

“Signs of Life” in the High School Classroom: Analyzing Popular Culture to Provide Student Choice in Analytical Writing

A high school teacher defines semiotics and explains how asking students to analyze cultural objects and practices from ordinary life and popular culture can engage their interests, release their creativity, and improve their critical skills.

I became an English teacher because I love literature. I wanted to introduce students to the beauty and the promise of writing—the ways that literature can propel us into the depths of the human experience and help us to find our common humanity. However, within my first few years of teaching, I quickly learned that convincing students that literature is even relevant to their daily lives (let alone an artistic reflection of their deepest fears, desires, hopes, and dreams) was pretty darn challenging. My students would much rather be perusing Facebook to check on a crush’s status or shopping at the mall with their friends than reading *Jane Eyre*. As you might imagine (and perhaps have even had the unfortunate experience of witnessing firsthand), when students are not engaged in a literary text, their analysis of it reads like an invocation of the Fifth Amendment:

“Fitzgerald is one of the greatest writers of all time.”

“Huck and Jim become close because they have a lot in common.”

“Conflict is a central theme in *The Crucible*” (sometimes spelled “Crucable”).

Unengaged students pull out every generic sentence ever written about a work of literature (meticulously collected from SparkNotes, Pink Monkey, and older siblings). Their strategy, though, is unmistakable: I am going to say as little specific information as I can so that she doesn’t re-

alize that I never read/understood/thought about/cared for this book.

Don’t get me wrong—I have tried long and hard to get students to engage with literature through all manner of creative, “high-interest” strategies. (I still have neck injuries from hiding under my desk for an entire period before reading *Lord of the Flies* to initiate a conversation about human behavior in the absence of leadership.) At the end of each unit, though, the result was the same: boring abstractions marginally related to topics we discussed at length during class.

Now, what am I supposed to do as their writing teacher? My job is to help them progress as analytical writers, and I will be assessed as an educator based on their skills in this area. And my students will need to know how to think critically about a text, an idea, or a policy and write about it in clear, focused, insightful ways to be successful in college and beyond. If I start with “conflict is a central theme” and work forward from there, we’ll all be in our golden years before any of my students demonstrates anything resembling the necessary proficiency in this skill.

A Traditionalist’s Foray into the World of Pop Culture (Spoiler Alert: She Survives!)

After years of deriding, lambasting, belittling, and generally fretting over students’ choices in music and film and hobbies (and blaming these interests for their inability to grasp what I considered “real” art), I decided to try something new, some-

thing bold: I tried taking my students' choices in entertainment seriously. After all, to them, it was equally ridiculous for me to ask them to take my art seriously, so why not try on their tastes and see if it didn't kill me? Perhaps I could use it as evidence that broadening one's horizons does not, in fact, cause blindness, induce sleeplessness or frequent urination, result in drowsiness or dry mouth, preclude their potential to be cool, or have otherwise lethal consequences. Maybe I could even use it as a bargaining tool, a quid pro quo of sorts—"Hey, kids! I saw Chris Rock's stand-up, why don't you try to read Christina Rossetti's poetry?"

What I found, to my shock, was that Chris Rock was . . . good. He was smart, and not in a slapstick comedy sort of way—he was critical of our cultural ignorance, our attitude toward difference, our collective whitewashing of our nation's past. He used language in nuanced ways and a host of impressive narrative and rhetorical strategies to demonstrate his points. *Wait a second*, I thought. *Could I have students analyze this?*

Analyzing the Signs of Popular Culture (and Living to Tell the Tale)

As it turns out, I am not the first person to consider the possibility that the elements of popular culture might work as texts for critical analysis. In fact, there's a whole field of study on almost every university campus entitled Semiotics, in which students take courses in "cultural studies." In *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, editors Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon define semiotics as the study of "signs"; they note that "[a] sign is something, anything, that carries meaning" (8), and they encourage students to look critically at the signs of popular culture—such as fashion trends, consumer products, technological innovations, or television programming—because, they argue, an analysis of popular culture reveals pervasive, often invisible, ideological views that shape our society (12–13). In other words, cultural studies instructors ask students to critically analyze all manner of cultural practices, developments, and consumer products in much the same way that they'd analyze more traditional academic texts, such as novels.

