

Humanities Out There Lesson 4: Comparative Analysis

Last week, your students imitated Hawthorne's allegorical method by modernizing *The Scarlet Letter*. The purpose of this week's lesson is to extend that exercise by presenting them with a recent movie that roughly approximates the novel's plot and its three central characters. Thus students will now analyze rather than create. This allows us to include some much-needed instruction in expository writing.

After completing this lesson, students will be able to perform a cross-historical and cross-generic comparison by identifying key similarities and differences, formulating an argumentative thesis, and gathering evidence to support this thesis.

Pedagogical Issues to Discuss:

1) Multiple intelligences.

I think we covered the theory and its limitations quite well on the noteboard. Most of you agreed that it was important to broaden the scope of teaching methods to suit the needs of students, but you felt Gardner's conclusions were too sweeping. Thus you thought an English class should by definition emphasize verbal and logical skills, even if it uses visual, kinetic, and other sensory stimuli in the course of doing so. I agree. What I am wondering is if you have any suggestions for altering the format of the workshop. Not the content; what I mean is, what other sort of tactics can we add to powerpoint, text analysis, and group discussion? I've been wracking my brain trying to think of game formats and I'm drawing a blank so far. Alternately, what kind of modifications to our tactics would be appropriate for your particular students, but maybe not for everyone?

2) Linking specific student interests to course content:

As far as my group goes, I don't think I've spent enough time getting to know them, but I definitely will next week. I like my group, they're nice kids, but they aren't very confident of their abilities. Sometimes I just think they're bored, one of the guys just tunes out when he doesn't understand. The others really seem to be trying but can't think abstractly. I don't think anyone's taught to do this in high school. They're more concerned about getting the right answer, and not sounding "stupid", rather than applying themselves to the lesson and creating original material. Felipe is definitely the more talkative member of my group. He has smart answers for everything I ask him, but he definitely tries to get the material and feels accomplished when he does. He has told me that the only thing that interests him is art, he wants to be a tattoo artist, and that writing just isn't his thing. It is clear he has a certain kind of intelligence, but he doesn't see art as anything but pictures. I explained that writing creatively, as they were asked to do in the last assignment, was another form of art, simply describing the images in his head with words. I think that these exercises do help the kids, but perhaps the way I'm executing them is not so much. Once I find out what all the kids "intelligences" or interests are, I can refer to them when explaining the material, so they can see how it might apply to them.

3) Establishing appropriate/effective modes of authority:

So, the kids, everything went fine. Adolfo tried to do math homework when I started the discussion. I say "tried" because I called him on it by saying, dude, what's up, you don't wanna

talk to me anymore? He said “sorry” and put it away. I KNOW that could have gone differently and badly if I had someone else’s kids in the group, but luckily, I can sense the respect they have for my authority, so I used it.

4) A su gusto...

Things you should do to prepare for Wednesday

- 1) Read this packet thoroughly and make sure you are familiar with everything in it.
- 2) Read the student writing samples I gave you and write comments on them.¹ We will do this in the staff meeting if time permits.
- 3) Read chapters 18-21 of *The Scarlet Letter*. We’ll barely refer to them in our exercise this week, but as always it will be helpful for your own familiarity with Hawthorne’s themes, style, plot, etc.
- 4) Go to <http://video.google.com> and type in “santa ana school news.” Watch as many of these PSAs as you can stand. I especially recommend the September 22nd episode, which features mariachis, the mayor, a Spike Lee lookalike who might be retarded but might also be a good parent, awkward WASPs, a street fair in the downtown area close to our school, and much more. As you watch the videos, try to analyze the way the school district is trying to characterize itself.
- 4) For those who are not posting to the noteboard weekly, your 2 credits are in danger. If you don’t like my topics, I have absolutely no issue with you writing your own. So either a) you get really involved in the next two posts, b) I force you to write a much longer final paper, or c) you fail.
- 5) Thank you for arriving promptly last week. It had a very positive effect on the whole lesson.

