

Special Topics in American Literature: Bein' Broke

Introduction:

First, let me say that I am a college professor who was born into the working class. My father drives a forklift for the United Auto Workers and my mother is a homemaker. They were divorced when I was two and I was raised by my grandparents. My grandfather was a Teamster and my grandmother worked in a shoe factory (until it closed because of the coming globalization of industrial work). I was a twenty-eight year old freshman in college. Initially, I went there, not because I saw some intrinsic value in education, but more because I saw education as a refuge from the economic storm that I faced as an unskilled, uneducated worker in a post-industrial economy.

While I was attending the local community college in Dallas, Texas, I discovered that there were student organizations and support groups for everyone but me. I wasn't a minority; I wasn't a woman, and, being a Catholic from a small town eighty miles south of St. Louis, Missouri, I didn't really fit in with the Christian Student's Union either. I experienced first hand what some of my white working class students at the community colleges in Texas where I have taught must experience when they enter the hallowed walls of the college – alienation and a fear – the kind of alienation and fear that leads the adult student to believe that “I must have really messed up my life somewhere along the line to end up here starting over.” I began my college career with a similar sense of failure – I had somehow failed just for being there in the first place. I believe that

this sense of failure is one of the hidden consequences of being a working class student. There are no resources or “special topics” at many community colleges and universities for the working class. At least there weren’t at any of the schools that I attended. In *Homo Redneckus*, I argued that working class whites, pejoratively called rednecks and white trash, should be an identity politics set apart from the all-encompassing category of whiteness (McCarter, html). Because I felt that there should be (for lack of a better term) *White Trash Literature*, when I got the opportunity to put together an American Literature course, I decided that I would try to teach *that* class. Here’s what happened:

Books:

When I tried to find books that were written for and by rednecks and white trash, I felt as if I was Sir Galahad in search of the Holy Grail – after all, historically, novels, short stories, and poems have been written by the leisure class and, in more modern times, they have been written by those who had the time and money to market their manuscripts to publishing houses (who would most likely reject them because they did not fit the worldview of the book buying middle class). How do you find books written by and about a culture that is too busy working to write books? This was a real problem for me, until I remembered a question that a student asked about Multicultural Literature in a seminar course I had taken. My fellow student asked, “Since Hemingway’s *The Old Man and The Sea* takes place in Latin America, can you use it for Latin American Literature?” Our instructor quickly replied, “No,” because it wasn’t written *by* Latinos, but instead, was written *about* Latinos. I thought that would

be an interesting way of seeking books to read for my course. How do various authors portray rednecks and white trash in literature over time?

The first book I chose to use in my class was Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's collection of short stories called, *Georgia Scenes*. This text was available online from the University of North Carolina website, *Documenting the American South*, so I could integrate the internet and computers in my class and at the same time, my students wouldn't have to buy the book (a real benefit for those struggling to pay for college). Longstreet's character, Ransy Sniffle, is the 18th Century antecedent to Faulkner's Flem Snopes. In addition, Longstreet's book, published in 1835, was one of the first examples of the Southwest Humor that influenced later humorists like Mark Twain. By beginning with these light hearted humorous sketches, my students would immediately be engaged in the text and hopefully, in the class.

I also chose Johnson Jones Hooper's *The Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* as a companion text to Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*. Hooper's work is also categorized as Southwest Humor, and his character, Simon Suggs, also serves as an antecedent to many of the contemporary images of white trash and rednecks. I stressed that Hooper was a member of the Whig party and that Simon Suggs was originally intended to be a caricature of Andrew Jackson. Hooper's work gave me the opportunity to show the political dimensions of literature and how it can be used to reinforce the status quo and reproduce the hegemony. On a more personal note, I was especially interested in the story called, "The Captain Attends a Camp Meeting." This particular sketch shows

Simon as being a confidence man (antecedent to Melville's *Confidence Man*) where he convinces a group of religious people to give him money to start a church. My great-grandfather was a farmer in southern Missouri. He had his land and was self-sufficient in the Jeffersonian sense of the *agrarian ideal*, but often needed cash to pay the taxes on his farm. My grandmother told me stories about him preaching tent revivals in Arkansas to make enough money to pay those taxes (and he wasn't even a preacher). My family was not that far removed from Captain Simon Suggs.