I've managed to adapt this university-level course to the needs of my high school writers, and

I've found that cultural studies can actually be used in tandem with literature as a tool to help students find a footing in the complexities of the texts that I ask them to read. It can work as a kind of lens through which students can read a literary text to identify meaningful passages, characters, plot events, symbols, and themes. But, best of all, this approach has enabled me to give my students the opportunity to find their voices and write about the things that they care about with depth, complexity, and sophistication.

Getting Started

I start our journey into the field of cultural studies with a discussion about the differences between "high art" and "popular" (or "low") art. I ask students to list examples of "high art" (ballet, opera, classical music, Shakespearean plays, etc.) and of "low art" (video games, sitcoms, big-budget movies, etc.). In almost every class, students are defensive of what is often termed "low art." They argue passionately that *Family Guy* is real art and that creating a video game requires incredible amounts of artistic talent.

They speak, with powerful certainty, about the value of these kinds of cultural artifacts to our lives. The first time that I introduced popular culture in my classroom, I was blown away by the sight of students I saw as reticent and complacent about English class coming alive.

After this discussion, I define semiotics as "the study of signs" and we define the term *sign* together. At first, students start by talking about literal signs such as billboards and stop signs, but then they start to mention other, less concrete signs such as red lights or facial expressions. I then ask if we make assumptions about people based on how they choose to look, and I ask if the ways people look are signs. Students view pictures of a young man with dreadlocks, one with a buzz cut, and one in a mohawk, and we discuss the ways in which each style sends a message and is, thus, a sign.

Once I feel that students have a solid understanding of what I mean by the word *sign*, I

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explain that because consumer culture plays such a huge role in our lives, we would be remiss if we did not analyze artifacts of mass production as signs of larger cultural values or beliefs. To demonstrate that seemingly neutral objects carry meaning beyond their obvious uses, we work as a class to analyze an object that most students have never thought much about yet use all day long: the student desk, present in almost all classrooms. To avoid a cacophony of random ideas, I ask students to respond to the following questions, which are adapted from Maa-sik and Solomon’s questions in the introduction to *Signs of Life in the USA*. And so we set about analyzing the desk as a sign:

Step #1: Consider its context.

- With what things can this object be associated?
- Of what system(s) is it a part?
- How is it different than other models/types/styles?
- Is it part of a pattern? Are there other things like it?

My students say that the student desk is associated with classrooms, school, learning, and teachers, and they observe that it is a part of the system of school (both our local school district and the larger system of public schooling). In response to the question about the differences that they observe in this desk, they always note that the chair is attached to the table and that there’s a bar that

jams into their knees on the front of the desk. They talk about how uncomfortable it is and the ways in which it restricts their movements; crossing one’s legs is difficult to do, and leaning back in the desk is impossible. When I ask if there’s anything else that is uncomfortable or restrictive within the schooling system, they list bells, hall passes, hand-raising, prohibitions against cell phones and gum-chewing, dress codes, not being able to leave campus during school hours, and many other “restrictions” that the school places on students.

Step #2: Ask why.

- Why is this object structured/used/built as it is?

By this point, students realize that the desk is uncomfortable because, at least in part, it’s supposed to be: it’s designed to prevent falling asleep or daydreaming. Students eventually come to the realization that the desk’s construction assists the teacher in maintaining ultimate control in the classroom, and they note that teachers’ desks are usually constructed very differently. They notice that student desks are designed to be arranged in rows, usually face the teacher, and are designed to be moved easily—that’s why the chair and the desk are attached.

Step #3: Reflect on this sign’s significance.

- What does this object reveal about our cultural ideology/values/beliefs/fears/desires/wishes/regrets/accomplishments/etc.?

After participating in discussions of the first two steps, students are ready to make generalizations based on the specifics we’ve discussed. Most students say that the desk is a sign of the school system’s need for control over students; they say that it’s a sign of the lack of trust the schooling system has for students. Many students will also comment that the desk is a sign that the schooling system expects that all students will be exactly the same. They argue passionately that what works for one student may not work for all students, that the desk is just like tests and other assignments in that all students must do the same thing (i.e., fit into the same desk) regardless of their interests, strengths, or talents. In short, an analysis of the desk has students railing against an entire system that they never knew oppressed them, at least not consciously and in such detail. I point out their outrage and

remind the students that it came from something as seemingly neutral as a school desk. Students' outrage is evidence of the value of semiotics: it demonstrates the necessity of analyzing cultural objects and trends to get at the larger, more meaningful ideological implications inherent within them.

Writing in Cultural Studies (and Liking It!)

