

Humanities Out There Lesson 1: Interpreting Symbols

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to a way of interpreting literary symbolism that is more sophisticated than the one typically taught in the high school curriculum.¹ This should help them with *The Scarlet Letter* and other difficult literary texts, and with the transition to college-level critical thinking.

After completing this lesson, students will be able to recognize visual and literary symbols, form interpretive hypotheses about visual and literary symbols, support interpretive hypotheses with evidence, and evaluate interpretive hypotheses through discussion.

Students' prior preparation:

1) Students have studied the origins of American culture, law, and literature from 1600-1800... this would include the Puritans, encounters with American Indians, the Revolution, the Constitution and the early years of the United States

2) Do not assume students absorbed that content all that well, and do not assume that they know *anything* about the cultural or historical context of North America in 1650, 1850, or 2006. On the other hand, don't be surprised if they do know some stuff, and never talk to them like they're stupid. They're not.

3) Students have learned what symbolism is in a rudimentary sense. They did an exercise where they brought an item of personal significance into class and explained what it symbolized to them.

4) Students have taken a pre-writing test on Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Minister's Black Veil," which uses a type of symbolism very similar to that used in *The Scarlet Letter*.²

5) Students have begun reading *The Scarlet Letter*, possibly up to Chapter 5. I think they pretty much skipped the "Custom House" introduction.

Things you should do to prepare for Wednesday

1) Read this packet thoroughly and make sure you are familiar with everything in it. Bring it to the school on Wednesday because you'll need it for cribnotes.

2) Read the first 5 chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*. You can skim or skip the loooong "Custom House" introduction if you read the following footnote.³

¹ The students' textbook defines a symbol as "a person, a place, a thing, or an event that has meaning in itself and that also stands for something more than itself." This definition isn't so bad... it's generic, but this is obviously best demonstrated by example anyway. The textbook also introduces a very fucked up distinction between "public symbols" and "personal symbols"... as if public symbols cannot have personal meanings, or personal symbols are somehow chosen in abstraction of their meaning to one's social group. Thankfully, they probably haven't actually learned this.

² Long story short, a Puritan minister very similar in description to Arthur Dimmesdale wears a black veil over his face and it freaks out his parishioners. Perhaps it is a symbol of his own sin, perhaps of sin in some more universal sense. It has a tendency to reveal sin in others. Pretty much like the scarlet letter. Students were asked to speculate why he was wearing the black veil.

³ Summary of "The Custom House" - Hawthorne's great-great-great whatever was a judge in the Salem Witch trials. Hawthorne considers the Puritans both "good and evil" and thinks they are still influential in his own life, the lives of other Massachusetts residents, and other Americans in general: "strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine." That is, both the good aspects (e.g. utopianism, social contract law) and the bad aspects (e.g. intolerance, persecution) of Puritan history are a crucial *inheritance*, a past that can't be avoided. Like original sin is both a good and evil inheritance according to Christian theology. Hawthorne feels stuck in Salem, Mass., his birthplace and current residence, but still chooses to live there. Just like Hester will. Hawthorne finds the scarlet letter as well as a short

- 3) Read the essay I sent to the listserv last week if you haven't: <http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/sb1.html>
- 4) If you haven't already posted to the noteboard for the week, please do. Or maybe you want to post again now that you've got the lesson: <http://eee.uci.edu/toolbox/noteboard/index.php?board=4380>
- 5) Make sure that you've got a carpool set up by the time you leave today. Be on time to your carpool and aim to arrive at the school 15 minutes early. Tuesday people, I've got a list of extra carpool slots from the meeting yesterday.
- 6) Make sure I gave you your parking passes and campus badges.

Other things to know about students:

- 1) Skill level for reading, writing, etc. will vary widely from student to student.
- 2) High school students and second language learners *can* figure out difficult concepts, but it will take them more time than it would take you to process and apply them. Be patient. The hardest part of teaching is keeping your mouth shut.
- 3) Some students may be insecure/defensive about their school performance and language usage.
- 4) Some students would rather be quietly obedient rather than risk embarrassment. It may take a couple of weeks to draw them out, but if you communicate that it's OK to make guesses and be wrong, that it's OK to disagree with you, etc. you can expedite this process.
- 5) Almost all of your students were raised in traditional Catholic households. This will inform their attitudes about gender norms and various political issues. The other effect this will have is more complex to explain. Basically, Central American cultures more clearly demarcate formal interactions from informal interactions than U.S. culture, where we shift freely from formal to informal. (Just think about the way I talk to you as an example of this.) The students may not quite know what to make of you. Are you a teacher (formal) or a student (informal)? Most teachers overcompensate one way or the other. Eventually they will figure out that you occupy some sort of gray area.
- 6) Students will free associate school concepts to pop culture or personal experience. Many of these associations are quite tenuous and may seem like a waste of time. Just recognize that this is actually a cognitive process. This is how you learned to be a student too.
- 7) You are *very* unlikely to deal with overt misbehavior. As we've discussed, our class could well be the most fun thing they do all day. But don't be surprised if students try to test your boundaries in more subtle ways. The main tension will be over "on task" vs. "off task"... again, there is a productive gray area. This is what teaching is all about.
- 8) Students will inevitably ask you for personal information because they'll identify with you more easily than their regular teachers. They'll also be curious about what college is and what a college student is. We *want* them to be curious about that.

