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UNCOVERING THE MYTHOLOGY OF SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE
ARTS: A BARTHESIAN APPROACH TO ENGLISH STUDIES

By

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ABSTRACT

UNCOVERING THE MYTHOLOGY OF SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE

ARTS: A BARTHESIAN APPROACH TO ENGLISH STUDIES

By

Jeremy Francis

The discipline of secondary English language arts faces inevitable

change in coming decades as notions and definitions of literacy

change. As English teachers and scholars move into an undefined era,

it is essential to examine the materials, methods, and practices that

have become solidified into the profession as "natural" or simply go-

without-saying. To this end, this dissertation presents the inquiry

method developed by Roland Barthes designed to analyze the aspects

of daily life and culture that are assumed to be true or beyond

question within a given society. Three myths within English language

arts are analyzed as part of the dissertation: The literary practice of

New Criticism, the composition institution of the five-paragraph essay,

and the practice of teaching vocabulary.

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Introduction

Early in my career as a high school English teacher I began to become unsettled in my practice. Everything was going swimmingly in my career: I had a great job, attentive students, wonderful colleagues and administrators, supportive parents, and a youthful zeal for the practice of teaching. A series of questions, arising from my practice, began to plague me, at times debilitating my passion and confidence. The perpetual "why?" that I persistently asked all through childhood, effectively maddening my parents, Sunday school teachers, babysitters and educators had come back to haunt me: I was the becoming the victim of my own skepticism. So much of the activity that preoccupied the time and attention of English teachers seemed to be either a useless, vestigial act of superstition or an orchestrated act of motivated mimesis. What was even more confounding to me was the fact that in a country, of which I had lived in three distinct regions in three different states, could be so entirely homogeneous in its practices. English looked nearly the same in Northern California, Texas, and Colorado while simultaneously people spoke different dialects with different accents, had different family structures, had different religious beliefs, and observed myriad other regionally distinct differences. It was uncertain, at times, if I was in a profession or a devoted religious community. Nearly everyone did the same

activities, believed the same interpretations of canonical texts, and used the same assignments.

I wish I could say that my personal and professional reflection was organized, systematic, and interrogative, but it wasn't. The development of my critical mind toward my chosen profession was piece-meal, developing one step at a time and largely in response to stimuli outside of my control. In the course of teaching, certain events would arise that either didn't make sense or seemed slightly illogical. As a primary example, during my student teaching experience at a suburban Denver high school, I saw the entire English department carrying out what seemed to be useless yet uniform teaching and assessing of vocabulary. One of my cooperating teachers allowed the vocabulary to occupy three-fifths of his class time, allowing the entire 50 minute class period on Monday to presenting the new words, the entire day on Wednesday to do a worksheet practicing the words, and then an entire period of Friday to take a quiz on the words. The practice made little sense to me (or the students), as the heavy focus on learning words to prepare them for an SAT test that was two years away seemed more like an effective time-killer than effective pedagogy. With very little knowledge about the scholarly debates surrounding the teaching, learning, and performance of vocabulary related tasks, I was still able to align myself with those who saw this

custom as a great waste of time oriented toward producing good quiz takers, not effective users of language. This is one example among many. And honestly, at times I was willing to adopt a problematic or disagreeable pedagogical practice to make my life easier. Planning was, and still is, very hard work. Having to plan two scintillating lessons a week is much easier than five.

But nevertheless, what began as lingering questions and doubts has now flourished into a larger, more systematic investigation into how the way what appeared to be natural at first look is the clear result of other forces.

Chapter One

Impending Change

The discipline of English language arts is currently standing on the brink of large-scale changes, for good or ill. In recent years, various stakeholders have paid increasing attention to the politics of defining literacy, language, English, and the other words and concepts associated with the discipline of English language arts in the United States. This dissertation will present, in the coming pages, that English language arts is in a situation where change is inevitable. However, the possible directions and forms of change are radically different, at times cooperative and at other times antagonistic to the myriad positions available in the debate over the future of literacy.

The changes of which I speak are perhaps summarized best by the literacy educators and researchers called the New London Group (1996) when they comment on the changing direction of literacy and what it might mean to be literate in the 21st century. According to their analysis, traditional modes of literacy, specifically those codified in our current model of English language arts, do an insufficient job of preparing students for the modern realities embodied by the demands of a postmodern society and post-industrial, service/information based economy. The New London Group cites a shift from an older industrial/capitalist model, which was based on an assembly line, task

oriented workforce, to a newer model of what Piore & Sable (1984) call "PostFordism" or what Gee (1994) calls "Fast Capitalism." The New London Group (1996) continues: "our job [as literacy educators] is not to produce docile, compliant workers. Students need to develop the capacity to speak up, to negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives" (p. 67). Additionally, notions of literacy in non-academic and non-professional capacities have changed as well, including community (Brandt, 2001), anthropologically (Scribner & Cole, 1981), and in socially specific contexts (Street, 1984). The massive influx of technology has changed the shape of the ways in which people interact in their literate lives. Literacy, as a concept, has become far more complicated than older notions of the ability to read and write in traditionally sanctioned settings, such as schools.

At the same time as scholars and teachers are redefining the boundaries of literacy, other groups are trying to turn back the clock on literacy by raising the stakes associated with the traditional modes of literacy. These conservative efforts actively work to exclude many of the new conceptions of texts, including multimodal and multi-literate frameworks articulated by researchers and theorists (e.g. Kress, 2003). Pieces of legislation such as No Child Left Behind and the increasing network of local, state, and federal educational

mandates have been working to narrow the discussion of literacy not only to those skills that can easily and inexpensively be tested, but also to those literacies that have been traditionally valued in previous decades (Kohn, 2000). Miles Myers (1996), in his book chronicling American literacy instruction since 1660, cites that in 1993, 75% of seniors in high school met the language arts performance expectations at the "basic level," perhaps the highest rate of traditional literacy ever experienced in our country. While this is a monumental feat, Myers then reveals that the standards that the students achieved were originally "outlined in the nation's standards projects of 1917-1918" (p. 1). While it is certainly true that most of the functional literacy skills deemed important after the first World War are still salient today, Myers concurs with the New London Group that the concept of literacy has become plural, embodying multiple literacies, and has expanded into many modes beyond printed text. These new textual modes and media demand an increased attention to how information and texts should be approached in an era where the environments in which literate activities are carried out expands exponentially. For example, new languages and literacies are necessary to interact with computers and other digital media, including programming languages, formatting languages, graphical interfaces, and other ways in which traditional notions of language are complicated through evolving practice.

As English educators and practicing teachers approach these impending changes, it is imperative to employ a wide variety of resources to help interrogate the different methods, stances, pedagogies, curricula, and ideologies frequently undertaken in secondary English language arts. In short, what needs to happen now is to revisit our past, our heritage, in order to better articulate a positive direction for the future. An uncritical, blind acceptance of placeholder methods, pedagogy, and content arrangement severely limits the discipline's ability to envision and conceptualize a future different from the inherited set of assumptions passed down through generations. At this crossroads, wherein any move is a move in a new and different direction, the method I will explain and employ will prove to be particularly useful to teachers and scholars in the fields of English education and secondary English language arts. I will present a concept to help describe the inherited assumptions

This dissertation will provide an articulation of, an argument for, and a demonstration of the method of inquiry developed by Roland Barthes called Mythology. Mythology, or the analysis of what Barthes termed *myths*, presents a way of reading the way that signs operate in the social world, often in ways that go unnoticed by traditional methods of inquiry. In this, the "reader" of culture is enabled to understand the way that systems act in order to create meaning on a

variety of levels, which I will discuss in subsequent sections. Thus, Mythology also holds the potential to help educators and researchers conceptualize problems and issues within the field of secondary English language arts. It is especially important at this pivotal moment in English language arts to begin interrogating the practices of our discipline that have advanced to the point of being natural or unquestionable, that is to say, those educational and pedagogical practices that have become virtually synonymous with the teaching of English itself. Obviously English language arts will continue to change, though it is still relatively uncertain if the change we are to expect from the coming decades is a strong gravitational force drawing the discipline back to older, outdated, yet ideologically comfortable practices and techniques or if the change will move in a new direction, a re-conceptualization, and a rethinking. It is also uncertain if such conceptualizations will be profitable for the discipline of English language arts, its practitioners, and their students. This is of key concern as English as a school subject comes under increasing and varied attacks of what the future ought to hold for both teachers and students.

Engaging Theory

When dealing with systemic problems, theory can be a powerful ally. A sound theoretical perspective can assist teachers and scholars

in tackling issues that seem too diffuse or, alternately, too specific to tackle through traditional approaches. What theory offers us is the ability to simultaneously conceptualize the very large or situate the very small. Theory, as Richter (1999) tells us in his book *Falling into Theory*, can often provide not just an answer to a question, but a new framework for understanding what questions we ask and why we ask them. In this, Roland Barthes's concept of myth and accompanying investigative method of Mythology emerge as valuable theoretical tools, tools which have yet to be employed, which can be used to both help practitioners of English language arts better understand their own practice and sense of the discipline while at the same time being a powerful tool for interrogating the discipline of secondary English language arts from a scholarly perspective.

Mythology

While Barthes's contributions to the fields of linguistics, semiology, cultural studies, media studies, queer theory, popular cultural studies, and many other areas deserve extensive inquiry in their own right, I will be focusing primarily on one of Barthes's better known ideas: Mythology. This decision for increased attention to Mythology is for several reasons. Primarily, if, as I hope, this project will be accessible not only to scholars and researchers but also to teachers of secondary English language arts, Barthes's work on can

serve as an excellent entry point to all of his work. *Mythologies* is arguably his most accessible work, and offers a familiar and reproducible method of critique that I will investigate in the coming paragraphs. Second, the type of investigation in *Mythologies* is particularly well-suited for the type of investigation most needed at this moment in secondary English language arts. In this, it is vital that we continue to investigate the invisible assumptions inherent in the discipline, both harmful and helpful, which have consequences beyond their limited influence in the classroom and connect to larger issues of reform in the practice of English language arts in our country. Mythology, as I will show, is a particularly useful method at this time, both for teachers and scholars as a tool for investigation.

Before venturing into an analysis of English language arts as a site of myth creation and maintenance, it is important to define our terms. Specifically, what does Barthes mean when he uses the term *myth*? And perhaps more important, what other meanings of myth are less significant given the current discussion? The word *myth* has a wide variety of meanings in common usage. Perhaps most frequent in the English classroom is the reference to an antiquated or folk belief. We no longer believe in Persephone or Demeter as historical or biological realities, so these beliefs of the past are relegated to mythical status. A second definition of myth implies a falsehood based

on a commonly held belief that has little reality in fact. However, the implication of falsehood, as in the urban myth of fully-grown alligators in New York sewers or putting a penny in your mouth to create a false-negative on a breathalyzer test, is not the meaning that Barthes ascribes to the concept of myth, as the following discussion indicates. Certainly some myths enjoy a dual status of being both widely accepted and demonstrably false, but this occurrence is coincidental.

The concluding essay of *Mythologies* (2001) entitled "Myth Today" does much to clarify Mythology in both a semiotic and critical framework. Primarily, Barthes writes, "myth is a type of speech" (p. 109). This is not meant in its most simple way as being one among many types of speech, but a highly specialized "system of communication" (p. 109). But what message does this system communicate? For Barthes, as he later clarified in his 1971 essay "Mythology Today," under his re-appropriation of the term, "myth consists in turning culture into nature, or at least turning the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the 'natural'" (1989, p. 65). The naturalizing influence Barthes describes here speaks of the way that culture shifts from being a deliberate practice to a widely embraced, default mode which is adopted without conscious acceptance by participants in the culture. By way of analogy, we could conclude that Barthes is speaking about the way that visible practice

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becomes invisible, the way the debatable becomes obvious, and the way the contestable transforms into that which goes-without-saying.

Although I use the concept of myth to critique English language arts practices that have become naturalized and that negate much of what it is we know about how sound English pedagogy can and should operate in English classrooms, I want in no way to suggest that "myth" as Barthes uses the concept is exclusively, or even often, something that is negative. Barthes's examples of myths, contained not only in *Mythologies* but also in the collection of essays *The Eiffel Tower and other Mythologies*, range from the relatively benign examples, which are more meditations on culture than critiques, to the more dramatic, critical, and negative myths that are equally as pervasive. Despite his relative treatment of these different stations of myth and their varied danger or threat, Barthes was very clear in his denunciation of the method by which myths are created. Myths, to Barthes, are almost always implicit in bourgeois culture and cannot exist without the tacit participation of the middle class. In essence, the creation of a solidified set of cultural understandings and expectations is impossible without the participation of the majority of consumers who also control most aspects of cultural production in a society. Barthes (2001) saw the "the bourgeois norm" as "the essential enemy" in ideological conflict surrounding the formation and maintenance of myth. Barthes

further argues that the aim of Mythology is to "account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature" (p. 9).

