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Final Exam

**Question 1**

Benefits of using multiple critical perspectives when teaching literature appreciation to children, to adolescents, and adults allows us to become aware of the entry portals we can guide our students through enabling them to appreciate and utilize their thinking processes in a more refined manner, thus assisting them in elevating their cognitive skills concerning the material they have read and joined with engagement. When we are able to combine multiple critical perspectives in our reading of literature or poetry we become better readers, which in turn makes us more effective teachers of literature. Reading is an art. To say you have skills in an art you must be amply skilled in using the tools that are applicable to the art. The most important tools to a reader who reads as art are specific and different critical perspectives. These tools strengthen your skills as an artist of reading. Without these tools of critical perspective your ability to guide others into the love and appreciation of literature is limited and your personal appreciation will be lacking in full appreciation and understanding of the craft of the writer.

The five key forms of literary criticism Wolf addresses are, genetic, formal, text to text, transactional, and sociocultural.

**Genetic criticism**, views the story through the lens of the author’s life and times. This does not mean that the story has to take place in the time or setting of the author’s actual life. To me it means expressly how the author’s characters interact and emote to reveal the author’s emotional perspectives and cultural experiences. For this genetic lens I am using Brenda Woods’, *My Name is Sally Little Song.* I gleaned some pertinent biographical information on Ms. Woods from an interview she gave to The Brown Book Shelf. The Brown Book Shelf is an electronic magazine that can be found at the following web address: <http://thebrownbookshelf.com/2009/02/13/brenda-woods/> . This interview asked some pointed questions concerning Ms. Woods’ childhood and early life experiences. The protagonist of the novel is Sally May Harrison. The story is written in the first person voice of Sally May. She is a young slave girl living with her Ma and Pa and brother on the Harrison’s plantation. Sally May is inquisitive about nearly everything. Her inquisitiveness causes her to get a terrible switching by her Master’s daughter. We find in the interview by the BBS that Benda Woods was a very inquisitive child and wanted to know everything about everything. Ms. Woods was a nine year old child when a 12 year old boy who lived on her block was killed in a tragic bicycle and automobile collision. Her mother would not allow the event to be discussed in the house. Ms. Woods felt that there should have been more conversation at home concerning death and loss. In the novel Sally May loses her mother due to an attack by an alligator. We journey with Sally May through her days and then weeks of grief. Sally May was able to overcome the loss of her mother and continue her journey to freedom with her Pa and brother.

At another point in Ms. Woods’ early life she was displaced from her home due to a parents illness and she had to live in foster care. This separation from what was her normal home relates exactly to the fact that even though Sally May was a slave her family lived in its own cabin and had lived there ever since she had been born. Sally May’s dad finds out that the Master is going to sell his daughter and son and decides to take them away from the plantation and escape to the Seminole Indians in Florida. Sally May, is forced to deal with the loss of friends and familiar surroundings because of the unexpected escape. Ms. Woods’ journey to the foster home in the interview paralleled Sally May’s leaving of all that she knew and journeying into the unknown. Ms. Woods made the following statement in her interview, “Digging deeper, I suppose I want kids to see themselves as capable of overcoming obstacles. Though I may put my young characters on sinking ships, whenever possible, I give them life boats.” Ms. Woods overcame many obstacles in her life. In her statement above we see the driving passion she has to give this life experience to her readers. Sally May Harrison former slave becomes Sally Little Song, living free as a member of the Seminole Indians. Sally May overcame much to find freedom and a place in a home that she loved among people who gifted her with a well earned new name.

**Formal Criticism**

The formal method of criticism is concerned with the text and the text only. How is the text arranged? How many Chapters? Do the chapters stand alone? What is the point of view of the narrator? What is the setting? How do the separate parts of the text fit? Wolf gives us many of the negatives concerning formal criticism. One of the more powerful statements found in Wolf’s text is, “…teachers often stood in front of their classrooms and expounded on the meaning of a text, positioning their students as passive recipients of text interpretation”. To me a reader of books from many genres I find this limited and limiting. Formal criticism limits the reader to accepting a certain point of view and does not allow the reader, especially young readers to expand their relationship with the text outside of the formal criticism and limits the expectations of the student to reach separate and different conclusions from the pre-expected ones.