Once students have an understanding of how to analyze an object as a "semiotician" might, I want them to practice this kind of analysis independently. To create a set of common vocabulary, we define the following terms:

- Cultural *practices* are the ways people do particular things (such as watching television) in a given culture.
- Cultural *developments* are changes or trends that occur in a culture. Examples of cultural developments might be the fact that more people are reading books electronically or that '80s fashion is making a comeback.
- Cultural *objects* are single objects that are a part of larger cultural practices or developments (such as TiVo, Kindles, or jeggings).

I give students the following assignment to address in writing on their blogs, and I ask them to read and respond to other students' analyses:

The ultimate goal of this assignment is to consider a "cultural practice" or "cultural development" (or a single "cultural object" that is a part of a "cultural practice/development") and explain what it reveals about our culture/society's values, morals, fears, insecurities, desires, wishes, hopes, aspirations, needs, expectations, idiosyncrasies, strengths, weaknesses, and/or regrets. You may consider practices, developments, or objects in politics, technology, fashion, film, literature, social interactions, sports, education, the work place, speech, theater, art, or some other area of your choosing and consider its significance.

Because this initial cultural criticism assignment is not tied to a specific literary work, students can select topics that they feel are relevant to their own lives or in keeping with their own interests. Students' pieces always remind me that they don't hate to think or write—they just want the freedom

to think about and write on topics that are meaningful to them.

Much to my surprise and delight, I found that when I turned over topic selection to my students, many of them actually attempted to do the kind of close reading that I'd been teaching with little success through "passage analysis" assignments on literature. For example, in this excerpt, Bianca looks closely at the details of an SUV's construction:

If you are living in the heartland of suburbia, where the biggest "off-road obstacle" you are going to encounter is the speed bump at the entrance of Starbucks, do you need to drive a Hummer?

... The Hummer is an ideal car for the wealthy suburbanite: besides the usual car amenities, it has a leather interior, the latest sound, navigation, and entertainment systems, seat warmers, etc. Its glossy exterior can be customized, and somehow the car maintains its slight "military build" while simultaneously displaying the full aesthetic extent of its \$42,000 price tag. However, the most symbolically important feature of the Hummer is its size. The Hummer is not only large and imposing, but also high off the ground. When sitting in it, you gaze down at the other cars and people. A "have" not only has enough money to afford a Hummer, but once driving it, they now both literally and figuratively look down upon the "have nots." Whereas money, power, and influence are arguably intangible, the "haves" have now physically assumed a higher ranking.

Cultural criticism also encourages students to look for patterns in trends or behavior and then consider these details together to make a broader claim about the larger implications of these details, the skill that theme essays are used to teach.



Thomas Doefler

Essentially, in the theme essay, we're asking students to collect evidence and come up with a claim about its significance. In cultural criticism, though, the claims students make are genuinely interesting to them—and to me; I've read hundreds of essays that argue that fate and choice both play a role in Romeo's and Juliet's demise, but the excerpt below comes from the only essay I've ever read in my life on military trends in fashion. Claire analyzes this trend and claims that it reflects women's anxiety about our current economic woes:

Military green dresses, skirts, shirts and pants covered the racks in Macy's, and girls all around us were sporting this season's favorite "combat" boots. . . . I started to think about what this new style actually meant.

Combat boots are part of a uniform. They represent conformity, war, discipline and masculinity. Soldiers wore them because they were durable and protective, but, today, girls are wearing them with floral skirts and jean jackets. Perhaps this style is trying to make a statement, speaking through the leather and shoe laces. This season's message is simple: women are strong, bold, courageous, and they persevere. Girls today, like in the '80s, can stand their ground and are capable of much more than they are given credit for. In heels, a woman can only go so far, but in boots made for walking, she is unstoppable.

In the 1940's when men were overseas fighting a war, women were at home running the factories and keeping the country alive. These women, who worked in the factories or with the Red Cross, wore uniforms. They pulled their hair back, dressed like the men, and got their hands dirty. The women of this period proved to their country and to themselves that they were just as capable as men and could be much more than housewives.

Today, the country is in a recession, and men and women are out of work and trying to make ends meet. Maybe this sudden military influence in women's clothes is trying to subconsciously remind the women of this country that we *can* do it. The green dresses are saying, "We are strong" and the tall black boots are screaming, "We can make it happen."