Barthes's idea of myth is both functional (it was developed through his two years of writing short essays for a column called "Mythology of the Month" for *Les Lettres Nouvelles*) as well as methodological, a means for approaching issues of culture. As a functional approach, Barthes used his growing theory of myth to help explain the daily interactions he experienced in life as part of his "période 'journalistique'" (Calvet, 1973, p. 37).

Mythology always emerges from experience and observation. For Barthes, this meant social commentary of France in the 1950's. Barthes discusses his reasoning for developing the mythological method when he writes:

> The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the

ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there. (2001, p. 11)

In this validation of his inquiry, Barthes is making two important moves. First, he is challenging the prevailing public understanding of what is considered "natural" in his native France during the 1950's, a move which he later links far more clearly with an overall critique of bourgeois consciousness and culture in France. Secondly, in his "feeling of impatience," resentment, and "ideological abuse," he establishes the role of the critic and mythologist as needing not only to investigate the sites and instances of this process of ignoring historical development in favor of a notion of naturalness, but also to challenge myth's status and hold on society. To this second end, Barthes advocates that the mythologist "must always remember to reverse the terms of this very old imposture, and constantly to scrape away at Nature, its 'laws' and its 'limits', in order to uncover History there and finally to establish Nature itself as historical" (p. 101). Barthes's comments here push the discussion forward, establishing that the very understanding of nature itself is a social construct devised to elicit ideological participation.

The repeated use of the words *natural* and *nature*, along with their many derivations, deserve some comment before moving further. When Barthes discusses nature, he constructs it in a way similar to

how we think of a second-nature or common sense. Nature is the

state of invisibility, something that exists without obstacle to the point

that it is no longer noticed, a reflex. But Barthes clearly establishes

that the very concept of a culturally situated notion of nature is

suspect. To Barthes, what appears on its surface to be natural is, in

fact, a product of culture and necessarily historical. In other words,

the very concept of nature is constructed through participation in

culture and magnified through the use of language, as the next two

sections will explore in greater detail.

There seems to be a cohesive story that exists among English

teachers, wherein there are a set of 'natural' methods that have

existed far longer than any specific English teacher, but nonetheless

are 'tried and true.' This promotion of an esoteric idea of 'the basics,'

or traditional modes of content and instruction, is the large problem

that this project will engage. This dissertation will focus on a

particular method for interrogating the received notions of "the basics"

in English language arts by way of Roland Barthes's concept of myth.

First, this chapter will introduce the concept of myth and relate this

concept to the current discussion in English language arts. Second,

the method of uncovering myth will be spelled out in greater detail

along with a greater investigation into Roland Barthes and his

contributions to many of the discussions that exist in Secondary

English language arts. Finally, the method of Mythology will be considered in light of other available theories that have been more widely used to explain ideas that have reserved a place within society as being natural or unquestionable, what Barthes refers to as that which "goes-without-saying" (Barthes, 2001, p. 11; p. 143). I will present an argument for why a Barthesian approach holds significant benefits for the specific problems that currently face English language arts. Finally, I will provide an outline of the remainder of this dissertation, including the specific myths within secondary English language arts to be interrogated, including New Critical literary methods, the 5-paragraph essay, and vocabulary instruction.

Basic English

This section will present and develop the concept of "the basics" in English in order to help ground the discussion of myth and Mythology in the next section. The discussion in the following section will, in turn, help to demonstrate the method of inquiry demonstrated in subsequent chapters. As mentioned before, the concept of the basics in English language arts is an often cited phrase intended to evoke a particular set of practices. Despite the fact that what has constituted a basic education in language has changed greatly over the past several centuries (Myers, 1996; Graff, 1987), a relatively stable definition of the basics has existed in English language arts for the last

several decades. English has the privilege of being largely responsible

for two of the three "R's": reading and writing. According to Hook

(1979), the result of several "basic issues" conferences throughout the

1950's was a belief "that the English curriculum should center on

subject matter" (p.8). Effectively, these conferences shifted the

emphasis of English from other competing models, such as the cultural

heritage model and personal-growth model, to "the skills or functional

model based on the nation's needs for initial literacy" (Myers, 1996, p.

4). Hook & Evans (1982) report that the cumulative effect of these

conferences included such recommendations as most of the class day

being dedicated to the three R's, "'clean' textbooks, free of notions

that violate traditional family and national values"; teachers in "the

dominant role" with "no nonsense about pupil-directed activities"; and

a pedagogy of "drill, recitation, daily homework, and frequent testing"

(p. 12). This staggering list comprises the first four recommendations

of 12 that Hook & Evans cite.

Moving forward two decades, similar calls for an increase in basic

English instructional practices were still prevalent. Hook & Evans

(1982) continue that comments on the public's desire for "a more

solid, more 'basic' education" from high school English departments.

This solid and basic education echoes earlier descriptions of the basics:

grammar, sentence diagramming, vocabulary quizzes, reading, classic

literature taught in familiar and traditional ways, teacher-directed learning, rigor, and discipline. The historical construction of the basics in secondary English language arts will act as an example in the next section as I explore the method of Mythology in more depth.

Method

Barthes spends the remainder of "Myth Today" spelling out how the work of the mythologist fits within the larger discussions of semiology and social politics as a method of uncovering secondary meanings within original systems of signification. In this, Barthes begins his definition by drawing upon Saussure (1957) and his method of semiotics, the study of signs. Saussure broke with earlier traditions of linguistics which tried to situate meaning at the morphological level (words) or syntax level (utterances) and instead argued that the most basic level of linguistic meaning existed as a sign. Each sign is constituted of two elements: a signifier (that which indicates the underlying concept, such as a word, image, or sound) and the signified (that which is being referred to by the signifier.) In this, the study of meaning is relegated to the study of representation, or the ways in which abstract or concrete symbols, utterances, or images actually are referring to larger concepts imbedded in a culturally-specific context.

In terms of the controlling example of the basics in English language arts, the word "English" composed of seven unique symbols

or characters. The graphic representation of these words, just as it appears above, constitutes the signifier. The signified, the concept to which these two words are referring, exists in the realm of simple meaning. English can have many meanings, for instance a nationality, a language, a school subject, and so forth. To an individual who can decode this cluster of letters, a first-order meaning emerges: the sign.

Barthes does not contest this basic functioning of semiology, but instead maps a superstructure onto it. *See Appendix A.* For Barthes, the mythologist need not be preoccupied with the basic, first level meanings represented by signs, but instead on the second order meanings created through repetitive social usage in the application of these signs within well regulated practice. In terms of our controlling example, the meaning of "basic English" exists beyond its mere definitional meaning. For example, "the basics" as a phrase can signify a rallying cry for the back-to-basics movement, a signifier in itself of a rigorous method of learning grammar and punctuation lost to a simpler time. To a progressive educator, the simplified meaning of the two words "the basics" can have the opposite effect, evoking a larger concept of oppressive schooling and remedial, deficit oriented pedagogy.

Barthes asserts that Mythology, the study of secondary meanings, is a science independent from semiology on the basis that

Mythology and semiology "have different contents" (2001, p. 111).

Like other arenas of scientific inquiry, Mythology exists as a member of other "sciences dealing with values. They are not content with meeting the facts: they define and explore them as tokens for something else." The exploration, thus, of basic English is not so much to understand the concept definitionally, but in terms of the values and larger significance it holds. Mythology "is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form" (p. 112). This study of second order signs is expressed as "that which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (p. 112). The combination of this original sign as new signifier and a new signified creates the second order meaning, or a new sign beyond the original, literal meaning to enter the domain of study of the mythologist: Signification, or how something means instead of what it means. Instead of studying the way in which meaning is constructed on the first level, the way a reader makes sense of the alphabetic or phonetic signs "basic English," Mythology seeks to understand how the basic sign is used to signify a deeper, second order meaning and how that meaning is imbedded in the larger system of signs that allow that meaning to exist. The construction of a complex social meaning, the

long lost golden-age of educational rigor or the repressive tactics of an unjust educational system, emerges as the domain of the Mythologist.

Barthes provides, as one example of how myth functions as a separate but interrelated form of language, a now famous image of an African youth on the cover of a Paris publication dressed in a colonial French uniform. *See Appendix B.* He first describes what he calls "the meaning of the picture," or the first order signs at play necessary to uncover the mythological content. He describes the view that his senses and basic linguistic abilities allow him to observe: "a young Negro [sic] in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour" (p. 116). This basic understanding of the physical image represented in the scene is unambiguous, inasmuch as any viewer is able to understand the content of the image as a first-order signifier, but also:

> Presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other. As meaning, the signifier already postulates a reading, I grasp it through my eyes, it has a sensory reality (unlike the linguistic signifier, which is purely mental), there is a richness in it: the naming of the lion, the Negro's salute are credible wholes, they have at their disposal a sufficient rationality. (p. 116)

A "reader" of this image readily understands the first order meaning of the image. But with the first order acceptance of the sign does not complete the meaning, as readers within a shared linguistic or cultural system simultaneously decipher the first order meanings, second order significations emerge. A progressive educator does not read the phrase "basic English" as a chain of simple linguistic representations; they jump directly from the first order decipherment to second order significance. In this, the study of myths is not a study of what things mean, but the way things mean.

An analogy may be helpful. In Freudian psychoanalytic terms, the "meaning," or first order sign, could be said to hold the manifest content of a dream: that which is actually happening. The interpretive aspect of the surface level images, sounds, and sensory input in the dream, the latent content, operates on the same level as the mythical, second-order meaning.

However, as we can all predict at this point, the interpretation, the making of significant meaning, does not end with the decipherment of the first order signs. Barthes continues his "reading" of the picture in question by stating that:

> whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me:
> that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any
> colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that

there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged
colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-
called oppressors. (p. 116)

This detailed interpretation and its overall "significance" can in no way
be drawn simply by recognition of the image composed on the page.
Thus, we enter the second-order semiological meaning, as the
construction of the first-order signs becomes a mere building block of
the larger meaning at hand. We move from the manifest content ("a
black soldier giving the French salute") to the mythical, second-order
meaning, the latent content. Thus, we see that the initial first-order
meaning serves two roles: "as the final term of the linguistic system,
or as the first term of the mythical system" (p. 116-117). Returning
to the example of *the basics*, we can see how understanding a
linguistic chain of words, such as *back-to-basics*, on one level can
mean something relatively simple, such as a simplification or a
complex system. However, as we enter the realm of myth, this phrase
can holds a natural-feeling connotation to those wishing to return the
majority of society to a mythical, simpler time, and education should
follow suit.

English Language Arts as a Site of Myth

Barthes establishes the idea that "everything in everyday life" is
the domain of the mythologist, not making this criticism the exclusive

domain of the bourgeoisie and high-minded literary critics. It is a

method for dealing with the daily banalities of life as a product of

history and culture, to make meaning and significance out of that

which is most familiar. Such is also the case for the ideas which have

become more institutionalized and heavily sanctioned within English

Language Arts. As in any discourse community, certain ideas have a

way of becoming naturalized, or in the case of English teaching,

becoming a part of "the basics." However, what is perceived by its

participants as being natural or basic is just as much a product of

culture, tradition, and discourse as a new, unfamiliar idea. In this,

English language arts creates an ideal site of study, and so it can be

seen as a discourse community or microcosm of society.

This is not to suggest that English teachers are blind conscripts

to an invisible historical or ideological force, but instead to help

reconstruct how aspects of the discipline can become familiar and

comfortable. English teachers, in my experience, are among the most

intellectually gifted and critically-minded professionals. Some of the

myths I will discuss in the coming chapters have reserved a place in

secondary English nearly synonymous with the practice of English

itself. As a secondary English teacher, I found that I operated within

disciplinary constraints that were not of my choosing. These

constraints undoubtedly informed the pedagogical decisions I made

and what curricula I chose, even with respect to the myths mentioned in this dissertation.

English education, by most historical and scholarly accounts, exists as both a community of participants and a body of knowledge. The group of participants, and specifically those that remain active participants in the community for longer than the duration of their schooling (teachers), establishes a community. Mythology, in this educational context, examines the interactions between these two spheres: the participants and the content. This is seen in its most formal aspects at annual meetings of NCTE: a group of individuals gathering for the study and discussion in their professional community. On its most banal level, this can be a table where English teachers share lunch every day, telling tales from their classrooms and sharing company with other intellectual practitioners of English language arts. Furthermore, we can move beyond the heroic and revolutionary experiences of "teacher-as-genius" stories where tradition is eschewed in remarkable circumstances to overcome all odds, certainly a form of myth in itself these days, such as the story of Jaime Escalante in the movie *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and Louanne Johnson in the movie *Dangerous Minds* (1995). Instead, the focus of mythological inquiry in education can shift to curricular banalities: handing out worksheets, grading essays, using the same overhead for a fifth year in a row, and

the other daily instances that manage to slip between the cracks of our public, private, and professional experience.