Because I feel that the term *redneck* and *white trash* are most often applied to poor whites from the South, I decided that I would try to problematize the definition (stereotype) by having my students read a book about the poor working class from the North. I chose Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Because most (if not all) of my students have read *The Red Badge of Courage*, this book also gave me the opportunity to problematize the canon and ask them why some books were included while others were left out. *Maggie* helped me illustrate how the canon could be used as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser) to reinforce and reproduce the hegemony of the status quo. Like Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* and Hooper's *Simon Suggs*, Crane's *Maggie* was also available online so that my students could use their computer skills to read the text instead of purchasing the book.

I thought that reading one of Mark Twain's novels was appropriate for my course. Since many students have already read *Huck Finn* or *Tom Sawyer*, I chose *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Although this book is primarily about racism, it is a

good contrast to some of the books that my students have already read.

Because this course is about *class*, my students could read this book and compare the struggles of Chambers to the struggles of those who are trying to escape from their class. How are they alike and similar? I also thought that, as a class, we could explore the idea of Roxy being one-sixteenth Negro and how that sixteenth made her a Negro. Because we have already discussed cultural reproduction and how difficult it is to break free from the class that you are born into in *Maggie, Pudd'nhead Wilson* would give the class an opportunity to compare and contrast *race* and *class* in this course.

No study of poor whites could be complete without reading at least one novel by William Faulkner. Because I wanted my students to focus on the narrative rather than the style of the author, I decided that I would use Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* in my literature course. In addition to *The Unvanquished* illustrating the relationship of Ab Snopes, a poor white, with the Southern aristocracy, I thought it would work well in the course because the novel was published as a serial in the Saturday Evening Post. *The Unvanquished* is Faulkner's most approachable novel and also the most appropriate for a sophomore level literature course.

Because I wanted my course to use several genres of literature, I wanted to include a play. I chose Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. Because many in the working class tend to congregate in bars and taverns, this play illustrates that part of the working class world. It also illustrates another dimension of the working class – nostalgia. I can't recall how many of my older cousins and their

friends would sit out on the back porch of my grandmother's house in Missouri and talk about "the glory days." The working class seems to have a plethora of stories about "when times were better," or when they "almost had it made." The bar rooms of America represent a kind of *carnivale* where the social order is interrupted, an interesting topic to explore in the course.

In addition to *The Iceman Cometh*, I also wanted to integrate *A Streetcar Named Desire* into my course. Because I try to use a variety of methods of instruction in the classroom and the film starring Marlon Brando is so well done, this was be a good time to use film in the classroom. I made it a point to tell my students that if they wanted to write their research papers on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, they would have to buy the book. Tennessee Williams does a great job of illustrating class issues in his plays and *A Streetcar Named Desire* provides a lot of issues to discuss in class. In addition, it helps to bridge the gap between the 19th Century and more contemporary literature.

As I moved to more contemporary literature, I found that Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph On The Sewanee* fit in with the overall theme of white trash literature. In her introduction, Hurston talks how poor whites played a role in the creation of African-American culture. She also explains how she believes that it is "taboo" for an African-American author to write a book about white people and that she wanted to challenge that idea by writing *Seraph On The Sewanee*. Oddly enough, almost no one teaches *Seraph On The Sewanee*. I chose the book primarily because I wanted the class to explore how Hurston portrays poor whites in the book and ask themselves, "Why does her depiction seem more

sympathetic than some of the other books we have read?" I also wanted the class to see how challenging it was for the Meserves (the family in the book) to transition into the middle class and to ultimately realize that it takes more than money to move from one class to another.

Henry Lightcap, the hero of Edward Abbey's *A Fool's Progress*, is the quintessential redneck. One of the ideas I wanted to explore in this class is that poor rural whites have a dual personality in literature and popular culture. On one hand are the hard working men and women who are the "salt of the earth" (think about *The Waltons*), and on the other there are *rednecks* and *white trash*. I believe that much of the literature and film that we see about poor rural whites is one-sided – either they show the reader/viewer the "salt of the earth" country folks, or they show them the *redneck*. Abbey challenges this one dimensional characterization by offering Henry Lightcap. Henry is equal parts "salt of the earth" and redneck – just like most of the *real* country folks in the backwoods of Middle America. One of the ideas that I wanted to explore using this book was the idea that hard working men and women – these folks who are the "salt of the earth" suddenly become *rednecks* to outsiders whenever they exercise their human agency against those who either are or appear more powerful than themselves. Having students use Abbey's book to explore this idea was a great way to make salient the duality of rural poor whites. When does a "salt of the earth country boy" go *redneck* on folks?