Wolf suggests that we not let oppression in formal criticism keep us from looking closely at text language. She suggests we open the museum doors to alternate voices and multiple possibilities in interpretation. This thought works both ways for me. I can see us rereading the classics and using other than formal criticism to gain a deeper understanding of these works. At the same time using formal criticism in multicultural literature in an unrestrained way so we may look into structure and form without the constraints of total restriction in the final definitions.

To take a tiny view of an attempt at formal criticism I am going to share a small poem found at the beginning of chapter 12 of *My Name is Sally Little Song.*

***Mama***

***Sweet Dessa***

***In heaven***

***Gone***

(Woods, 2006, p. 105)

The short abrupt lines give the sense of brevity. The final line gives us no reprieve. In four short lines a life is over.

**Text to Text**

This comparative form of criticism allows us to expand our look at literature through valid comparison of our main text to other text by the same author, or the same genre. The potential connections are nearly unlimited. Wolf suggests in our text; “You would typically choose a central text and then select other stories that complement it.” The use of text to text comparisons or text to poetry or even text to media allows us to discuss concepts and themes that will enable us as teachers to bring meaning into our reading by presenting another view point. Text to text for me is higher form of simile. The more explanations or descriptions we can offer anyone to allow them to gain insight or meaning of the subject has value. Text to text comparison may be the key that will unlock meaning for someone. It could also be used to increase attraction to a subject that the original text could not do for some readers. When a reader becomes interested in the subject the reader will develop more comprehension and this interest could be increased through the ‘right on’ comparative text.

When we use text to text comparison we will engage our students by the very act of asking them to tell me what you think. Suddenly they aren’t being told what to think but to think. As a teacher and mentor you guide but don’t drag your student to the next level of critical thinking.

Text to text calls for response, analysis and discussion. In general discussion with friends and sometimes even with strangers we hear someone say, “Oh, that reminds me of…” , text to text can be as simple as conversation between two people and the conversation leads to some form of consensus and consensus many times leads to resolution.

In our text Wolf uses Hartman and Harman to describe how literary texts can be arranged in several ways; Companion text, Complementary texts, Synoptic texts, Disruptive texts, and Rereading text, each of these divisions have a detailed explanation in the text. I list them here for the purpose of identifying the example I will use found in the literature we have read during this course.

I am using synoptic texts for my example. Comparing, *My Name Is Sally Little Song,* to *Esperanza Rising*, by Pam Munoz Ryan. We have in these stories two young girl protagonist who are telling the story. They both lose what they expect to always be their homes. Each of them, confront the loss of a parent. They each become immigrants into a different society with different languages. They both console the spouse of their lost parent. The both become secure in their new identity and both rise to the challenges they encounter. This comparison can lead to a deeper connection to the reality of how much we are alike even when on the surface we appear to be so different.

**Transactional criticism**

Wolf reveals to us that Louise Rosenblatt is generally recognized as the first voice in transactional criticism. Transactional criticism recognizes that the reader brings individual life experience to the text. These life experiences act as a guide to the text. The result of this text comprehension through life experiences, create what Rosenblatt calls a poem. This form of criticism has been difficult for me to grasp in its entirety. I, after much struggle, have gained on the concept, but still have some difficulty with the, me aspect of the criticism.

Using Rosenblatt’s Continuum I grasped the efferent side pretty quickly, it is easy to understand that the reader has read a text, newspaper, formula, recipes, etc. After the reader has engaged with the efferent the reader has the knowledge needed to act on the information. Go somewhere, cook something, seek employment etc. The readers life experience in this instant will let the reader know if the information read is applicable in his/her life. The aesthetic side gives me pause to reflect on the depth of the understanding received through the reading.

I as a reader do experience the emotions generated in the story and if my past life experience allows me to relate in a dynamic way I may once again experience the fear or joy of a described event more than someone who hasn’t actually experienced the event. But somehow there seems to be a sense of uncontrolled subjective connections that may not really exist.

When Wolf gives us the tool of a mirror and then warns us that the mirror has limitations if we do not realize that we may place too much weight on the individual reader by stressing that the reflection is the only thing that matters. Wolf shares her three negative aspects of transactional criticism. The aspects are an exaggerated preeminence of the reader, the focus on reader response rather than transaction, and the interpretation of “self” in its most narrow sense.

Wolf continues, by making us aware that this form of criticism can cause the reader to not be aware of the larger scope of transaction, the reality that though the reader is an individual the reader is not separate from culture, class and gender, or time place and situation.

