those around them…” (65), even to the point of encouraging “pastiche and parody” of styles in major texts to help students get “inside the heads of those writers” and to become better writers themselves (160).

He adds that the “process of reading” also should “take precedence” (166). This means “how to read closely [and] how to situate a text in relation to others [and] to culture, society, the world…” (166).

Scholes’ prescriptions may not surprise writing-specialist faculty. But what of those of us who teach literature? Rather than just share and discuss Shakespeare and Dickinson, should we train students to closely read and even mimic them? Should we ask students to compare their milieus to ours, and to practice deconstruction and other theories on them, and even to rewrite them for contemporary cultures? If so, perhaps simple assignments implied by Scholes–like analyses by elements, interpretive theses, reviews, critical analyses, deconstructions, even creative writing–will become more common in literature courses.

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**Scholes’ “A Sample Program in Textuality”** (Epilogue to “English After the Fall”):  
[www.brown.edu/academics/modern-culture-and-media/sites/brown.edu.academics.modern-culture-and-media/files/uploads/Epilogue.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/academics/modern-culture-and-media/sites/brown.edu.academics.modern-culture-and-media/files/uploads/Epilogue.pdf)