Secondly, we have the rhetorical task of understanding how particular forms of knowledge become sanctioned as true, basic, or natural. This dissertation will present and critique three myths of English language arts, three so common and familiar that some will wonder why one would inquire or, alternatively, care. Each essay will isolate a particular myth that pervades the discipline as a site worthy of investigation, as a critique of the most deeply ingrained aspects of the profession. It is important to distinguish the intent of these essays from other forms of critique, as the following chapters are not an attack on the teaching of English, but instead on the particular practices that exist within the larger framework of English language arts that are in need of further investigation before being carried into the next era of teaching. Thus, the intent is not just to reveal the empty signifier behind the practices discussed; the critique here is not just an exposé on how well a particular method works. Barthes distinguishes this type of inquiry from other activities, for one can engage in the investigation of a myth in many ways. The first available position, according to Barthes, is the investigation which seeks to find "symbols" or symbolic meaning behind the signifier. "I find myself before a simple system, where the signification becomes

literal again: the Negro who salutes is an *example* of French imperiality, he is a *symbol* for it" (Barthes, 2001, p. 128). This method of investigating myth is insufficient, as it focuses its energy on the "static, analytical" aspects of the myth that seeks to destroy it. In a dynamic system such as that of English language arts, this reductive inquiry method fails to achieve the goals afforded by this method.

For example, we could extend the metaphor of imperiality to English itself, focusing on the way that the discipline of English has been used throughout recent history as a way to subjugate and "correct" the linguistic patterns of people in Puerto Rico, Guam, and even within our own borders in the American Southwest and with the indigenous populations throughout the country. In this explanation, the signifier of English becomes the "symbol" of oppression and imperiality. This essentializing of the importance of the symbolic meaning, largely constructed to discredit or destroy the placement of the signifier's (English's) importance or political position, proves to be not only reductive, but also inaccurate and shortsighted, and thus not a justified analytical tool.

The second mode of mythological inquiry, continuing from the first, which seeks to expose empty signifiers, Barthes describes, similarly undesirable and insufficient, seeks to uncover the alibi of the myth, or the way the myth is operating to mask or distort the reality it

purports to describe. In this misguided attempt at uncovering myth, inquiry focuses on the effects and methods of a myth and the manner in which myths distort or manipulate "truth" to create a commonly held belief, itself nearly inscrutable and unassailable from within the socio-semiological system. Barthes describes these two methods as "the former is cynical, the latter demystifying" (p. 128). However, the third method of mythological inquiry Barthes describes is the most useful, relevant and helpful to the current discussion. Barthes summarizes this method:

> Finally, if I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, I receive an ambiguous signification: I respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, I become a reader of myths. The saluting Negro is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very *presence* of French imperiality. (p. 128)

In this way, Barthes situates himself as a mythologist who is a participant in the myths of which he is a "reader." This should be a familiar (and comfortable) position for many critical English educators and teachers, as legitimate, productive inquiry into that which goes-without-saying in secondary English should first and foremost begin with its participants, not assailants. For too long participants in the English community have stood by and waited for change from outside,

accepting the proclamations and demands of forces outside of the discipline to frame the problems and provide solutions (Burns, 2007). Granted, Mythology certainly doesn't offer a quick-fix solution to grass-roots activism. However, encouraging teachers and researchers to make sense of the discipline of English and its activities, rather than relying on outside interpretations, can be immensely valuable as we approach the coming changes to the discipline. The next section will examine other methods for approaching naturalized phenomena in culture as well as examine the strengths of Mythology given this project.

Review of Available Methods

Clearly, Mythology isn't the only available critical tool to confront the issues of institutionalized and naturalized material and action mentioned above. This next section will examine several different existing analytical tools and discuss their limitations with confronting the issues inherent within secondary English language arts. Of course, this is not to say that these methods are useless or undeserving of attention, as a great many English education scholars have employed these critical traditions in their inquiry, but I will make the argument that Barthes's concepts of myth, the unit of study, and Mythology, the method by which we study myths, have distinct benefits to offer the discipline of English language arts. The critical approaches and

theorists mentioned here are discussed for the simple reason that they have often been invoked or applied to current discussions in English education, secondary English language arts, and literacy studies. As I will show, each theory is very well suited to the theoretical problems it was developed to investigate. However, this section will show the theories described here are limited in their scope or emphasis to deal with the specific problems of secondary English language arts.

To many critical traditions, the mere fact that a particular ideology holds a comfortable place in history and culture is more than enough reason to bring it under scrutiny. Gramsci (1971) further developed the Marxist concept of hegemony to discuss the way that capitalism creates a system of ideological apparatuses by which the bourgeois values are promoted as natural or correct for all people. This hegemony, similar to the way Barthes discusses Myth as an invisible force that seems "natural" to inside participants, is entirely pervasive throughout capitalist social systems tied to Christian religious institutions. Hegemony is not created and applied, but rather constructed through continued practice from a variety of positions in society. However, Gramsci sees this invisible, pervasive hegemony as an obstacle to be overcome, a challenge to be met by the counter ideology of Marxism.

As it is relevant to this discussion, Gramsci's hegemony has two problems. First, it sets up a situation in which subjects in a society replace a dominant ideology and supplant it with another. While the secondary value system (one allegedly constructed by its participants) has qualitative benefits over the system in operation before intervention, there is little analysis of the way that the new value system will avoid eventual entanglement in the same ideological positioning as being not just natural, but *more* natural and thereby establishing a more innocuous hegemony that will eventually become as invisible as the first. Barthes, on the other hand, takes a more sympathetic view of the invisible elements of a culture, seeing them as necessary entities for people to make sense of the world. Certainly, there are more and less devious aspects of a pervasive culture, but perhaps confronting and interrogating these sanctified ideological positions is valuable before deciding to overthrow them.

Secondly, Gramsci is a political theorist and writes as such. His critique has to do with the daily operations within political ideological systems, not specifically with the functioning of language as an area of applied study. By starting first with Marxist doctrine to explain the functioning of ideology, unlike Barthes, who begins with semiotics, as we shall see, Gramsci's arguments are entirely relevant to social

activist research as well as political theory, but perhaps a little broad

to apply in a specific way to the interactions in a language classroom.

This isn't to say that Gramsci's ideas aren't valid to help analyze

educational structures, events, and interactions, but I see a strong

need to find a theoretical tool that first and foremost deals with

language and then extrapolates to society instead of a theory that

eschews language in favor of social analysis. Mythology, as a method

that seeks to explain social phenomenon in terms of their linguistic

and semiological basis, provides such a framework.

Louis Althusser (1978) extends the concepts discussed by

Gramsci by introducing the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses

(ISA). While Althusser acknowledges that he is basing his ideas on

Gramsci (p. 142), Althusser goes into greater depth by examining

several different ideological institutions and their functioning, including

the institution of schooling. Althusser's goal in his research was to

examine the ways that ideologies worked through ISAs. Althusser

worked to distinguish ISAs from what he termed Repressive State

Apparatuses (RSA), which were more direct in their functioning and

manipulation of forces in society through economics and politics.

ISAs, on the other hand, work in a much more subtle way. Althusser

cites schools, churches, and the institution of the family as primary

promulgators of ideology through society, often acting in ways that are

accepted as safe or neutral, eschewing direct force, as is the case with RSAs, in favor of more subversive means of indoctrination (p. 145).

While Althusser's ideas of Ideological State Apparatuses are a valuable and significant contribution to the discussion of the way ideology is transmitted through education and other forms of "soft" social influence, there are limitations to the theory. Primarily, the theory does not account for how forms of culture that are not as permanent or fixed as ISAs (the media, art, popular culture, and daily life) can or do have an impact on ideology. Second, this theory's focus on the ways in which state apparatuses (ideological or repressive) worked to modify the behavior and ideology of individuals under-theorizes the capacity of individuals to contribute to culture as active participants. Barthes's methods of analysis provides relief for some of these areas by directing the discussion to even more subtle and invisible cultural manifestations as a site of myth production, not leaving all power and authority in the hands of institutional bodies.

Another prominent concept that attempts to grapple with the natural or invisible aspects of culture is *habitus*, first articulated by Marcel Mauss (1934) as "techniques du corps" or body techniques that constitute the daily social interactions that become naturalized or internalized by members of the group (p. 3). The focus of this analysis shall be on the later pronouncements and developments of

the concept of *habitus* as theorized by Bourdieu (1977) and his

analysis of the ways that ideology operates through society. Much like

Mauss before him, Bourdieu perceives *habitus* as the "action[s] that

result from the institution of the social in the body" (Bourdieu &

Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Bourdieu primarily works to develop ways

to do research in social and economic contexts, particularly

investigating the way the subject (or individual) operates within a

structured society. Bourdieu's speculation is that *habitus*, or the

beliefs and habits developed by individuals in social circumstances, is

neither forcibly imposed nor chosen of free will. The analysis of the

concept of Bourdieu, while similar to Gramsci in his value to many

intellectual fields, falls upon the same shortcomings as Gramsci when

it comes to the interrogation of secondary English language arts.

Bourdieu's theory is more concerned with the complex social

interactions that he observed while doing research in social settings

and not so concerned with the way naturalized phenomena exists as a

constructed phenomenon of semiology. Beyond this, Bourdieu has

received a great deal of attention from educational scholars and

researchers who have applied his methods to the study of education.

Understanding these theories and what they offer as a way to

interrogate what is considered natural or that which goes-without-

saying in a society helps us to understand what type of analytical tool

is needed to undertake the investigation of secondary English language arts. Bourdieu, Gramsci, and Althusser are frequently drawn upon in many different critical educational research endeavors, while Barthes is far less often applied. The remainder of this project does not seek to replace these tools and the value they offer the discipline of English language arts, but instead find new ways to apply another, lesser known theory to the same context. The contribution of Mythology to the canon of critical tools available to English teachers and researchers provides the potential for a more nuanced understanding of how we make sense of the discipline.

Roland Barthes: An Argument for Inclusion

Roland Barthes, despite being very well received in literary and rhetorical fields, has received shockingly little attention in the realms of education, and English education specifically. This is particularly surprising as Barthes is a theorist who undoubtedly wrestled with issues similar to the concerns of English educators and teachers. As a lifelong student of language and a university instructor, Barthes offers scholars of language and practicing teachers a rich perspective that has been untapped.

Roland Barthes had a varied, yet tragically short, career in which he investigated a variety of different subjects united in his fascination with language. Barthes at different times wrote as a cultural critic,

applied linguist, literary critic, writing theorist, among others. His earliest books, such as *Writing Degree Zero* (1957), which sought to establish literary language as a system of signs operating within a larger semiotic language, and *Mythologies* (2001), which applied a similar method of investigation to daily phenomena in life, eschewing the page and written word, sought to investigate the ways in which all manners of life are governed by symbols, and how those symbols are in turn governed by culture. Shortly after his early works, Barthes's attention shifted to the systematic study of semiology, Barthes's term for a broader based notion of semiotics, or the study of signs, which includes the cultural investigations of second and third-order forms of meaning making that are often overlooked in traditional semiotics. In his later work, particularly *S/Z* (1970), he worked to theorize notions of the text. His final decade of writing before his death in 1980 was self-reflexive, as in his textual biography of his own life *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), and experimental, wherein he began to write in short fragments, arguably trying to escape traditional bourgeois conventions of writing (Seiler, 2006). While all periods of Barthes's work will be used at different times, the core of this project is to examine Barthes's concept of Myth and the method of investigating Myth and Mythology, as they apply to secondary English language arts.

Barthes's potential contributions to the field of English education are plentiful, yet little attention has been paid to this influential and prolific thinker and writer. It is difficult to know certainly why Barthes has been viewed as a relatively minor character in the larger discussions of literacy and education, though it is not entirely surprising. Barthes spent the great majority of his career as a relative outsider to the French academic establishment, primarily occupying teaching posts at lesser academies and never receiving a doctorate (Culler, 1983). Meanwhile, many of Barthes's French contemporaries, including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, whose ideological alliances and research interests overlapped with Barthes's own, enjoy continued academic interest and attention, both within language study and educational research.

The fact that Barthes never took a doctorate limited his ability to climb in the academic ranks in France in the mid 20th century. This exclusion, however, also offered Barthes a different career path: teaching. Though Barthes was considered unfit for public service as a public school educator due to his diagnosis of tuberculosis as a child and the possible ill effects that could have on young students, he was given a low-ranking university teaching position at École Pratique des Hautes Études (Culler, 1983). It was in this position that Barthes produced the majority of his work. Even in his social life outside the

academy, Barthes existed as an outsider, being both homosexual in a heterosexist society and a protestant in Catholic-dominated France. However, this position of outsider to many of the social privileges in French life allowed Barthes to become an outside critic to the French establishment. This position undoubtedly contributed to Barthes's desire to unpack the inherent ideologies and assumptions, both those that operated benignly and those that operated perniciously, in French culture. Though a career teacher, Barthes eventually was granted a position at the prestigious Collège de France, where he worked, taught, and wrote until his untimely death in 1980.