Where to draw the line if students ask for personal info:

- 1) If it makes you uncomfortable.
- 2) If it might make your other students uncomfortable.

account of Hester's story in a moldy old drawer in his office at the Salem Customhouse. So the story is grounded in fact (supposedly) but he will embellish the details as he imagines them. The fundamental conflict in the story will be between intellect and emotion. The central theme of all of Hawthorne's stories is that intellect alone becomes evil.

- 3) If you think the student doesn't actually care and is just trying to delay the lesson.
- 4) If you haven't completed the basic goals of whatever activity you're doing.

Try not to communicate the following without meaning to

- 1) H.O.T. is not a charity. It is a shared intellectual enterprise.
- 2) H.O.T. is not a dumbed down version of the UCI college curriculum. We use the same concepts and skills that Aaron uses in teaching literature to college students. We customize them for the particular outlook and interest of high school students.
- 3) We have no sacred knowledge by virtue of being college students that these poor bastards are lucky to have access to. We're not here to free their minds, enlighten them, or save them. We are here to *exchange* knowledge and to guide them in developing their own skills.

0:00-0:05 Aaron's PowerPoint

The purpose of the PowerPoint is to teach students that symbols are not stable. In other words, one symbol can change in meaning over time, across different cultures, and in different situations and contexts.

- 1) Morning session will have access to the classroom before school starts. Afternoon session will be wedging in between bells.
- 2) Ms. Wood (a.k.a. Cindyann) will introduce us to the students.
- 3) I will dim the lights and show a brief PowerPoint slideshow.
- 4) The main example I will use is the swastika, which is used by cultures all over the world as a symbol of good luck, the divine, etc. For the Nazis, and for those versed in European history, it has taken on a rather different symbolism since the 1930s.
- 5) I will bridge from the students' prior concept of symbols and enumerate the three main traps that college students fall into interpreting symbols.
- 6) I will then outline a better process for interpreting symbols

0:05-0:20 Group Exercise: Interpreting Visual Symbols

The goal of this exercise is for students to put into practice the idea that symbols may have more than one obvious meaning, and that they need to form arguments to support their interpretation of a symbol's meaning.

- 1) First we will divide into nine groups. This may be somewhat chaotic. Your group should have four students. Make sure each student gets a worksheet. We may extend the groups to spaces outside of the classroom in the future, but probably not today.
- 2) I will put up a slide of a very ambiguous road sign on the PowerPoint.
- 3) Each student will freewrite silently for 2-3 minutes. They should write a hypothesis of what the symbol means and as many points supporting this hypothesis as they can think of. There are answer blanks on the worksheet. Be patient, but if they're all done writing, move on.
- 4) You may need to give an example of how one would form a hypothesis and supporting points. Try to think of something totally ridiculous so you don't step on their toes.

- 5) After the freewrite, each student should be given the chance to explain his/her hypothesis. At this point, just praise the students for following the procedure correctly.
- 6) Once everyone has gone, you will now open up a discussion about which hypothesis is the strongest interpretation. Let this discussion go pretty much wherever it wants, but make sure you steer it toward a group vote. Don't bother to break a tie.
- 7) Be sure to emphasize that the losing interpretations are not necessarily bad, but lack the strong supporting evidence of the winning interpretation. Some interpretations *are better than others*, but this is always subject to further evidence and reinterpretation.
- 8) If time permits, I'll put up a slide of a second road sign, and you can repeat the process.

0:20-0:40 Group Exercise: Interpreting Literary Symbols in *The Scarlet Letter*

The goal of this exercise is to transfer the skills gained in interpreting visual symbols (previous exercises) to the more difficult task of interpreting literary symbols.

- 1) There are dozens of interesting symbolic events, characters, images, etc. in the novel, but the three most important ones early in the novel are probably the rosebush, the Letter, and Pearl. Since there will be nine groups in each session, three groups will discuss each of the three symbols. Let's be sure to divide these right now.
- 3) Passages and page numbers can be found on the worksheet.
- 4) Use the same procedure as the previous exercise. The freewrite will take longer because the students will have to read a paragraph of Hawthorne mumbo-jumbo. Be sure to help students with vocabulary, story context, historical context, etc. if necessary.
- 5) Appropriate types of evidence for supporting an interpretive hypothesis are phrases/sentences in the text, stuff that happens elsewhere in the book, historical context, similar ideas in other books they've read, relevant personal experience, etc.
- 6) You may have to nudge them along. We'll brainstorm some of our own interpretations right now.
- 7) Make sure that you specifically assign one group member to read to the class in the next exercise. It should *not* be the same student who came up with the 'winning' interpretation.
- 8) If your group has extra time, move on to one of the other two passages.

0:40-0:50 Group Report: Interpreting Literary Symbols in *The Scarlet Letter*

The purpose of this exercise is to solidify the work that has gone on in the small groups by having students speak aloud to the class and listen to one another's interpretations. Since each interpretation has already been affirmed by four people, in theory we should get a number of differing interpretations, but each one fairly strong. Students will also see how the other two symbolic passages were interpreted according to the process that they used for their own passage.

- 1) One member of each group will read the group's 'winning' interpretation. Don't worry if they mumble or read mechanically; the point isn't really in the listening. I assume the most confident speakers will volunteer, so be sure to make a different student present when we do this again next week, etc.
- 2) These need to be one minute or less or we're not going to beat the bell. Make sure your students are prepared to present concisely.