Many of my students' responses demonstrate that they know how to create a voice and make informed and effective narrative and rhetorical choices—all skills that I doubted they had the abil-

ity to master when we analyzed only literature. For example, it wasn't until I started having students analyze culture that I discovered that Christian had a fantastic sense of humor, but analyzing literature didn't allow him to showcase this writing strength. In the excerpt below, he analyzes his new Droid smartphone:

Just when I thought my life could not become more technologically connected, I tore open the smallest gift I could find under the tree on Christmas morning to realize I was sadly mistaken. A Droid. Now all the evils of our world, all the social vacuums of our society, and all the technological time-sucking vampires I needed were right here at my very finger tips. So much more potential for procrastination, so much more time to play games at home, in the car and during class, so much more time to stay in touch with all my bffs. Omg. More time away from my preexisting stack of responsibilities, just what I need.

The gift was just as awesome as it was daunting. . . . I plugged in the charger and pressed the power button. I immediately felt stronger, as if droid chemicals were coursing through my veins, increasing my muscle mass tenfold. Fifteen minutes later, after a few phone calls and screaming directed towards the Verizon Wireless automated phone machines, the wondrous creature had been activated.

After just a week, it has proved to be just as much a burden as a blessing. I've already been yelled at during class for playing Angry Birds. But it's not entirely my fault. The Droid has some sort of hypnotic power that requires that I pull it out of my pocket every few minutes to check on her and make sure she's doing alright. The battery life is terrible and my wall outlet is currently working double time compared to what it was a few weeks ago. And to top it off, Facebook is now a touch screen tap away. It could not get any worse than that.

The purpose of this initial cultural criticism assignment is for students to think critically about a practice, development, or object and analyze it. I've found that giving students the freedom to analyze objects and practices from their world actually makes them curious about the objects and practices of other worlds, for example, the cultural practices or objects within the literary texts we're reading. We've analyzed the soldiers' objects in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the practice of hosting and visiting in the *Odyssey*, and the rituals of dating in *Pride and Prejudice*. The possibilities are endless.

Why Semiotics Makes Sense

When I think about the fact that, for centuries, academics and amateurs alike have studied literature because it is a mirror of culture and societal values, problems, issues, ideas, discoveries, fears, desires, and relations, isn't that also a reason to study other cultural forms as well? As students of literature, aren't we, by default, students of culture? As such, we should not be neglecting the myriad cultural forms that exist in our world today in addition to literature—theatrical performances, films, music, art, dance, social networking sites, smartphones, research archives, sitcoms, video games, etc. Each of these media, each in its own way, reveals something about our culture and about the ideological perspectives that shape our society. Isn't part of my job as teacher to help my students to become skilled analysts of these media so that they can become adept at reading our world in nuanced and useful ways? Isn't that, after all, why I teach literary analysis in the first place?

Analyzing popular culture also lends authenticity to the practice of analysis. A parent once asked me a valid question after my Back-to-School Night talk: "What exactly do you mean when you say that you want students to come up with 'original' theses? Scholars have been analyzing most of these texts for decades, even centuries, so how is my 16-year-old supposed to come up with something new to say?" Fair enough. For writing to be meaningful, writers must feel that their task is bringing new knowledge into readers' lives. We don't want students to feel that they are struggling to find an answer to a question that's long been answered or resolved.

Letting Go

Now, I admit that a small part of me died a sudden and irreversible death when I first referred publicly to Ke\$ha as an "artist" (what artist inserts a dollar sign into her name?), but, in the end, I am thankful that I had the courage to venture into the realm of popular culture because it has transformed the way that I view my classes and my role as an educator. I think that our discomfort in analyzing popular culture is largely a function of the centuries-old debate about the definition of "art": What does it do? Who is it written/performed for? Toward what end?

As with any approach that posits writing as the center of the curriculum, some great books will go unread. But, at the end of my time with my students, what matters is that they have grown as thinkers and as writers. They can always go back and read *Jane Eyre*, but the chance to become a successful writer in my English class only lasts a year. For this reason, cultural criticism has become a cornerstone of my teaching practice and will remain so as long as it continues to help students do meaningful writing work in my classroom. 

As students of literature, aren't we, by default, students of culture?

Works Cited

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

"Unlocking the Underlying Symbolism and Themes of a Dramatic Work" invites students to explore objects relevant to a character from Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*, such as Mama's plant, to unlock the drama's underlying symbolism and themes. Students explore character traits and participate in active learning as they work with the play. Students use an interactive drama map to explore character and conflict, and then write and share character-item poems. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/unlocking-underlying-symbolism-themes-272.html>