Ultimately, these common themes in Barthes's life and work, being an outsider to mainstream society, existing as a critic of the culture around him, and studying language as a means to do so, prefigure the method Barthes developed to deal with such issues: Mythology.

Three Myths in English Language Arts

Each chapter within this dissertation will follow the same basic outline in the exploration and critique of each myth. Primarily, each mythical phenomenon being investigated will be introduced, followed by a justification of the pedagogical practice's central, natural, or invisible role in the discipline of English language arts. In essence, we will establish each practice or pedagogy as a first-order sign, wherein

it exists as a recognizable and familiar phenomenon. Secondly, as demonstrated by Barthes's mythological technique, the practice itself as an intelligible, reliable form of "meaning" (first-order sign) will enter a second level analysis, wherein the original meaning becomes the signifier in a new equation, to be paired with a mythological signified to create the second-order meaning, or "signification" (Barthes, 2001, p. 115). This second positioning of the pedagogy-as-myth will work towards a similar goal as Barthes's own essays, "to display, analyze and critique a feature of French cultural mythology" (Allen, 2002).

The three myths on which this dissertation will focus are, in chapter order, the pedagogical approaches delivered through New Criticism, the 5-paragraph essay, and vocabulary instruction. These three myths were selected for several unifying reasons: each is a privileged method of pedagogy in English language arts, as each chapter will show. Additionally, all of these myths, at their outset, appeared to have potential negative aspects through their continued unreflective practice. Again, this is not a suggestion that all myths, in Barthes's approximation, are dangerous, mass hallucinations with disastrous results. Nor are Barthes's myths synonymous with other uses of the word myth, usually implying a generally held misconception or archaic belief. However, the demands of a dissertation require a certain degree of conflict. A 170-page

celebration of how great and benign the discipline of English language arts is currently would do little to move the field forward, particularly in this time of impending change and an uncertain future. The myths discussed in this dissertation, thus, will demonstrate particular pedagogies that are naturalized, normalized, or have risen to a point of security in the discipline that they are largely unquestioned or are held as being nearly synonymous with the discipline of English itself. To this end, I have selected myths to represent different parts of the academic tripod in English language arts. Thus, chapters two, three, and four will focus on an issue in reading/literature, writing/composition, and language study, respectively.

Conversely, each myth represents a different aspect of myth that should help to demonstrate the breadth of the analytical techniques afforded by the method of Mythology. Primarily, New Criticism has been selected for its invisibility. While chapter two will make a strong argument that New Criticism is not only prevalent, but supports and explains many of the academic and pedagogical interactions in English classrooms, it will also become apparent that very few teachers are aware of New Criticism's existence. New Criticism, according to many historical researchers in the field, has held a "virtually imperial" hold on secondary literature pedagogy for over 50 years (Applebee, 1974). Due to this acceptance and situating

of New Criticism as being both invisible and entirely pervasive, I assign the title of a *myth of absence*. This term seeks to describe a particular type of myth, a subdivision of my own making rather than Barthes, to elicit the nuances of the types of myths that are continually at play in culture.

The third chapter looks at the pedagogical institution of the five-paragraph essay. The reason for this myth's inclusion is my doubt that there exist many teachers who are unaware of this behemoth of writing instruction. For this reason, I have assigned the title of a *myth of presence*. In this, the 5-paragraph essay works in a more deliberate way, becoming the entirely visible and entirely pervasive pedagogy, all other approaches becoming deviations from an accepted norm. In this, the myth need not be invisible, but instead be so visible that it becomes taken for granted and begins to go-without-saying.

Finally, the fourth chapter looks at the practice of vocabulary instruction. The teaching of vocabulary demonstrates what I call a *myth of symbiosis* or a myth that develops in a closed community within a larger society. This chapter analyzes the ways the need for enhanced vocabulary is understood within the discipline of English language arts and outside the discipline, specifically in the private sector. Both in schools and in public society, vocabulary is viewed as a signifier of social class and intelligence.

The final chapter concludes the dissertation by bringing together the many ideas discussed and proposing future possibilities for the mythological method in educational research. Also, I will suggest several ways for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers not to see the mythological method as a mere critique, but instead a method of positing problematic positions for future revision and reflection and of working to see what aspects of the profession have been masked or distorted. While it is certainly impossible to live without myths, it is also essential to find a way to live, function, and practice teaching in a way that accounts for the myths in which we all are immersed. This can be accomplished by being more deliberate and transparent with our intentions, in essence, becoming more transparent with myths. Just as Barthes, always French, through and through, critiqued and interrogated his own cultural home, I, too, plan to carry out a similar critique of a homeland, one which has been as good to me as France was to Barthes. These critiques are not entirely iconoclastic, seeking to air the dirty laundry of the community, but instead a mixture of celebration, critique, investigation, and hope for a brighter future.

Chapter Two

Introduction

    This chapter seeks three main goals: 1) to define New Criticism in both general and pedagogical terms while simultaneously making the argument that New Criticism cannot be made sense of outside of a discussion of pedagogy; 2) to establish New Criticism as a myth in secondary English language arts by demonstrating it as what I have thus far called a myth of absence, or a myth that has the benefit of being both invisible and entirely pervasive; and 3) to analyze the implications of the myth of New Criticism, particularly focusing on the pedagogical trespasses it commits.

    Perhaps more than any other movement, New Criticism stands out as a major influential force throughout the 20th century in literary studies, both in universities and secondary environments. From its humble beginnings in the 1920's, when it emerged into the field spawning from "a small group of professors and students at Vanderbilt University," New Criticism steadily gained influence and authority in the world of academic literary inquiry to the point "that [New Critics] were almost equated with the very nature and essence" of literary criticism in America (Surdulescu, 2000, chap. 2). However, the ascension of power of this movement has had impacts beyond the mere methods scholars used to examine literary texts.

To outsiders, New Criticism must seem a minor, if not trivial, matter in the larger issues of secondary English instruction. To most students in American high schools between 1940 and the current era, aspects of New Criticism are not only familiar, but perhaps even synonymous with the way in which these students were taught in their English classrooms. Ironically, despite the prevalence in secondary literary practice, which I will establish later in this chapter, New Criticism is more often considered an afterthought, a footnote, and even a scapegoat in the larger field of English studies, particularly in post-secondary English departments.

And herein exist the tensions that this chapter will explore. New Criticism, a specific, localized theory of literary inquiry that arose for specific reasons and its own impetus, rose to such prominence in secondary literature instruction that Applebee (1974) refers to it as having a "virtual imperial" hold on curriculum and literary interpretations in the 1950's. Appleman (2000) concurs with this assessment when she refers to New Criticism as having taken "hold of the secondary English classroom in the 1930's and is still felt today" (p. 4).

At the same time, New Criticism has served for decades as a target for scorn for more recent academic critical traditions, including those that place more emphasis on the social and personal dynamics

of literary interpretation. At different times in the movement's development, criticism came from multiple sides, often alleging the death of New Criticism. Krieger (1961) reports in the early 1960's that "we are told on all sides that the New Criticism is dead, that a reaction has set in against it" (p. 107). As Cain (1982) adds, "we have been hearing reports of the death, decline, or harmlessness of the New Criticism for decades," though, he admits, "they have been greatly exaggerated" (p. 1100).

Despite the relative certainty of the harmlessness, or "toothless lion" status (Dickstein, 1981, p. 11) of New Criticism among those who attend the Modern Language Association Conference each year, I would argue that aspects of New Criticism are not only alive and well in secondary English classrooms, but have also taken on the status of myth by having aspects of the theory fully naturalized and assimilated into the daily routines of English classrooms. Furthering this point, New Criticism enjoys the status of being both invisible and completely pervasive in secondary practice, establishing New Criticism as a Barthesian myth. This is not to say that New Criticism holds the same pedagogical "imperial" status suggested by Applebee; instead, New Criticism currently shares the space of literary interpretation with other theories, including the very biographical and subjective methods New Criticism was attempting to respond to in the first place.

The problem, as I will show, is that while certain aspects of New

Criticism have been set aside for the time being, such as the

intentional fallacy, which stipulates that one ought not look to the

author's life or intentions for a work to evaluate that work, what has

remained of New Criticism is perhaps more problematic than the

stranglehold New Criticism had at one time held on literary analysis. I

will show how aspects in the current state of literature instruction

represent a mix of a few remaining textual orthodoxies advocated by

New Critics. But even more than textual methods, what has survived

to this day from the New Critical movement is a deficit-modeled

pedagogy that derives from New Criticism.

Definitions and Pedagogy

It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of the New Critical

movement as being independent from pedagogy. This is not to say

that the movement self-consciously began in order to establish a

literary pedagogy to be implemented among students, but the New

Critical movement's results and legacy hold all the trappings today of a

pedagogical movement. In this section, I will give a brief explanation

of New Criticism's tenets while simultaneously considering the New

Critical movement as a promulgator of pedagogy. In this analysis, I

will analyze three key points in the institutional history of New

Criticism: 1) its origins and institutional history, 2) its peak and

ascendance into secondary English classrooms, and 3) its current legacy in secondary English classrooms beyond its supposed decline among literary scholars.

Origins of New Criticism

As mentioned earlier, New Criticism can trace its earliest institutional roots, though the work of psychologist and New Critical forefather I.A. Richards certainly predates this, to the 1920's at Vanderbilt University, where a small group of literature professionals and students began to work on a method of analyzing literary texts that avoided the problems inherent in the biographical and subjective, gentlemanly trends of the previous decades (Surdulescu, 2000, chap. 2). Over its near century of history, the label New Criticism itself has undergone several small changes, sometimes being capitalized, sometimes not, and often, but not always, used with the definite article "the." The popular origin of the term is widely cited as Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*, "which seems to have established the term in common usage" (Wellek, 1978, p. 612). Before this, the term emerged in various forms, though with different content and practices, as the "neue Kritiker" coined by the Schleger brothers in the 19th century and Croce's term "la nuova critica" (ibid). Even before Ransom, there were several publications bearing this

name, and the term was somewhat widely used among the practitioners of this approach.

New Criticism is also not a minor concern, a footnote, or a curious interest in the history of American literary criticism. While there have been other formalist and object-centered critical literary movements and personalities in the United States, New Criticism is by far the most pervasive and successful (Singer & Dunn, 2001). Surdulescu (2000) posits that "[o]f all critical doctrines that have prevailed on the English-speaking scene in the postwar decades, the New Criticism is perhaps the best qualified to be called a real school of critical approach to literature" (chap. 2). The longstanding legacy of the movement aside, even from its inception, New Criticism was, at the time, a revolutionary, progressive, and highly contested approach and method for dealing with texts.

As mentioned before, New Criticism, in the grand scheme of aesthetic theory, is situated as an objective or formalist theory, or one that sees meaning as arising from the art-object itself and its formal components rather than as meaning being situated in the perceiver. Once New Criticism is understood as a formalist or object-oriented form of criticism, most tenets of New Criticism make sense logically and intuitively. Put another way, Childers & Hentzi (1995) cite New

Criticism as focusing "on the artistic technique of the text or object under consideration" (Childers & Hentzi, 1995, p. 116).

In its most general sense, New Criticism can be seen as a method of approaching text, wherein the critic should

(1) center his attention on the literary work itself,(2) study the various problems arising from examining relationships between a subject matter and the final form of a work, and (3) consider ways in which the moral and philosophical elements get into or are related to the literary work. (Van O'Connor, 1949, p. 489)

Surdulescu builds on this previous quote when he writes, "New Critics felt it was time to do away with the traditional approaches, which laid emphasis only on the historical, social, biographical or psychological contexts, on the moral or philosophical implications, or still on the textual-linguistic specific factors" of a text (Surdulescu, 2000, chap. 2). Instead, New Critics favor focusing on the way a text operates as a literary work of art and the way its formal elements combine to create an internally consistent and organic whole. Beardsley (1958), another prominent New Critic, reinforces the notions of unity and support when he writes that experiences with artistic objects, including written texts, are similar in that

(1) [a text] may be more *unified*, that is, more coherent and/or complete, than the other; (2) its dominant quality, or pervasive

feeling-tone, may be more *intense* than that of the other; (3)

the range or diversity of distinct elements that it brings together

into its unity, and under its dominant quality, may be more

complex than that of the other. (p. 529)

These recurring points--consistency, unity, quality, attention to the

text itself--all establish the most basic elements of New Criticism.

