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Mythic America: Developing an Interdisciplinary Course

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Mythic America: Developing an interdisciplinary course

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[Headnote]

A team-taught class effectively integrates literature and history.

History and literature both document the human experience. In most institutions, however, academic disciplines are usually compartmentalized. Rarely do faculty members from different disciplines work as a pedagogical team. Even more rarely are teachers willing to share their classroom with anyone other than their students.

This self-imposed isolation denies teachers both the knowledge and the expertise of their colleagues. Teachers, therefore, are often at a disadvantage when they attempt to integrate material from other fields into their classrooms. I frequently introduce historical information, for example, into my literature courses. On the first day of class, I typically send students to the library and tell them to come back with a presentation on what was going on in England during the nineteenth century. If a student is interested in medicine, he or she can report on Victorian medical practices, and so on. In addition, I often take students on a tour of a Victorian house. Back in the classroom, I discuss the Reform Bill, the Crimean War, Dr. Acton's theories of sex and women, physiognomy, bustles, the Crystal Palace, the Pre-Raphaelites, the Benthamites, fossil discoveries, imperialism, and steam engines. Discussions about these and other historical issues and events, I have discovered, help students to contextualize literature.

My colleague in the social sciences division, historian Phillip Gibbs, takes a similar approach in his classes. In his American history courses, students study a variety of American fiction, including such novels as *The Killer Angels*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Ragtime*, *In Country*, and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Fiction, says Gibbs, helps give historical characters both form and feeling, a quality often missing even in the best historical writing. But more important, novels can deepen a student's understanding of the social conventions, issues, and conflicts of a historical period that affected real lives.

Such study also allows students to "consider a literary work more as a cultural than a linguistic construct," in line with how Jacqueline Banerjee views new historicism (531). By guiding

students to ask historical-cultural questions of a literary text, the course enables them to gain an immediacy of a historical period by engaging it through informed reading.

Given our mutual interests in history and literature, Phil and I decided to create a course which would integrate the two disciplines. Such a course, we concluded, would require both professors to be in the classroom at the same time. This approach would not only help students see the interconnection between history and literature, but we could also offer them differing interpretations of events and issues. After countless hours of research and considerable feuding, we finally agreed on both the material to be studied and the organization of the class. What resulted was a new course called *Mythic America*.

With the support of the vice president for academic affairs, the course made its way into the core without changing the curriculum. Students signed up for both US History 202 and American Literature 204. The first time we offered the ten-credit course, students met everyday from 10-11:30 with a ten-minute break. We faculty (who were teaching ten other credits besides) and the students found this too grueling without enough time to keep up with the reading. The third year the interdisciplinary course was offered, it was scheduled to meet Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 12-2:50.

This revised schedule allowed students extended time to prepare for class and work on research papers and projects. It also provided us with the opportunity to conduct field trips, to engage students in debates and committee assignments, and to view and discuss films in their entirety during a single class meeting. More importantly, it afforded us the necessary time to explore each of the readings and topics in greater depth.

That third time around proved successful in another way: our vice president awarded us one-third release time so that we had only one other five-credit course to teach. This kind of administrative support is absolutely crucial if faculty are to reinvent the wheel. Organizing a course that extensively but selectively draws material from two different disciplines requires much preparation and coordination. We were unable, for example, to find textbooks that collected and organized both literary and historical pieces in a workable way. As a result, we spent hundreds of hours sifting through historical documents, short stories, novels, and poems. Then we began that first quarter with what we thought was a reasonable syllabus, but we soon realized that we had been too ambitious. The next year we reduced our topics by two (a painful amputation), and reduced the number of readings under the remaining topics. We had discovered that students not only had trouble keeping up with the reading load (and these were mostly very serious students); they also had not had enough classroom time to work through the material in discussion. We had to slow things down.

In hindsight, I think we reduced the course requirements not so much out of sympathy for the students, but out of genuine concern for Phil and me, for we were putting in much more preparation time than we had ever imagined. Even if I were familiar with a literary piece, I would have to reconsider its relevance to the assigned topic for the day I also had to read historical material that I was totally unfamiliar with. Phil had the same responsibility. Besides familiarizing ourselves with the reading, we had to discuss how we would synthesize the information: What themes did we want to treat? What issues? What points? How would we

moderate the class discussion?

As for grade evaluation, at the end of each topic, students were given a two-part exam: an in-class, open-book essay (choice of two out of three discussion questions) plus a comprehensive out-of-class essay question. Phil and I would split the essays (as we did the end-of-the quarter project paper); I would read half, make comments, and affix a tentative grade while Phil did the same with his. Then we would swap, with the second read being much easier because both of us had carefully commented on grammar and mechanics as well as content. The dual evaluation probably provided the students with the most thorough reading of their work that they had ever received (for I not only graded for them but was constantly mindful that a colleague was going to be "grading" me, that he would agree or disagree with my comments or find things that I missed). Finally, we would meet and "negotiate" grades. The students never received one grade for literature and another for history. Instead, they earned a single grade for each project.