0:00-0:12 Aaron’s Video

The purpose of the video is to establish the comparison that the students will use in the writing exercise. More broadly, the purpose is to illustrate how certain themes and techniques retain continuity even across different historical periods and artistic genres.²

¹ Here are some tips for commenting on student writing if you’ve never done it before. First, always be encouraging. This doesn’t mean always be ‘nice’; it’s all too obvious if you’re trying to sugarcoat a negative comment, and students find it patronizing. Try to achieve an even mix of appreciative comments and advice/criticism. Use common sense to control your tone; perhaps you could phrase things in the conditional mood. Wouldn’t it work well if you used some rhetorical questions? I think that if you invoke the first person pronoun, it would sound friendlier and less vindictive. Second, resist the urge to overemphasize minor grammatical errors, especially punctuation and spelling. These are important, but not as important as word choice, clear syntax, and having a clue what you’re talking about. Third, try to limit the number of comments you make. Research studies show that once you exceed more than four or so on a page, it becomes completely useless. The most important comment you make is the ‘terminal’ comment, in which you use 1-3 sentences to sum up the student’s achievement and the areas they can improve or revise.

² If you’ve taken one of my classes, you’ve probably seen me use this same technique. I call it the ‘reverse Trojan horse.’ First you use a modern medium like film to make something older and more alienating like *The Scarlet Letter* more fun and accessible. That’s the Trojan horse. It keeps students awake and teaches them basic content coverage, but by itself it’s completely pointless. It fails to address this question: why are students reading old books in the first place? When you reverse the Trojan horse, you use the old books as a way to teach students methods of analysis and criticism that they can then use for more important things like interpreting the cultural and political

1) The movie is called *Quinceanera*. It's about a Mexican-American teenager who lives in Echo Park and has a falling out with her family when she becomes pregnant. I've taken the 90 minute movie and reduced it as much as I could (to 12 minutes), but I'm still biting into a good bit of your teaching time and for that I apologize.

2) The basic theme of the full movie is something like 'judge not lest ye be judged.' I've cut out sub-plots involving the protagonist's gay cousin and her kindly uncle being evicted from his apartment. I've also left the pregnancy in some suspense; it turns out that Magdalena actually did not have intercourse with Herman. Due to their rather literal understanding of sex ed, he made what Borat would call a "sex explosion" on her thigh, whence occurred the unlikely but nonetheless statistically possible scenario of a stray sperm slipping past the goalie. None of that is particularly relevant to the clips the students will see, which emphasize her vulnerability, her minister father's rather un-Christian reaction, and the social double standard that stigmatizes her and leaves her boyfriend scot free. You'll recognize the basic Hester-Dimmesdale-Chillingsworth template, although *Quinceanera* is obviously not based on *The Scarlet Letter* and has some key differences.

0:12-0:25 Group Exercise: Similarities and Differences

The purpose of this exercise is for students to identify key similarities and differences between *The Scarlet Letter* and *Quinceanera*.

1) Use your own judgement about your group to structure this exercise. It might be better to begin with individual writing, but then again maybe not. It should lead to discussion at some point. The main thing to discuss is which of the similarities and differences are actually important, and which ones are just incidental. Don't let them look at the back of the worksheet. It's just going to confuse them at this point. Unless your discussion completely stalls because it's clear that the students have no clue about the basic scenario of the novel. In that case it might be helpful.

2) I hope this exercise will break down some of your students' defenses and get them to connect Hawthorne with their own world. This may lead the discussion in unexpected directions, so remember my advice about productive vs. unproductive tangents. Then again, I've been wrong before, so you may need to nudge the students a bit to identify connections between the two stories that may seem obvious to you and me.

0:25-0:40 Group Exercise: Thesis Construction

The purpose of this exercise is for students to practice a basic formula for developing an argumentative thesis.

1) If any pedagogical technique has stood the test of time, it is this five-step, which bears the ominous name of 'Sheridan Baker Thesis Machine.' The first two steps emphasize the distinction between a topic and a thesis, which is a specific argument about a topic. The third step insists that a thesis must be justified instead of merely stated. The fourth step makes the

messages they are constantly bombarded with in their daily lives. Why not analyze modern media directly? A good college will have classes that do that, but within many curricula it can be difficult or impossible. It offends students, their parents, and their lawyers. I guess that's a modified version of last week's defense for allegory.

thesis – and thus the paper it organizes – less boring, by adding a qualification. No issue worth writing about is so simple that there is only one side to it. The fifth step reminds the student that a thesis is created to advance an argument, which means that it must be possible to disagree with it. Otherwise, how could anyone argue about it? This is why “This moisturizer really feels soothing on my skin” is not a good thesis; its reverse would be “This moisturizer does not feel soothing on your skin.” And you don’t know what my skin feels like. You asshole.