The approaches of New Criticism were not isolated to the

Americas. A nearly tandem movement existed in Russia, often called

Russian Formalism. This take on literary formalism, like New Criticism

in the United States, did not enjoy a cohesive body of practitioners,

but instead a general alignment of principles with variations and

disagreements. One major school, often called mechanistic formalism,

was advocated by the OPOJAZ, or The Society for the Study of Poetic

Language (Steiner, 1995). The mechanistic method, like New

Criticism, sought to understand works of literature as a series of

interacting constituent parts that contributed to a whole. Another

movement, reacting to the rigidity of the mechanistic approach,

advocated for a more organic approach. The organic perspective

preferred to view literary works as working similar to a biological entity

(ibid).

What New Criticism, and most formalist methods, did offer

scholars at the time was a consistent method for addressing the

recurring concerns of literary texts, a method that first and foremost

looked at the text as the source of meaning instead of privileging

oneself or connections to the expansive and often contested historical

and cultural realities beyond the text. This focus made New Criticism

a viable candidate for adoption, as it provided a unified perspective on

how critical reading ought to take place and how criticism ought to be

generated. New Criticism also had the advantage of philosophy and

method, presenting an approach to literature that enabled novice

critics to look for specific, reproducible textual features. These

strengths of New Criticism, among others that will be discussed later,

can clearly account for the ready adoption of the methods both among

critics and teachers

Fallacies

In addition to the terms and formal features New Critics

advocated, New Criticism developed and implemented a series of

fallacies, predominantly postulated by Wimsatt & Beardsley in their

two famous essays *The Affective Fallacy*, which advocated an

emotional distance from a text, and *The Intentional Fallacy*, which

advocated a distance from the author of the text, that are central to

New Critical doctrine (Wimsatt, 1954). Specifically, these fallacies

govern what a critic or student should not do when engaging in literary

interpretation. The reason for this inclusion in the discussion is two-

fold. Primarily, the fallacies are often cited, incorrectly, as clear definitions of New Criticism rather than, more appropriately, as a check on the validity of criticism. Second, the two fallacies have served as the springboards from which critics of New Criticism have launched their assaults (Scholes, 1999; Rosenblatt, 1978).

Wimsatt & Beardsley define the affective fallacy as "a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it is and what it *does*)" leading to the inevitable problem where "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear" (p. 345). Ransom (1941), a prominent figure in the New Critical movement, weighs in on the relevance of emotional or affective interpretations in criticism when he writes, "Emotions themselves are fictions, and critical theory could not with a straight face have recourse to them…The feelings will be their strict correlatives, and the pursuit of feelings will be gratuitous" (p. 21-2). Thus, the affective fallacy operates in order to distance the reader from the text in any emotional capacity, leaving the text itself to be encountered in an intellectual manner.

The affective fallacy generates perhaps the most critical scrutiny of all proposals aligned with New Criticism. Fish (1984) dedicated large portions of his book *Is There a Text in This Class?* to the problems with the fallacy and its underlying assumptions about texts, readers, and the products of such exchanges. Fish challenges the

assumptions of the affective fallacy when he asserts that a text, once

liberated from the constraints of New Criticism's brand of formalism,

"is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that

happens to, and with the participation of, the reader" (1984, p. 25).

Rosenblatt (1978) similarly rallies against the inherent problems of the

affective fallacy and how it denies the transactional nature of reading

and understanding, emphasizing in too great a degree the stability and

fixedness of a text.

    The intentional fallacy, the arguably less controversial and, aside

from Roseblatt (1978) and a few others, largely ignored cousin of the

affective fallacy, eschews the tendency of readers and critics to look at

the intention of the author, as "the design or intention of the author is

neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of

a work of literary art" (Wimsatt, 1954, p. 3). To Wimsatt and

Beardsley, a work of literature "is detached from the author at birth

and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or

control it. The poem belongs to the public" (p. 5). These fallacies in

particular gave rise to the New Critical call for a focus on "the text

itself" instead of external factors that exist beyond the text. The

fallacies are later summarized and applied to pedagogy by Cooper

(1971), who writes:

...concern with the speaker of the poem leads inevitably to the "intentional fallacy," while concern with the audience outside the poem inevitably leads to the "affective fallacy." The first is a confusion between the poem and its origins and ends in biography and relativism. The second is a confusion between the poem and its results and ends in impressionism and relativism. [Wimsatt] concludes by arguing that the real appeal of both these fallacies is that they allow the critic to escape from the hard job of work required by objective or intrinsic criticism. The implication is that anyone guilty of either of these fallacies is both lazy and ill-trained." (p. 1065)

Though Cooper's commentary is decidedly sarcastic, it does highlight the judgmental aspects allegedly associated with the New Critical movement. His point is this: to a New Critic, to follow the rules is to be rigorous, to break them is to be frivolous.

The New Critical arguments against the focus on authorial intention have clearly lost much of their influence in secondary English language arts. Of three major textbooks surveyed, all have biographical information about the author of the short and adapted pieces of literature, both poets and fiction writers. The affective fallacy, on the other hand, has caused much more trouble for New Critics. This tenet has been the springboard from which numerous

attacks have been launched. Cooper (1971) summarizes the pedagogical discontent among educators nicely when he comments that many teachers conduct high school English classes "as though the students were upper division or graduate university students, rather than a captive audience of quite average adolescents." This attempt at systemizing and professionalizing literature in schools will be addressed in the following section. "As a result," he continues, "these teachers, too, have discouraged talk of emotional involvement in discussing works of literature" (p. 1063). Though the current trend in secondary literature instruction is toward more student-centered, subjective, and response-oriented roles in English classrooms, the lingering and invisible effects of New Criticism and the affective fallacy are still present, as I will explore in the next section.

The New Critical attempt at objectivity in the fine arts can seem, at least on its surface, problematic. Previous generations of aestheticians delighted in the subjectivity of art, or its capricious and unpredictable nature. New Criticism, on the other hand, tried to balance a written work as both a work of art and as a stimulus to produce a measured, reasoned response through available, definable methods. This seeming opposition of creative art and hard science is a key principle in both New Criticism as a theory and as a pedagogy, as

this dual-nature allowed New Criticism to gain acceptance in secondary schools in the 1940's and 1950's.

An Objective Stance

Beyond their initial and localized impetus to form a new theory of textual meaning, New Critics were certainly engaged in a discussion beyond the immediate concerns that spurred the movement. Bell-Villada (1998) situates New Criticism as a continuation and logical extension of the "Art for Art's Sake" movement and the theories of the aesthetes of Britain, such as Pater, Ruskin, and Wilde (Bell-Villada, 1998). However, unlike the Aesthetes, who saw the work of art's only responsibility as being beautiful, New Criticism worked to develop a language and pedagogy for uncovering and understanding this beauty.

The desire to make the practices of literary interpretation more accountable and objective is often cited as the primary intention of New Criticism. Responding to decades of subjective, emotive critical movements that tended to privilege the opinions or personal reactions of the critic, New Critics sought to develop a set of tools to make the interpretation of literature a more stable, scientific practice by focusing solely on the text.

Raleigh (1959) comments that New Criticism is a "curious and paradoxical blend of two great and supposedly antithetical forces—art and science, or, more precisely, aestheticism and scientific method"

(p. 22). Raleigh's point here is that New Criticism exists as a method

of approaching texts as artistic objects from a scientific, objective

paradigm instead of a subjective and personal experience-driven

perspective. The methods of New Criticism, he says, exist "as if Oscar

Wilde's festering lily" was "transformed into a hard, sharp, steel

scalpel, in a perhaps unconscious desire to acquire protective

coloration, borrowed some of the methods and some of the authority

of science" (p. 23). This is where New Criticism emerges as a more

clearly definable pedagogical force. In addition to the general

philosophical viewpoints New Critics were arguing to advance, they

were also advancing a more structured way of looking at texts, a

method in every sense of the word. English teacher Miles Myers

(1971), who would later go on to become president of NCTE, provides

a personal perspective when he writes that English teachers, as "the

products of the New Criticism, took as our model something like

English as science, calling for (1) an objective stance, (2) a constant

attention to the text, and (3) an appreciation of form for its own sake"

(p. 319). Pro New Criticism educator Van O'Connor (1949) comments

on how

> Each [New C]ritic is attempting to establish a body of definable
>
> criteria. A concern with such terms as "tension" and "ambiguity"
>
> or "expressive form" and "pseudo-reference" or "paradox" and

"irony" implies an attempt to establish a body of criteria. Each

critic is concerned to develop techniques that will enable the

reader to explore the complex parts of the literary work and to

make some attempt to evaluate its worth. (p. 490)

Van O'Connor goes on to list many other terms that New Critics strive

to isolate and preserve in a text, ultimately creating a virtual clone of

the literary terms sheets, omnipresent in English classrooms in the

United States.

This dual attention to scientific methods and artistic stringency

gave New Criticism an open invitation to American high schools in the

1950's. Applebee (1974) cites a desire on the part of many teachers

of literature to employ more rigorous and scientific methods in

literature classes to combat a perceived softening of English as a

discipline. Santora (1979) cites the launch of the Soviet Sputnik

satellite in 1957 as the metallic and metaphorical harbinger of New

Criticism. He echoes Applebee's analysis about the perceived

weakness in English methods and how a more rigorous and "scientific"

method was needed in the most artistic of the core subjects in schools.

Clifford (1979) adds that English language arts, "Spurred on by a

national insecurity about our scientific pre-eminence a great cry went

out for intellectually serious content. University English departments

soon adopted the scientific, rigorous techniques of the New Critics" (p. 37).

Ironically, at the same time New Criticism was being ushered in to schools to solve the perceived weakening of standards, the theory was on its way out in universities and among literary professionals. According to Surdulescu (2000), "By 1955 [New Criticism] had completely lost its innovative image and was regarded by many [in universities] as a dying trend" (chap. 2). The claim of New Criticism's demise is echoed frequently throughout the historical literature. Nevertheless, what is perhaps more important, at least to the topic of secondary English language arts, is the ready reception of New Criticism into classrooms despite its demise in universities. This isn't to say that New Criticism had little impact in secondary English classrooms before the late 1950's, but the political turn of events during this time period ensured New Criticism's broader acceptance as *the basics* instead of just another tool for interpreting texts. For all the reasons mentioned in the previous two sections--stability, rigor, authority, and accountability--New Criticism was on the fast track to become a major force in secondary English language arts classrooms.

New Criticism as Myth

As mentioned in chapter one, New Criticism is a particularly interesting site of mythological inquiry, as New Criticism represents

what I have thus far called a *myth of absence*. A myth of absence requires that a particular myth be both secure in its presence and invisible to its participants. As Barthes points out, myths always have "elsewhere at their disposal" or always maintain that there is another interpretation of a particular sign or phenomenon other than that shown by the mythologist (Barthes, 2001, p. 123).

Additionally, mythology requires a validation or justification of a particular myth's omnipresence as a prerequisite for critique. Thus, once New Criticism has been established as a myth within secondary English language arts, I will examine the potentially harmful effects of this pedagogy both now, and the potential harms that will continue to develop through continued unreflective practice.

First, New Criticism clearly meets the standard of being invisible. Appleman (2000) comments that few, if any, English teachers know that New Criticism is a theory. More often teachers are likely to see it as part of a body of basic practices, familiar from their own secondary and undergraduate experiences. Second, the discussion of New Criticism in the leading journal for secondary practitioners, *The English Journal*, has been on a steady decline over the past 50 years. Most mentions of New Criticism in *The English Journal* are done so by former teachers-turned academics, or those who have decided to go outside the classroom discourse and investigate the mechanical issues

behind the scenes of the current practices of secondary English language arts. This is not a combative judgment on practicing teachers, but more of an indication of where the discussion of New Criticism takes place, generally in universities. A quotation by the late Carl Sagan comes to mind with reference to secondary practitioners and explicit knowledge of New Criticism: "An absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." To the mythologist, the mere fact that someone is unaware of a phenomenon is perhaps the best evidence of its pervasiveness, not proof to the contrary. What was once a commonplace lunchtime discussion topic 50 years ago has perhaps gone dormant, replaced by other issues and concerns.

Still, as early as 1950, experts in the field were predicting the inevitable adoption of New Criticism to the status of myth and invisibility. As the editor of *The English Journal* writes in a 1950 "The Editor Confides" column:

> When the New Criticism is no longer new but has been assimilated into the tradition, we shall have benefited by learning to read poetry somewhat more closely; and the discovery of "internal consistency," upon which the New Critics insist so strongly, will be just as an important main criterion of the correctness of a reader's interpretation rather than a means of interpretation. ("The Editor Confides," p. 103)

This comment points to the methods by which New Criticism has already made its entry into the everyday methods and practices of English: close reading, consistency, and standardization of interpretation.