For me an interesting awareness came when I was attempting a transactional criticism in relation to Sally May’s Pa in a line from *My Name Is Sally Little Song.* The line is; “We’s free.” Sally May’s pa said these words to Sally May and as a reader I thought how wonderful and that I too had experienced freedom when my enlistment in the Navy was over, but truth prevailed for I was not a slave, nor was I an African who had suffered so much pain and suffering to be free. The joy I felt when I reread this with the added understanding that I had failed to think about the class, place, and time the first time I read the line, this new joy was the knowing that I would never comprehend Pa’s personal joy, but I can truly rejoice in his joy.

**Sociocultural Criticism**

In Wolf’s description of sociocultral criticism she refers to a phrase from Matthew Arnold; “the best that has been thought and said”. It is the educator responsibility to realize that Arnold’s view was limited to his time and place in society. Today’s teachers live in a different society with expanding awareness of differing cultures. This expansion, not corralled by exclusiveness, but open gated to unending evolution, creating room for inclusiveness of all citizens of our ever shrinking world.

Sociocultrual criticism, gives the student a lens to ask questions or inquire as to what social group is this story written about. How could this story be different if it had taken place in a different culture, or within a different class? Wolf uses Rudine Sims Bishop to explain that even the most offensive books, “can offer opportunities for careful, sensitive, critical discussions of their derogatory images and the purposes they serve.” She continues by stating, “I look for ways I can open up critical conversations with children.” She expressly speaks to the skills a teacher must develop to prevent students from seeing themselves cast as stereotypes, but reflect more on the question of where we are now as a society, and how we arrived at our present state.

In Sally May’s world the reader comes face to face with the cultural differences she faced when she received her whipping from the Master’s daughter, because she would have the nerve to hold a book she couldn’t even read. She passionately desired to read. She touches the book as if it is the most sacred thing in the world. I would also mention here that Larry McMurtry (2008) in his biographical book, *Books: A Memior, says, “*At any rate, though I didn’t at first realize the class significance of our owning a set of the *World Book Encyclopedia,* I became, for a time, an encyclopedia reader myself” (McMurtry, 2008, p. 13). How many of us, as teachers, realize that even having a set of encyclopedias as a child put us in an entirely different social class from many of our students and their families.

When we are considering the lens of sociocultural criticism we must be cognizant of how deep the differences are in social class and likewise in cultural understanding. Developing the skills required to facilitate the lenses of multiple critical perspectives is not an overnight achievement. The teacher who utilizes these skills must dig deeper into the literature being presented to the students. When the teacher digs deeper into literature, and develops the skills of effective multiple critical perspectives she/he will be enabled to utilize these skills as real tools enabling her/him students in today’s classroom.

**Question 2: Discuss the roll of literary elements**

Wolf gives her readers eight major components of narrative that may be used as quick reference points to develop a common language between the teacher and her/his students. This common language with an appreciable understanding of the major components of narrative will develop in the student a deeper understanding of quality literature and then elevate the students understanding of the writers creative skills as well as enable them to become creative writers of skill themselves.

I appreciate that Wolf actually uses the term children instead of the formal ‘students’. Children, is a metaphor invoking the parenting nature and protective bond associated with the actuality of being a parent. This use of metaphor in the text brings home that these particular children (students) are invaluable and the teacher’s interaction with these precious charges should always reflect the genuine concern that a parent has for her/his child. This point of view, illustrated by Wolf’s use of the descriptive term children in place of the standard term student creates a powerful connection between the author and her reader. It, also, at the same time creates a common language between me, the student, and Wolf, the teacher mentor. When Wolf uses the term student throughout the rest of the text I the reader will have had an uptake, engaging with crafted language, and will know that Wolf’s narrative component, point of view, was an artifice to keep in front of me the responsible point of view that the word student, means and will always mean children.

Wolf’s counseling in this particular text book is directed at students from her perspective as an experienced and successful teacher. She is obviously concerned that we her students become the best teachers we are capable of becoming. She has honed her skills as a writer and calls on her past experience as a teacher and reflective reader to step forward and guide us as a mother would guide her children. You sense her desire and concern for us, her students, to understand the needs of our future students no matter their race, gender, religion, or social status. The genre of her work is seen as a social action to accomplish a particular purpose. The purpose is to motivate her students to become teachers who will enable their students to appreciate and understand quality literature for the benefit of their individual social evolution and then, sharing their new found abilities by assisting the evolution of society as a whole.