Students were encouraged to conference with either of us. They were not to think of us representatives of two separate disciplines. We both knew the material and knew how to discuss writing. Nevertheless, some students seemed to gravitate to me and others to Phil. Gender and personality no doubt played some role in this. role in this.

Phil and I were in the class the entire time. Seated in circle formation, we acted as prompters and led students in lively discussion. If Phil asked a question, I might answer it or add more prompts which would get other students engaged. (One of the nice things about team teaching is that there will always be someone in class that has something to say in response to your comments and questions.) Phil was very good at playing the devil's advocate, taking the opposite viewpoint to mine, which often allowed the students to see both sides of an issue. Students didn't sit as passive observers, however. Even if Phil and I really got "into" it, we would back off and let the students jump in with their opinions. We often acted as a catalyst. At other times, it was healthy for them to see that the professor isn't always right, that another academic can disagree. Such dialogue went far to encourage critical thinking.

While in this roundtable format, the class investigated six major myths that greatly influence the way people perceive themselves as Americans. We took our definition of myth from Keen Valley-Fox's *Your Mythic Journey*. Accordingly, myth is "an intricate set of interlocking stories, rituals, rites, and customs that inform and give the pivotal sense of meaning and direction to a person, family, community, or culture" (xi). With this definition in mind, we began the class with a discussion of Paula Gunn Allen's "Myth/Telling/Dream/Showing."

The first myth we examined was "The Land." Beginning with the topic "The Old South and the Lost Cause," students read material from Tindall and Shi's *America* (359-73) in conjunction with Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" and Frank Lawrence Owsley's "The Irrepressible Conflict." From there we moved to "The New South and Agrarian Revolt" (Tindall and Shi 480-86, 573-86) with Henry W Grady's speech on white supremacy and industrial progress and Andrew Nelson Lytle's "The Hind Tit." We concluded with a discussion of James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (5557, 159-61, 322-25) and William Faulkner's "Barn Burning."

The literature and the readings from the historical text provided insight into the plight of Southern farmers. I came to see Abner Snopes for the first time in a sympathetic light. I used to teach "Barn Burning" as the universal story of a youth coming into adulthood and choosing his own path that radically departs from his father's. Although the father was corrupt, Sarty's innate goodness and innocence triumphed. Sarty was able to put his terrible childhood behind him and strike out on a new path that promised a more stable life.

But once inside a literature/history classroom, I saw the characters and events through the experience of a Southern sharecropper. This time I understood why Abner Snopes ground manure into Major de Spain's carpet. Snopes reminded de Spain that his wealth could not isolate him from the ugliness of the world or the manure of his own life. It was also an expression of his anger at a system which seemed to afford a poor man little or no justice. What kind of system allows one man to build a plantation out of "Nigger sweat," Snopes might have asked, and denies another the means for any house other than one that "ain't fittin for hawgs"? Snopes, students also recognized, had to take his own justice. The barn, which symbolizes success and abundance, becomes the object of Snopes's fiery rage; it represents everything that he lacks.

After reading about the difficulties of sharecroppers in the American South, I came to understand "Barn Burning" on a different level. It also caused me and my students to see the pain and destruction of a people who live in a country where anybody is supposed to be able to get rich, or at least be able to support a family. The American dream is elusive for many Americans, especially those eking out their living from the soil.

Our study of country music also furthered our investigation into the mythology of the land. Rooted in the folk traditions of the British Isles and the American South, country music, students learned, has long been an expression of the joys and sufferings of common people who struggle to survive on the land. But this does not account for the modern popularity of the music. Why, for example, does the Northeastern city-dweller listen to Randy Travis? Is it a desire for confirmation of a value system that is rapidly eroding, one in which children go fishing with their grandfather? Is it a belief that if a woman just hangs in there long enough, her man will come back to his true love and the responsibilities of his family? Is it a hope that God is still in control? Simply put, country music provides the illusion of stability and survival of "old-fashioned" ideals for a people who live in the middle of a maelstrom of change.

Country music and the South are often associated with family and religious values, but the West has long been an emblem of America. Throughout the American past, the West has been seen as the mythic land of opportunity, a place where one can shape one's own destiny. But there was a price to be paid. Native Americans were an obstacle to "Manifest Destiny" and national progress. They would have to be removed (Tindall and Shi 490-501). We read a number of poems that reflected the clash of cultures between whites and native Americans, such as Diane Burns's "Sure You can Ask Me a Personal Question," R. T. Smith's "Red Anger" and James Wright's "Having Lost My Sons." The class also had a lot to say about Albert Hurtado's "A White Man's Rationale for Killing Indians on the Overland Trail." Gertrude Bonnin's "Schooldays of an Indian Girl" and Simon Ortiz's "Kaiser and the War" provided students with insight into the suffering of a displaced people in a way no history textbook can.