Literature scholar and critic William Cain (1982) goes clearly against those who argued that New Criticism was no longer a factor in English studies and literary criticism as late as the 1980's when he writes, "New Criticism is alive and well," and it "is not so much declining or dead as it has won eternal life as the core or essence of criticism" (p. 1005). New Criticism, Cain argues, was "deeply ingrained in English studies" by the 1980's, even after the cultural turn in literary studies, and had become "The natural and definitive conditions for criticism in general" among secondary and college instructors (ibid). Cain furthers his approximation of New Criticism as myth when he writes:

> New Criticism survives and is prospering, and it seems to be powerless only because its power is so pervasive that we are ordinarily not even aware of it. So embedded in our work are New Critical attitudes, values, and emphases that we do not even perceive them as the legacy of a particular movement. On the contrary: we feel them as the natural and definitive conditions for criticism in general. It is not simply that the New

Criticism has become institutionalized, but that it has gained

acceptance as the institution itself. It has, in a word, been

transformed into "criticism," the essence of what we do as

teachers and critics, the ground or given upon which everything

else is based. (p. 1001)

Cain's comments here speak to the mythical status of New Criticism,

transitioning clearly from history to nature and becoming the

institution from which it arose. Though Cain's arguments are situated

in the time he was writing, it is valuable to see his take on how New

Criticism can become a myth of absence by being both invisible and

entirely pervasive.

Rubin (1980) argues a similar point from a different perspective:

If the New Criticism as a movement is concluded, it is because

its job has been done: it has made us read poems closely and in

their own right, so that we could gain access to the poetry

written in English during the first half of the twentieth century.

But I remain unconvinced that it is kaput, because I don't see its

job as having been done. Certainly its faddishness is over; it is

no longer a novelty. But increasingly to be New it has not

thereby become Old Criticism. Instead it has become simply

criticism. (p. 683)

Rubin, similarly, comments on the mission aspect of New Criticism. To Rubin, New Criticism had a clearly defined goal of changing the way discussions of literature took place, actively trying to replace existing methods and becoming the way criticism took place in English.

Many of the institutionalized assumptions these critics both point to include the now ubiquitous method of close textual analysis, "which the New Critics introduced to America and called 'close reading'" and which "has been a standard method of high-school and college instruction" for decades (Tyson, 1998, p. 117); a formalist emphasis on the constituent parts of a literary text, a phenomenon that most English teachers will recognize more easily as a "literary terms sheet"; and an emphasis on internal consistency that brings the previous two elements together. The formalist methods of New Criticism, as a result, became a method for standardizing essay writing and the foci for classroom discussions.

Additionally, Foster (1989, p. 6) and Appleman (2000) point to the fact that most high school English faculty were trained in and practiced New Critical textual methods. As recently as 1994, Goodson comments on New Criticism's hold on secondary English language arts when he situates New Critical practices as being among the "Orthodox Forces" in the discipline, along with the five-paragraph essay, which will be discussed in the next chapter. He continues with a particularly

hip analogy, at least hip for 1994, of comparing pedagogies such as New Criticism with Rush Limbaugh and newer, alternative approaches with Beavis and Butthead (p. 23).

Even in the age where more teachers define themselves as practitioners of reader-response based criticism and knowledge of the existence of New Criticism is on the decline, Martin (1992) points to the fact that change is never easy. Despite earnest attempts to move away from New Critical methods and assumptions, he contends that "[w]e may change our minds; it is much harder to change our habits" (p. 56). This "change of minds" is reported by Dixon (1967), who, while reporting from the Dartmouth conference, says that the time for literary analysis focusing on "[t]he dryness of schematic analysis of imagery, symbols, myth, structural relations," clearly referring to the practices of New Criticism, and "should be avoided passionately at school and often at college" (p. 60).

Ingrained in Materials

Smagorinsky (2002) makes the claim that "New Criticism has become ingrained in U.S. schools and the textbook industry...it is still the dominant approach to teaching literature in secondary schools" (p. 75). Though his claim may seem intuitive to those familiar both with New Criticism and secondary literature instruction, Smagorinsky doesn't provide evidence to support this claim. In this section I will

examine three secondary literature textbooks to see if claims by Smagorinsky and others that New Critical elements are ingrained in the available secondary literature instructional materials are valid. Such an establishment would certainly help to promote the argument that New Criticism operates as a powerful, invisible myth of absence in English.

Outside the textbook industry, Jones (2001) confirms the presence of New Criticism as a basic tenet of Advanced Placement English courses, materials, and tests when he writes, "each exam is rooted in…what is described as a New Critical approach to literature" (p. 53). Foster (1989) continues that the same Advanced Placement exams "reflect a faith in textual autonomy and objectivity," and see a text as being "the sum of textual elements that are best studied piece by piece to discover how parts fit together to make a whole" clearly indicating a fixedness in New Critical theories of texts (p. 6). However, this evidence itself must be taken cautiously, as nowhere near a majority of students access Advanced Placement literature courses and connections between Advanced Placement curricular developments and general education curriculum are speculative at best.

In trying to determine what, if any, textual interpretive practices and pedagogical assumptions are inherent in secondary English,

looking at textbooks seems to be the best way to draw out nationwide similarities. First, Textbooks from a single publisher are almost entirely consistent nationwide. Second, most, if not all, secondary schools in the United States have at least one set of English textbooks. Third, most schools adopt textbooks from a relatively small number of publishers. These three points all contribute to the argument that textbook publishers have a very powerful influence over what literature is taught and how it is taught. In personal communications with a sales representative from Holt, Rinehart & Winston, the *Elements of literature* series of textbooks gained a rate of over 70% among seven southern states and enjoyed similar rates of adoption in other regions. He cited the format of the company's textbooks, which helped teachers to meet state standards for high-stakes testing, for the broad adoptions.

To get a representative sample of textbooks in use in American secondary schools, I located two textbooks from two different publishers. The first, *Elements of Literature Fifth Course: Literature of the United States with Literature of the Americas* comes from the Holt, Rinehart & Winston series mentioned above. The second sample, *Literature & Language Orange Level* for 9th graders by McDougal Littell was selected for several reasons. Primarily, I have taught at three high schools in my career, two in Colorado and one in Michigan. The

Literature and Language textbook was the official 9th grade selection at all three schools. Additionally, as a field instructor at nine schools across mid-Michigan, this text, with its white and orange cover and picture of a contemplative young woman, was a common sight. Plus, I had a copy of the book on my bookshelf. Ultimately, I find these two textbooks to be reasonable selections and a representative, albeit unscientific, sample of the types of literature texts available for use in secondary schools. It should also be noted that this section is not designed to attack the validity or usefulness of these books as instructional resources. Both textbooks are well designed and well intentioned. Nor should this section be read to denigrate all English textbooks, as others not surveyed could offer different methods or organizational structures that avoid these recurrent pitfalls. Clearly, based on the adoption rates of each, they are useful to a great many teachers in our country for many purposes, including preparing students for standardized assessments. This section aims more at uncovering different attitudes and beliefs about texts and the work students do with those texts, particularly those beliefs that are not readily visible.

Interestingly, both of these book series were created by or assisted by English education scholars who have come out, on record, as being opposed to New Criticism. The *Literature & Language*

textbook has Arthur Applebee, author of numerous studies on the history and ideology of English and literacy practices in the United States, listed first in a list of *Senior Consultants* who supervised the creation of the series. The *Elements of Literature* series cites as its first program author Robert Probst, whose book *Response and Analysis* (1987) viciously assaults the practices of New Criticism in classrooms. The textbook goes on to cite Probst as having "established the pedagogical focus for the 1997 edition" (Probst & Anderson et al, 1997, p. 2). Strictly based on the presence of these two scholars, Applebee and Probst, as collaborators on these books, it would appear that an emphasis on New Critical language, methods, and techniques would be unlikely. Both scholars have expressed discontent, if not outright hostility, toward New Criticism. The avoidance of New Criticism is expressed in both texts, though the promise is short lived, as this analysis will show.

Generally speaking, both books attempt to align with a reader-response pedagogical framework. *Literature and Language* includes a letter to the student in the opening pages of the text:

The book you are holding is unlike any textbook you have ever used. It is based on a unique philosophy—that what you bring to this book is just as important as what the book brings to you. This means that your own experiences become the basis for your

involvement with the literature and activities. The special

features in *Literature and Language* promote this relationship

between you and the text. (Beatty, 1994, p. 3)

The central concepts of this book are emblematic of Reader Response

and other progressive reading pedagogies: valuing the individual's

contribution and diminishing the importance of a commonly definable

text in favor of many possible texts. The promises of this introduction

are largely upheld through most of the book. Unit One, *Reality: A*

Matter of Perception, includes this thinking prompt under the heading

"Strategies for Reading Fiction," which acts as a guide for all

subsequent works of fiction in the book:

After you finish reading a story, think about it for a few minutes.

What is your initial impression? How did the story make you

feel? What did you think of the main character? What is the

underlying meaning of the story, the message about life that the

writer is sharing? (p. 24)

Seemingly, questions like this one, and the six others that accompany

it, are as antithetical to the New Critical movement as you can get.

Examining how the story "makes you feel" seems to be a clear

violation of the affective fallacy, the "underlying meaning of the story"

and "the message about life that the writer is sharing" immediately

violate the intentional fallacy, and the tendency to try and summarize

the story and derive an "initial impression" would violate the previously unmentioned "heresy of paraphrase," a New Critical principle expounded by Brooks (1947). The heresy of paraphrase stipulates that because a literary work, specifically poetry, is precise and concise, and its meaning relies on its formal composition, it ultimately cannot be paraphrased or summarized.

The textbook *Elements of Literature* contains similar questions and prompts, particularly challenging the affective fallacy's assumptions. A follow-up question for a selection from *Of Plymouth Plantation* by William Bradford asks students to make connections between themselves and the text, including the prompt for teachers to assign to students: "Consider the reasons for this voyage and the prospects the pilgrims faced. How would you have felt?" The teacher's edition cites a sample response: "Sad, for the journey was long and the future bleak" (Probst & Anderson et al, 1997, p. 31).

Both texts include extensive biographical information about the authors of every work included in the anthology. These biographical asides typically appear one or two pages before or on the page after the work by each author. Because it is arranged chronologically, *Elements of Literature* includes a great deal more information on the historical age and stakeholders during particular historical periods. This is not surprising, as the intentional fallacy is perhaps more of a

toothless gopher now than the aforementioned "toothless lion" (Dickstein, 1981, p. 11).

Based on this analysis, it would seem that not only was New Criticism a non-issue in this textbook, but the authors were self-consciously trying to excise any alliance with or allegiance to the New Critical movement. This is probably accurate. However, as I have been arguing thus far, New Criticism represents a myth of absence, a myth that is both invisible and pervasive. New Critical elements, despite being self-consciously excised from both texts, nevertheless permeate both books. For example, both books show a trend toward increasing difficulty, which makes sense given that students will become more skilled and competent in the type of analysis requested by the textbook over a year. However, both texts fall into a similar problem: while questions and prompts at the beginning of the book are indeed focused on the more affective and personal reactions of students, the later chapters begin, increasingly, to privilege in-depth analysis, or close reading, toward increasingly limited correct answers that derive from formalistically constructed arguments and readings. For example, by collection six of *Elements of Literature*, students are asked to "[r]e-read the famous first paragraph of [Edgar Allen] Poe's story. Which words suggest decay, sterility, finality, and emptiness? List them." The teacher's edition then offers a long list of possible

"Answers" to evaluate students' responses, all of them individual words (Probst & Anderson et al, 1997, p. 281). Even the tone of the "Reader's Response: Shaping Interpretations" sections begins to stiffen considerably as the text progresses. When talking about Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), students are asked, "Why does Ruth scramble the eggs after Walter has asked for them not to be scrambled?" instead of a question model from an earlier chapter, which would more likely have been phrased: Why *do you think* Ruth scrambles the eggs after Walter asked for them not to be scrambled? While this is a minor, perhaps even superficial, difference, the shift in discourse is interesting. Additionally, the range of acceptable responses to this question is more limited and certain: "She is angry with him; or she is not paying attention to him" (Probst & Anderson et al, 1997, p. 830).

A similar pattern emerges in the *Language and Literature* book. As one example, though many more exist, after reading the poem "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" by Adrienne Rich, students are asked, "What do you think the door symbolizes? Explain your answer" (Beatty, 1994, p. 468). The language of this question mirrors the earlier sections of the book, particularly in the phrasing "what do you think" instead of simply and overtly stating something such as "what does the door symbolize?" However, the addition of the second part of

the question, "Explain your answer," starts to hint at the desire for students both to produce internally consistent arguments and defend those arguments using the text itself (ibid). This pattern emerges and moves increasingly toward evidence-driven interpretations. For example, "What is Temas's greatest obstacle in this test? Support your answer with information from the story" (p. 482).