The complex social integration of a multicultural society is a setting that requires writers as leaders. Writers, who can convey through their writing the importance of the different components required in the development of society. Writing that encourages integration of different cultures, religions, races and relationship choices. Supporting an individual’s right to live in this universal setting of a community, working together for the welfare of all who dwell therein. Wolf enlightens her students with the knowledge of how pressing the present time and setting is for the teacher to guide the student into deeper reading of meaningful literature. The place for social action is in the community of students, where teachers guide and encourage. The time for that interaction is now, as the mood of society is edgy and suspenseful. As world populations increase the need to educate becomes more pressing. Teachers must become leaders of their students, not cookie cutter representations of manufactured academics, but powerful characters who develop skills that enable them to see the individual challenge each student faces. Wolf’s description of the need to recognize the components of narrative provides the student with the tools necessary to recognize that the elements of her narrative is the setting that engages us as readers.

Wolf provides powerful examples through her choices of touchstone titles throughout the text. Her touchstones are the tools we use to discover whether or not the literature we are reading is real gold or fool’s gold. She shares with us the tools of multiple types of criticism to hone our skills. In her endeavors to encourage us, her students, to hone these skills she has presented us with eight different literary elements to look for and recognize in the literature we read. The recognition of these literary elements, carry us deeper into the theme of our text. The theme of our text is complex putting culture and class under a powerful microscope. Illuminating how literature has been used as a tool to lift one class above the other through an over abundance of white European writers and a lack of literature from other cultures and races. She confronts the inequities thrust upon children due to their gender, their race, their countries of origin, their religions and their social status.

Shelby Wolf is a battle hardened leader. Her sword is the written word. She fears not to charge into a world filled with publishers whose main interest is the bottom line of the profit ledger. The status quo is but an imaginary enemy that will eventually fall to educated readers who through deeper reading of quality literature will see the elephant in the room. She has convinced me that my egotistical belief that I understood literature was an empty echo of false reality. The tone of her book takes her reader into the fray. She leads us into understanding the importance of the event of reading. The tone of her writing is conveyed through the style of her presentation. She does not write in the style of *House Beautiful,* she writes with the voice of a Walter Winchell, exhorting immediacy of action by teachers who desire to be effective in their craft.

Many readers are convinced that text books do not have a plot. This is absolutely not the truth. Ms. Wolf has an obvious plot and if the reader will but pay attention the plot becomes visible and then undeniable. The main character in the book is you the student and reader. You are described by the effort you make. If you read deep into the text you will discover you are the results of your efforts to recognize multiple forms of criticism and literary elements. Your character is a composite of what tools you develop through deeper reading of the text. There are very few opportunities for the reader of a text to actually decide how strong of a character he/she is becoming. The beginning of the text describes you the reader as a character, confronting the challenge of becoming a better reader. During your journey through this challenge you are offered the opportunity to expand your skills through reading deep enough in the text to discover the tools you will need to guide your students in developing their literacy skills. This challenge is difficult and requires attention to the pitfalls many of your students confront as they develop these skills. The denouement or final resolution of the plot is hidden in what kind of a character you choose to be when you enter the classroom as teacher. Ms. Wolf’s desire is for you to be effective, engaging, and confident in your skills as a reader, and a teacher of reading. Her writing reveals her genuine belief that you will be. Why shouldn’t she call her students her children, and why wouldn’t we her children accept the challenge.

**Note on style used to discuss the role of literary elements.**

Dr. Parson, I know I have discussed literary elements in a rather strange way in this essay. I have never enjoyed or engaged with a text book anymore than I have with *Interpreting Literature with Children.* I underlined the literary elements originally as I wrote this paper for my own benefit so that I could keep track of usage. My plan of action was to remove the underlining before I submitted the paper to you. After reflection, I decided to leave the underlining as it seemed to fit the form and style of the writing. If you feel the underlining is not appropriate I will remove it. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for being an effective teacher. Your choice of this text book was a blessing to me. As I grow older, I realize that I must write and will write. This class has opened my eyes to the need of becoming a better reader. In addition, your kindness in sending me the link to Mem Fox was the inspiration that made me know I had abandoned my first love, writing, and writing with purpose and an increasing hunger to become a better writer.

**References**

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