The conquest of the West, of course, was an outgrowth of the American desire for the good life. Beginning with Alexis de Tocqueville's "Why the Americans Are So Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity," we explored the national obsession with financial well-being. What we discovered was not only a history of spectacular economic growth, but also disillusionment and a long train of broken dreams. Students read excerpts from *The Jungle* (135-41) and *Babbitt* (15-16); watched *Matewan* and *The Grapes of Wrath*; and analyzed Hamlin Garland's "Under the Lion's Paw," Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge," and Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." In connection with these selections, students read in Tindall and Shi about big business (503-15), unions (515-28), social reform, progressivism (615-43), the Depression (728-57), post-war prosperity (838-48), and President Johnson's vision of the Great Society (885-902).

In this course segment entitled "The Good Life," two literary works received close attention. The first, F Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited," examined the disillusionment of many people during the 1920s. Tindall and Shi placed Fitzgerald's story in a historical context: The "Roaring Twenties" were supposedly years of prosperity, frivolity, and loosening morals. They were that for some Americans, yet for others, the period provoked despair and doubt. The war's unprecedented carnage hastened a growing challenge in modern thought to the old values of progress, faith, reason, and optimism. As novelist F Scott Fitzgerald observed in 1920, "here was a new generation . . . grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken." Such aching disillusionment among what came to be called the "lost generation" was not as widespread as Fitzgerald or others have suggested, but it was a prominent feature of postwar intellectual and social life. (678)

The anguish depicted through Charlie, Helen, and Marion in Fitzgerald's short story made real the consequences of the "Lost Generation." The literary text allowed students to feel the emotion; the history text allowed them to understand it.

The second major work in this section was Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. From their reading in the literary and historical texts, students surmised that Willy Loman had a compulsive drive for "plenty." This drive was so powerful that it became a destructive force in his relationship with his wife and sons. Seen from the perspective of the consumerism of the late 1940s and early 50s, Willy, therefore, appears to be a casualty of the American creed of success.

The kind of questions that students raised with this interdisciplinary approach exceeded the breadth and depth of just a literature class. For example, they observed the significance of Willy's dying in a car, something they would not have thought to do in *American Literature 204*. Included in Tindall and Shi's text is a reproduction of Margaret Bourke-White's famous photograph, the "American Way" (752). In this photograph, we see African Americans in a bread line pass in front of a billboard that boasts the "World's Highest Standard of Living." The billboard portrays a car with the smiling faces of a white family: Mom and Dad, two kids, and family dog. Beneath runs this caption: "There's no way like the American Way." After seeing that photograph, the students had reason to discuss the significance of Willy's car. And they could answer the most crucial question about the play: What kills Willy Loman?

After much reading about consumerism in the history text, students suggested that Willy's

occupation as a salesman was an important theme in the play. They also assessed Willy's statement about his older son (who is "trying to find himself") as a historically accurate statement of the disillusionment people were feeling; Willy bemoans: "Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such personal attractiveness, gets lost. And such a hard worker...." The play reflects many values that the students identified as being part of the American creed (by working hard, looking good, and being personable, you deserve a piece of the pie). The play also sparked a multitude of questions: Why does Hap keep saying that he's losing weight and that he's going to get married? How are these reflective of social pressures for conformity when to conform means having some control over your life, which these players did not have? Why does Willy insist on Swiss instead of American cheese? Why does Biff steal? Why does Willy warn Hap and Biff to watch what they promise the girls, if being married is the ideal? What does Linda represent? Why does Willy cheat on her? Without Tindall and Shi's chapter, "Through the Picture Window: Postwar Society and Culture, 1945-1960" (848-56), the students probably wouldn't have been able to raise or respond to such questions.

Miller's play and the readings from the history text prompted students to think seriously about their own values and beliefs. By the end of the term, we feared that a number of our bleary-eyed sophomores had been overwhelmed. Most of these same students, however, turned in amazingly positive evaluations of the course and the professors. They told their friends to sign up for it next year. "A lot of work, yeah, but what you learn!" was the common assessment. Written testimonies of how the course changed their lives were numerous.

An interdisciplinary approach to the study of American society and culture helps students appreciate and understand the power of the myths which define them as a people. By demonstrating the interconnection of several fields of study, students also learn the essential value of each discipline. If history is to be meaningful, for example, it has to assume flesh and blood; it has to be about real people that are knowable. That's what literature makes happen. And if literature is to be meaningful, it cannot be isolated from its sociohistorical context because people are framed by that context. Providing the tools from both disciplines equips students to gain a deeper and broader understanding of their own myth-making processes.

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