Next, as the text advances in difficulty, students are requested to start incorporating formal literary elements in their responses and provide more quotation and close analysis. This increase in analytical is accompanied by a decline in the free-response, affective questions. For example, the preface to the unit on drama in *Elements of Literature* delivers students with a host of formalist-derived terms, such as conflict, tone, imagery, character, and the accompanying methods for analyzing these elements of literary texts. *Literature and Language* takes the same approach, though with a different organizational structure. Each section begins with an "Elements of…" page, which offers different formal aspects of each of three "genres": fiction, nonfiction, and poetry (Beatty, 1994, pp. 23, 44, 90). These sections focus on the literary terms common to most English classrooms, and all of the elements of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry are single words with concrete definitions, represented as the parts necessary to construct or decode the works.

Thus, despite the clear attempt on the part of some authors to excise New Criticism from the pages of the text, elements of the theory and attitudes inherent within the theory still emerge. Inadvertently, it seems as though these particular texts initially privilege impressionistic and personal responses to engage students, only to later privilege the very pedagogies that the text purports to avoid. It seems as though the purpose of the textbook, if viewed as a complete unit of instruction, is much more interested in students being able to produce measured, internally consistent, evidence-rich interpretations than to do the psychological and subjective work, such as better understanding themselves or using the students' experiences as evidence.

This analysis echoes previously mentioned claims of the invisible ubiquity of New Criticism. Even self-conscious attempts to avoid the theory inevitably return to many of the attitudes and assumptions delivered to us by the New Critics. If the breadth of teaching techniques and textual approaches were represented as a wooden sculpture, New Criticism no longer has status of helping to define the shape, color, or subject of the sculpture. It, instead, is the grain of the wood, permeating every element of the sculpture and affecting the more visible and public elements in every way.

It is also important at this point to wonder why some textbooks invariably fall back to a default position of New Critical pedagogy even when self consciously trying to avoid it. This question cannot be answered completely without a great deal more inquiry, but it is possible to posit some possibilities. First, textbook companies operate in a subsidized market economy; they compete with each other and fight for supremacy in markets. Thus, features of a particular book, such as teacher familiarity with theoretical approaches or alignment with standards, could enhance the marketability of a particular book or series. Based on the premise that most teachers were educated with a New Critical bias, most teachers would, arguably, find a New Critical methodology familiar when approaching textbooks. Second, the decades old calls for rigor and discipline in English classrooms, which will be discussed in the next section, could still be lingering forces, though the textbook industry has clearly made accommodations for more recent developments in the Reader Response movement. Whatever the reason, the pedagogical stances that echo New Criticism remain in textbooks.

The Secondary Legacy of New Criticism

At this point it should be apparent that the New Criticism that originated in the South in the 1920's is markedly different from the New Criticism that flourished in universities during the 1930's and

1940's, which is patently different from the pedagogical approaches

that infiltrated secondary English language arts classrooms in the

1940's and 1950's. As with most ideas, each version of the theory by

the same name was appropriated for reasons specific and localized to

the needs of those implementing it. The remainder of this essay will

examine the inherent problems with the pedagogy of New Criticism

that emerged and was coupled with secondary English language arts.

This isn't to say that many of the pedagogical trespasses were not

practiced by the conscripted university professors who practiced New

Criticism, quite the contrary. I.A. Richards, whom I shall discuss as an

example, certainly is demonstrative of the problems and deficits

imposed by the New Critical paradigm.

To begin, after an ambitious study into the way future secondary

English teachers are trained in University settings, Smagorinsky and

Whiting (1995) describe New Critical pedagogy in secondary

classrooms as ultimately being "teacher-centered, formalist, product-

oriented, and content-oriented; the teacher's role is seen as

authoritative, with the implication that the teacher is prescriptive

concerning knowledge and dominant in terms of controlling classroom

discourse" (p. 63). Scholes (1985) pokes fun at the role of the

instructor in a New Critical literature class as being "the image of a

brilliant instructor explicating a poem before a class of stupefied

students" (p. 24). Scholes continues that the job of an English teacher is not "to intimidate students with our own superior textual production," as he so frequently sees associated with New Critical approaches (ibid). Additionally, Probst (1987) describes New Critical assessment in secondary English classrooms as viewing the range of student responses and

> as lying on a continuum at greater or lesser distance from a
> hypothetical perfect reading. That reading is most closely
> approached by the most perfect reader, presumably the one
> most experienced and best able to suppress his individuality in
> the interest of objective, uncontaminated reading. In this view,
> the students' readings are wrong, some more so than others.
> Those who adopt this New Critical perspective see the teaching
> of literature as a process of purging those elements that
> interfere with achieving a pure reading. (p. 14)

These three accounts of New Criticism as a secondary English pedagogy draw attention to the disfluent and asymmetrical power relationships that can and do emerge. Granted, schools in general are institutions built upon asymmetrical power relationships, but we should do all in our power to look to the possibility of a more democratic and balanced pedagogy instead of reproducing unjust models. Probst and Smagorinsky & Whiting are not merely commenting as reductive critics

in this case, either. New Critical advocate Wellek (1962) reinforces this notion of a "hierarchy of viewpoints" or a method of evaluating the correctness of student responses when he writes:

> All the different points of view are by no means equally right. It will always be possible to determine which point of view grasps the subject most thoroughly and deeply. A hierarchy of viewpoints, a criticism of the grasp of norms, is implied in the concept of the adequacy of interpretation. (p. 156)

Wellek's commentary highlights two different aspects of the pedagogy implicit in New Criticism. First, he clearly maintains that there are superior and inferior interpretations. Second, and perhaps most revealing, is the method by which those interpretations shall be judged. By slipping to passive construction in the second sentence of this quote, the implicit subject, teacher or expert critic, take your pick, is omitted in favor of a broad statement of truth about the validity of such judgments.

New Criticism and the Banking Model

Brazilian educator and social critic Paolo Freire worked to rectify some of the imbalances in education that I have discussed above and what he saw as reproductions that "mirror oppressive society as a whole" (2000, p. 73). He describes the "banking model" of education, wherein "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the

students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 72).

Freire puts forth ten conditions on which the unjust "banking model" is

built; among the conditions are:

-the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing

-the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting

through the action of the teacher

-the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her

own professional authority... (p. 73)

In practice, these conventions impose a deficit model on the students,

where the instructor is set up as the default critic with the "correct"

interpretation and students are set up as unknowledgeable amateurs,

grasping to approach the level of expertise demonstrated by the

teacher. In this line, Beach and Marshall (1991) posit the

consequences of a New Critical pedagogy in their field-based analysis

of a classroom interaction: "The students' contributions to the

discussion thus far are minimal...They have few considered opinions

about the story—they have only read it once—and thus they seem

willing to listen as their teacher tells them what the story means" (p.

4).

In commenting on the intended and unintended consequences of

New Criticism's legacy, Daiches (1950) cites that New Critics "have

striven by every possible means to widen the breach between amateur

and professional criticism: even their vocabulary helps to serve this purpose" (p. 65). By creating a long list of trade-specific terms and methods, the "incidental ironies, the juxtaposing of unlike elements, the bringing together of homogeneous elements, the use of alliteration, of internal rhyme, and so forth" and the "[m]eter, diction, metaphor" and "methods of organizing the poem" that New Criticism proponent Van O'Connor (1949, p. 492) advocates, a wall is set in place, defining those who know on the inside as a privileged class and excluding those who do not begin as experts in the new, external, and arguably artificial language.

Robbins (1993) recounts her experience as a teacher and practitioner of New Criticism and how she accidentally set students into a deficit-modeled place in her classroom:

> Trained in the New Critical tradition, I viewed my main responsibility as telling students what I knew about the texts they studied. Like an interpreter translating the Rosetta Stone, I presented stable meanings to model a decoding method students could reimpose on other comparable texts. I lectured a lot, and students took notes. Then they took tests to show they had studied their notes. Or they wrote papers, usually with an assigned thesis; every student advanced the same argument, employing similar collections of textual "evidence." (p. 24)

Robbins laments the position she put her students in, asking them to read her mind and regurgitate the "stable meanings" she provided instead of respecting the creative faculties of her students as independent and intelligent people. However, it is clear that by determining the terms on which literature was discussed, the literary terms focused upon and methods to developing critical readings, Robbins had set her students up as unknowledgeable amateurs who were set to the task of grasping at straws using a language that is native to no one and known by few.

One of the earliest and most vociferous advocates of the New Critical methods, I.A. Richards, wrote in his influential book *Practical Criticism* (1929) that his experience of working with students yielded problematic literary interpretations and fallible results. This ambitious study of multiple readers reading multiple poems sought to uncover how the individual interpretations of poetry were fallible, unreliable, or just plain wrong. He cites one of the main problems with many readers of poetry is that the readers in his study had "the difficulty of making out the plain sense of poetry. [A] large portion of average-to-good...readers of poetry frequently and repeatedly fail to understand it, both as a statement and as an expression" (p. 12). In essence, the impetus for Richard's study was not only to isolate the text from extra-textual aspects that irresponsible readers might bring to the text, but

also a frustration with how "lazy and ill-trained" students were (Cooper, 1971, p. 1065).

Put in another way, New Critical critic Louise Rosenblatt (1969) comments that "the aim [of New Critics]...is to help the student read more adequately," assuming that a reader's natural tendencies are, by definition, inadequate (p. 1007).

What New Criticism represents here is the "banking model" of literature instruction, as it assumes a mastery on the part of the teacher, who is the primary actor, speaker, and explicator, and who is granted authority in the classroom by virtue of her pre-knowledge of the content.

In summation, New Critical approaches to literary and aesthetic interpretation are highly problematic. If one wants to engage in the study of the artistic object through formal means, New Criticism is one of the few languages and discourses we have at our disposal, a language that has tended to dominate classroom discourse, even in subtle, mythical ways. Without drawing attention to itself as an everyday habit or myth, New Criticism employs three dangerous pedagogical givens: the deficit model and the banking model, both serving the interests of continuing asymmetrical power relationships, reproducing unjust structures of the larger society; the problematic assumption that meaning resides in, and only in, a text, and the

problems such an assumption presents to schools' mission of teaching

reading and literacy; and pedagogical acts of robbery, stripping

students of their confidence, creativity, and intellectual ownership.

Rather than accepting a problematic pedagogy, chapter five will

suggest an alternative theoretical approach, one that empowers

students and teachers, for "Education must begin with the solution of

the teacher-student contradiction, but reconciling the poles of the

contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students"

(Freire, 2000, p. 72). One of the first steps in the reconciliation of

contradictions of which Freire speaks is to recognize the ways that the

knowledge and pedagogical attitudes received from the New Critical

movement have naturalized the role of the teacher-as-sole-expert

critic. Challenging the status of this pedagogical position as natural is

the first step in reconciling this myth and advancing literature

instruction.

Chapter Three

Five Paragraphs in English

Though there is much disagreement on the origin of the five-paragraph essay, different scholars citing its entrance back as far as ancient Greece to as late as 1950, there is less disagreement that it is an established tradition in the teaching of composition in secondary English classrooms. Of all the myths discussed in this dissertation, the five-paragraph essay is perhaps the most pervasive and effective, as it has secured for itself a fortified location in composition instruction as the standard pedagogy of teaching, all others being reduced to alternative approaches. By way of introduction, in one case study, submitted by Johnson & Smagorinsky et al (2003), a young teacher goes through the decision process of whether to use the five-paragraph essay, clearly understanding that this mode of writing represents "the basics" and the best way to prepare her students for standardized tests.

The five-paragraph essay goes by many names, including the five-Paragraph Theme (5PT), Keyhole Essay (Univ. of North Carolina Writing Center, n.d.), Hamburger Essay (Schnarr, personal communication, October, 2004), or Multi-Paragraph Essay, as has become the vogue on many standardized tests. The number of names standing for a single practice betrays the simplistic reality of the form;

most or all of the available synonyms evoke similar formats and structures of writing. For the duration of this chapter, I shall refer to it as the five-Paragraph Essay. Essay is perhaps a more appropriate term than "theme," as the implementation of this writing phenomenon has clearly transcended the production of short, thematic documents produced in English class. While I choose to use the terminology of five-paragraph essay, many of the studies and opinions I will cite favor different language. For all intents and purposes, this distinction of nomenclature is nominal and is more reflective of historical and regional distinctions instead of substantive differences.

Regardless of the name, the content of this writing pedagogy is the same. Nunnally (1991) provides perhaps the most succinct description when he writes:

The FPT requires (1) an introductory paragraph moving from a generality to an explicit thesis statement and announcement of three points in support of that thesis, (2) three middle paragraphs, each of which begins with a topic sentence restating one of the major ideas supporting the thesis and then develops the topic sentence (with a minimum of three sentences in most models), and (3) a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and points (p. 67)

The specificity of the length of paragraphs, sentences, and ideas varies from source to source. Montante (2004), in a user-guide to teaching the five-paragraph essay, encourages students to include only two ideas per main point, to be developed into 5-10 sentences. She summarizes that after outlining your ideas (according to the outline included in the article), "voila! You have a perfectly organized expository essay. That's the beauty of organizing your research in an outline: The writing takes care of itself" (p. 36).