The final selection for my redneck literature class was Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which illustrates the darker side of the redneck

experience. Allison also offers the opportunity to discuss subcategories of literature (feminist, African-American, Latino, Native American, etc.) and their own *canons*. In addition, I wanted to show how even those canons can break down. Dorothy Allison is a woman, a lesbian, and (after reading her books, I feel that she wouldn't mind me saying this), white trash. One of the questions that I wanted students to answer was, "Which subculture gets her?" Does her work belong in a feminist canon, a lesbian canon, a white trash canon, or none of them?

In addition to requiring the students to read the books, they are assigned short biographies of the authors. Reading biographies allowed students to see what class the authors were from and how their class influenced their narratives about the rednecks and white trash that they wrote about.

Assignments:

Before I get into the specific assignments, I would like to explain how I graded those assignments. For the most part, college professors usually assign a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F) along with a point grade for every assignment that they give. I have always had issues with the idea of grading because I felt that it only reinforced the idea of a meritocracy. It surprises me that many of my colleagues do not believe in the meritocracy and yet, are not more resistant to assigning the grades that admissions counselors, financial aid directors, and, in some cases, employers use to measure the progress or worth of a student. I thought that in addition to teaching a literature for and about the working class, I might incorporate a working class method of grading students as well.

While I was trying to set up the grading criteria for the course, I reflected on my own experience as a working class boy growing up in southeast Missouri. Working class students, for the most part, think of themselves as average people. That is almost ingrained in them – “I’m just an average Joe.” (Remember the “Joe Sixpack references to the average voter during the Reagan Revolution?). I thought about my own less than illustrious academic career in high school and realized that as long as I made a “C,” I didn’t feel bad about anything. After all, I saw myself as being an “Average Joe” and since there was nothing special about me, then I could expect to be happy about being average. My conclusion was that many working class students feel that as long as they make a “C,” then they are living up top their potential.

Thinking about what I had learned and the rewards or *grades* that I got for them, I developed a solution to my grading dilemma: I remembered my grandfather (believe it or not, we called him “Big Daddy”) teaching me how to do things and assigning me chores around the house. Often, these things were tedious and boring and I tried to rush through them as fast as I could so that I could move on to more interesting activities. When I hurried through my chores, Big Daddy always said that I was “half-assing” them and made me do them over. While I was doing them over, he would say, “You never seem to have enough time to do things right, but always have enough time to do them over.” I discovered that was the secret to my grading dilemma – do it right or do it over.

All of the assignments that I asked my students to do, except for their research papers and the tests, would be graded on a pass/ fail basis and that if

they failed them, I would require them to do them over. I realize that grading papers over and over again can be tedious and time consuming, but by employing this tactic, then any student who really didn't want to do the work would drop the class after a few weeks, and those that really wanted to learn would do the work. Paul Willis', *Learning To Labor*, discusses how working class students have the idea of "just getting by" culturally ingrained in them. I believe that instead of giving working class students a "C" for their efforts, and reinforcing the meritocracy and the hegemony, college professors should see this as a teaching opportunity. I raised the bar considerably for a "passing grade" and then graded as many papers as needed to make sure that my students were anything but "average."

I have noticed that over the last several years, more and more employers (at least in the Dallas area) are using an online application process for evaluating applicants. I wanted to use computer-based instruction in the classroom so that my working class students that might not use computers could get experience using them. I decided to set up a blog where my students could talk about the readings. In addition to giving students valuable experience using computers (they have to fill out forms and register to use the blog), this gave them an opportunity to say things that they might not want to say in class. When I gave the students instructions to sign up for the blog, I asked them to use a pseudonym so that no one would know who they were. I asked them to e-mail me their "blog name" so that I could give them credit for participating. By giving

the students an opportunity to participate in a public forum anonymously then they would be more inclined to speak their mind.