2) This is may strike you as overly mechanical. Well, that’s why it’s called a Machine. I would certainly fail a student who wrote this way in Writing 39. At the same time, this is exactly the same approach that sophisticated academic writers use; they just do it with a bit more panache. We’ll save panache for another lesson.

0:40-0:50 Group Exercise: Gathering Evidence

The purpose of this exercise is for students to choose a particular angle of comparison from the scenes/passages I’ve provided, and to analyze specific text in order to find evidence in support of their thesis.

1) This is a ‘back pocket’ activity. There might not be any time for it, but if you have extra time this is what you should start doing. Later in the week, the students will write their thesis into a longer assignment that we will read and comment on.

2) I’m not 100% sure what the prompt for the aforementioned essay will be. Obviously it will begin with a comparative analysis thesis, which the students have now written. From there, I suppose that the body paragraphs of the essay would provide evidence for the thesis by giving textual examples. You’ll probably have time to discuss how a thesis is the ground floor for an essay, and how you build up from there by giving specific evidence in body paragraphs for the claims made in the thesis. You might also have time to refer to the comparative quotations I set up on the back of the worksheet. Don’t feel the need to look at more than one set. For instance, focus on the ‘baby daddy’ comparison or the ‘neighbors’ comparison. I just want them to know it’s there and know how they might use it.

2) As you already know, many of your students have meager textual analysis skills. The good thing is, they will feel more comfortable with the contemporary bilingual dialogue of the movie than they do with Hawthorne’s impenetrable (to them) 19th-century and pseudo 17th-century prose. It may help to define the term ‘analysis.’³

Follow Up Exercises for Ms. Wood’s Students

1) Bring your thesis to life by writing a full-length comparative analysis. Start with the argument you made in your thesis. You said that although *Quinceanera* and *The Scarlet Letter* share some basic similarities, they are, in the end, significantly different because blah blah blah. **Or** you said that although *Quinceanera* and *The Scarlet Letter* do have some obvious differences, all things considered, their similarities are more significant because of blah blah blah. The basic form of

³ It comes from the science of chemistry and means something like, breaking things down into their constituent elements. Think of it as a process of digestion; your mind has to eat a big slab of text and then separate the nutritious parts from the waste matter. The homophony with ‘anal’ is interesting but has no etymological basis that I’m aware of.

your essay is now in place. First you'll need an introduction paragraph that begins with an attention 'hook', then states your thesis, then previews the evidence you will discuss in the rest of the essay. Then you'll need one or two body paragraphs citing specific evidence of the differences you mentioned, and one or two body paragraphs citing specific evidence of the similarities you mentioned. (Whichever one is your real point, put that one last.) Then wrap up with a brief conclusion restating your thesis and adding one new thought or question.

2) Discuss the following questions in class. *Quinceanera* highlights a social 'double standard.' *From a biological standpoint, Magdalena and her boyfriend Herman are both equally responsible for her pregnancy. But from a social standpoint, she is shunned and ridiculed by her family, friends, and neighbors, whereas he maintains his innocence and is able to completely evade any consequences. Do you feel that the double standard in the movie accurately depicts the way things work in your family, your community, or the U.S. in general? Why or why not? Is it significant that the same theme occurred to Hawthorne in 1850 and the movie directors in 2006, even though they were depicting different time periods and two different cultural environments? Or is this just a coincidence? Explain.*

3) Write a brief answer to these questions, then ask the same question to your UCI tutor. *What is your most difficult obstacle to going to college? What is your strongest motivation to overcome this and other obstacles and go?*

4) Make a scarlet letter and wear it to school next Wednesday. It can be any letter of the alphabet and you can make it any way you like, but it should pin or stick to your shirt. It should also stand for something you've done in the past that you feel bad about. **Or** something that others hold against you even if you think it's no big deal. Of course, given what you know about the complex nature of symbols, it could stand for many things at the same time. You are not permitted to tell other students in the class what your letter stands for, or Ms. Wood will give you another letter... a big, fat "F" on your grade.