Writers such as Deborah Tannen and Fan Shen discuss differences in the way women communicate. Tannen focuses on the ways that women communicate, while Shen explores the difficulties Asian students have in questioning authority. However, because working class studies is so often ignored in academia, no one has published anything about how working class students (especially boys) are reluctant to say anything intelligent for fear of being labeled a brown nose, etc. By using these blogs, my working class students would have the freedom to speak their minds because their identities remained a secret. This also gave many of middle class students an opportunity to express the middle class view of poverty, allowing working class students to engage in a dialogue with them about their views. Because this forum is an anonymous one, I could count then on all of my students to be very candid in their responses with one another.

In addition to the blog assignments, I also asked each student to do a book review in the class. Not only did my students have to turn in a typed, double-spaced paper, but they also had to present the book to the class before we discussed it. I used this assignment primarily because I knew that more than ninety-nine percent of my students would never write a book review again. I know that sounds like a crazy reason for doing it, but I wanted my students to learn how to write in a strange genre. Moreover, I wanted them to figure out how to do it themselves, so I gave them resources so that they could find several

examples of what a book review looked like and then told them to use those examples as instructions on how to do it.

A book review is a very difficult assignment for a sophomore to do (especially when their instructor has raised the bar for what he believes is acceptable and requires students to rewrite papers until they are acceptable). The primary reason that I used this book review as an assignment is to show my students that there are very specific rules for the genre and that some of these rules are not obvious when one begins trying to write a review. I planned on using this book review as an example of how there are “hidden rules” to being middle class and upper class and that many working class students who are trying to transition in to the middle class have a difficult time figuring out what these rules are.

I decided that I would give two tests in the class – one over the first five books and another over the last five. The test would be administered in two parts – an identification and short answer portion in class and an essay test that the students could take home and complete. I felt that by structuring the tests this way, I could accommodate those who did not write well under pressure (after all we do teach process writing in composition) and help reduce the test anxiety as much as possible as well. I also provided my students with links to websites that offered suggestions for taking tests and alleviating test anxiety and required them to read them the week before the test was administered. Students were also provided with links to online study guides (if they were available). I did this for two reasons: 1) to give them a resource so that they could study which characters were in the novels and the important themes, symbols, and motifs

from the novels, and also 2) as a kind of “I know that you know these sites are out there” to help combat the temptation of plagiarizing these sites on the take home portion of the exam.

Because my students were sophomore literature students and had already passed English Composition, I felt that they should write a research paper for the course. I gave the students specific instructions for the research paper, asked them to submit a proposal before beginning the paper, and, like all of the other major assignments for the course, gave them several links to help them write the paper (I also gave them information about the writing center). In addition to asking students to write a research paper, I also set aside time for them to do presentations at the end of the semester so that they could share their work with the other students in the class. Because students (especially working class students) tend to take more ownership of their work if they have to present it to their peers in a public forum, I felt that these presentations would ensure that students did the best work that they possibly could. In addition, if students believe that their instructor and fellow students will be asking them questions about their research, then they are less likely to plagiarize their papers for fear of being caught in front of the entire class.

Conclusion:

Because more and more working class students are enrolling at colleges and universities, the faculty must learn to meet their educational needs. One of the ways these needs can be met is by teaching courses with working class themes.

Working class students and especially, adult students, can potentially be victims of the hidden injuries of class. Just as the faculty teaches courses that reflect African-American culture, Latino culture, and Gay and Lesbian culture, we must also teach courses that reflect the values and customs of the working class. If we do not do this, then we are only reinforcing the hegemony and perpetuating the status quo. Not only must we show our working class students that elements of their culture are valuable and life affirming, but we must also strive to assess the learning outcomes of those students using a model that is different from the traditional educational system. The hidden rules of the middle class are embedded in our pedagogy, assessment, and delivery. If we are to ever really educate our working class students and not just homogenize them into the hegemony of the middle class, we must address all of these things. This is a lofty aim and I do not believe that my course in American Literature came close to realizing that goal, but I do believe that it was at least a starting point – a starting point that might cause a crack in the barriers to higher education and help to democratize learning.

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