Another take on the five-paragraph essay comes from an anonymous article in the secondary literary journal and classroom strategy guide *Literary Cavalcade* (2003), wherein the author provides a similar description as Nunnally, though the author argues for the utility of the form. The author states, "The five-paragraph essay can be used when writing short English papers, answering essay questions, composing college application essays" and many other uses "of this all purpose structure" (p. 5; p. 4). This short article, designed to outline to teachers exactly how to teach the five-paragraph essay or "The perfect paper," also posits that this relatively simple organizational structure "can be used equally easily to make persuasive arguments or present neutral exposition" (p. 4).

This chapter will examine the five-paragraph essay from several theoretical and practical perspectives, all of which contribute to the

ultimate argument of this paper: the five-paragraph essay is not only a myth, but a powerful and manipulative myth that's continued unreflective practice holds problematic consequences for the most vulnerable students in our schools. To this end, I will trace the history of the five-paragraph essay in the teaching of secondary English language arts. Establishing the mythical status of a phenomenon is the first step in performing mythology. Thus, understanding that the five-paragraph essay has become the pedagogy that goes-without-saying is a necessary precursor to a mythological critique. Secondly, I will examine the five-paragraph essay in reference to genre, investigating if the composition strategy can be accurately described as a genre of writing. In this discussion, the perspectives of substance versus form and social notions of genre, the two foremost perspectives in genre theory, will be examined, contrasted, and then applied to the five-paragraph essay. The final section of this chapter will bravely commit the affective fallacy (discussed in the previous chapter) and examine what the five-paragraph essay *does* to students, particularly the most vulnerable, as opposed to what it *is*.

It is also important to define the terms I will repeatedly use to describe the five-paragraph essay. The five-paragraph essay cannot be accurately described as an approach or a method, as these terms fail to take into account the ideological components of the five-

paragraph essay phenomenon. Nor, as I will demonstrate, can the five-paragraph essay be considered a genre of writing. Inasmuch as the five-paragraph essay is simultaneously a product, a teaching method, and signifier for other ideological concepts, the term pedagogy will be used.

Establishing the Five-Paragraph Essay as Myth

Most teachers of English and Language Arts acknowledge the pervasiveness of the five-paragraph essay in secondary composition pedagogy. Johnson & Smagorinsky et al (2003), however, cite that "the five-paragraph theme's ubiquity is more presumed than documented" (p. 137). True, there have been few, if any, broad investigative inquiries into the pervasiveness of this pedagogy of writing, though the anecdotal evidence more than compensates for this dearth of "proof." Still, Hillocks (2002) points to strong evidence in his Spencer Foundation funded review of five state-standardized writing assessments. He points to the fact that the five-paragraph essay is certainly and unequivocally being tested on all of the assessments, whether explicitly stated or not. Beyond this, Hillocks also states, "The chief finding of this study is that writing assessment drives instruction," though it should be mentioned that the focus of the study was assessment, not instruction (pp. 63-64). Considering that as of 2002, 48 states required standardized writing assessments, the

scope of the implementation of forms of writing akin to the five-paragraph essay becomes increasingly large.

In this next section, I will look at various articles in the field, written both by teachers and researchers, in order to establish that the five-paragraph essay is truly the accepted standard practice among high school teachers, even to the point that it has become invisible, assumed, and truly achieving a mythical role in the English language arts curriculum. In this literature review, I will pay close attention to the specific words the authors use to describe the placement of the five-paragraph essay in secondary English language arts.

A Dominant, Widely-Used, Entrenched, and Accepted Standard

Educator and scholar Glenda Moss (2002) concedes that in her inquiry into the nature and prevalence of this mode of writing, "The five paragraph theme was the accepted standard" in secondary practice, though she continues that she is not sure why it holds this privileged place or who put it there (p. 23). This phrase, "the accepted standard," indicates the depth of the placement of the five-paragraph essay in the curriculum. As the accepted standard, Moss recounts using the five-paragraph essay in her own class and observing students and teachers readily engaging in it as well. For Moss, it was not until she entered a graduate program of study that she had the time to reflect on the writing practice and question its

central location in the writing curriculum. In this, Moss helps to articulate the point that, in her approximation, the five-paragraph essay is truly the writing pedagogy that goes-without-saying among English teachers. As Barthes would argue, once a social phenomenon, including pedagogy, is accepted as being natural, given, or understood, it has clearly entered the realm of myth.

A second view of the centrality of the five-paragraph essay comes from Nunnally (1991), who notes that the five-paragraph essay holds a special role in secondary practice as a "national phenomenon" and entirely pervasive in most aspects of secondary English language arts (p. 68). He discusses a success case of the five-paragraph essay pedagogical approach by talking about students applying to junior college, who "were weak in diction, ideas, and literary experience." The result he observed was that by disciplining his students' free-flowing ideas and educational deficits into a prescriptive mold, his "group of bland but planned essays rose to the top" (p. 67).

Even proponents of the five-paragraph essay method of composition assent to its central, unquestioned location in the curriculum. Lockward (1985), in an essay addressing conference presenters at myriad English education conferences, situates the five-paragraph essay as one of "our [English teachers'] sacred cows" that is best left unchallenged or criticized, mostly due to the futility of such a

criticism (p. 34). In her chiding of conference presenters for entertaining the notion of eliminating the five-paragraph essay, she reinforces the solidity of the essay while simultaneously highlighting the relative difficulty of any form of meaningful change. While Lockward is a supporter of the five-paragraph essay, her opinion suggests the ferocity of some teachers' defense of the five-paragraph essay and the five-paragraph essay's near religious acceptance as a basic form of pedagogy.

Fairbrother (2003) similarly describes how the five-paragraph essay is "entrenched in the language arts curriculum" (p. 13-14), while Wesley (2000) describes the same situation mirrored in students, commenting on just how "entrenched the FPT is in student minds" (p. 57). Both authors' projects, interestingly, make use of the word "entrenched," which keeps pace with earlier views echoed in this section. However, each use of this single word actually highlights a different aspect of the five-paragraph essay in the English classroom. Fairbrother (2003) speaks of the ways in which the five-paragraph essay has solidified itself in the discipline and among teachers, eschewing other diverse pedagogical possibilities. Wesley, on the other hand, focuses on the way the five-paragraph essay has immediate and lasting effects on students and their interactions with writing.

Ultimately, the sources cited above point to the similar conclusion; the five-paragraph essay enjoys a privileged, nearly unassailable position in secondary English writing pedagogy. Between Johnson & Smagorinsky's use of "widely used," perhaps the most reserved reference, to "dominated" from Hillocks, "entrenched" from Fairbrother and Wesley, and the "accepted standard" contributed by Moss, it is clear to see the depth of acceptance the five-paragraph essay enjoys.

Myth, Alibi, and Dissent

Despite the mountain of anecdotal and qualitative documentation, the discussion surrounding the five-paragraph essay still remains both bimodal and monolithic. Based on a review of discussions regarding the five-paragraph essay in practitioner journals, arguments typically address the need for the five-paragraph essay or a case against the five-paragraph essay's effectiveness. Does it work to help students organize their otherwise scattered thoughts? Does it hinder student creativity in favor of clear organization? On the middle-ground, is the five-paragraph essay merely a convenient and temporarily satisfactory way to teach until a better method reveals itself? This focus on the two compositional alternatives presented by the five-paragraph essay, namely to engage it or choose not to use it,

helps to establish the mythical place of the five-paragraph essay in the collective mind of English teachers.

Barthes cites that myth often exists while having "a perpetual alibi: it is enough that its signifier has two sides for it always to have an 'elsewhere' at its disposal" (Barthes, 2001, p. 123). In this, Barthes makes the important distinction that the myth is not readily admitted to by its participants, as those engaged in the creation, practice, and perpetuation of a given myth can always deny the secondary nature of the sign, claiming that the first, simpler explanation free of "significance" is all that is important or existent. Culler (1983) provides the additional explanation that, for Barthes, myth's "practitioners can always deny that second-order meaning is involved, claiming they wear certain clothes for comfort or for durability, not for meaning" (p. 27).

The "alibi" phenomenon works particularly well for the myth of the five-paragraph essay. While it is accurate to assume that the five-paragraph essay represents a notion of "the basics" in secondary pedagogy, some teachers have begun to question its central location (Wesley, 2000; Nunally, 1991). However, whenever criticism of this pedagogy for writing emerges, multiple alibis abound, citing the essay's ability to help students structure thought, provide form to arguments, and even replicate the type of writing expected in colleges

and in the workplace (Speer, 1995; Kuehner, 1990; Nichols, 1966; Montante, 2004). Despite the fact that there clearly seems to be a current against the myth of the five-paragraph essay, this dissent does not negate the myth. Nor does dissent break the power of the myth and its effect on culture in which it resides. Barthes illustrates this on many occasions, and complete hegemony is never a prerequisite for a myth to be in place. An example: In "Steak and Chips," Barthes (2001) describes the French preoccupation with seeming naturalness of steak, as it is often served rare, containing life in its most vital essence. "It is the heart of meat, it is meat in its pure state; and whoever partakes of it assimilates a bull-like strength" (p. 62). Chips, similarly, hold the connotation as being peasant fare: simple and satisfying. Surely there were vegetarians at the time Barthes was writing, and their refusal to participate in the myth of meat does not deny its popular significance or its hegemony. In this way, the myth needs neither full participation nor full allegiance to exist in the mythical state. Similarly, the relatively recent dissent over the five-paragraph essay does not eliminate its mythical status. In fact, most of the discussion concerning the five-paragraph essay centers either on its defense or declamation. These internal debates rarely investigate the role, the myth, this writing construct holds on students and curriculum.

Genre, Substance, and Form

Many voices in the fields of English education refer to the five-paragraph essay as a genre of writing (Dean, 2000; Devitt, 1997). But what, exactly, is a genre? What are the boundaries that surround a genre, and what process or method allows us to define a particular text as being generic, or emblematic of a particular genre?

Academic definitions of genre vary greatly, though they are united inasmuch as they see genre as a negotiation of several variables, including substance (what the text is about), form (how the text is organized), and social context (for what rhetorical purpose the task was created). Traditional approaches to genre primarily focused on literary genres, "defined by conventions of form and content" (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 1). Many of the classifications of genre, such as fiction, poetry, and prose, come to us directly from Aristotle (Clark, 2003, p. 242). Even genres outside of literature are defined according to "attention to textual features" and the intersections of form and content (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 1). Content refers to the substance of the text, or the ideas that need to be presented through writing. Form, on the other hand, deals with the way in which arguments and content are arranged to be presented.

A renewed interest in genre theory emerged in the late 1980's and early 1990's, a renewal that sought to expand the rather stifling

notion of genre in literary studies and begin to develop a broader definition of how to organize texts. Many of the new genre theorists began to argue that genre was best studied in a social context, inasmuch as all texts are produced socially and are also received socially (Russell, 1997; Miller, 1984; Freedman & Medway, 1994). Miller, in particular, argues that genres emerge from "exigence," whereby recurrent social situations prompt the necessity of similarly crafted and worded texts.

The traditional understanding of genre can, when applied uncritically to composition, become a recipe for technological determinism. Inasmuch as genre is understood as a balance between content and form, the potential exists for the content to have to be modified in order to fit the somewhat arbitrary standards of the form. In this, the five-paragraph essay, say Rosenwasser & Stephen (1997), is not unlike the myth of Procrustes, famous for offering "wayfarers a bed for the night, but with a catch. If they do not fit his bed exactly, he either stretches them or lops off their extremities until they do" (p. 44). Johnson & Smagorinsky et al (2003) note that many of the critiques of the five-paragraph essay arise from the debate over substance and form. In this way, teachers privilege adherence to form over students' ideas such that "the form itself is the emphasis, rather than ideas, expression, or communication" (p. 141). Hillocks (2002),

in his five-state survey of writing assessments and their effects on student writing and the effects on teaching, points to the fact that institutional encouragement or insistence on prescriptive forms such as the five-paragraph essay encourages homogenous, artificial writing products. This adherence to form, following from the five-paragraph essay's clear alignment as a current-traditional exemplar, provides the foundation of the rest of this section.

My main critique of the traditional understanding of genre as it applies to the five-paragraph essay is the assumption that tools (in this case forms) are neutral, or that forms themselves have no content of their own. Barthes's argument on the nature of substance and form, particularly focusing on the level of dependence in the relationship between the two, can help to provide clarity on this issue. The concept of myth can provide a better understanding of notions of substance and form in the secondary writing classroom.

Barthes, Substance, and Form

Barthes discusses the content of myth as existing in absolute parallel to the discussion of genre: that is the precarious balance of substance and form creates myth inasmuch as it creates genre. And this makes perfect sense; the study of genre is not so much a study of texts themselves, but a study of the way that people divide, sort, and define texts into groups. In this way, genre serves the same function

as a myth, emerging from a more stable, fixed definition—being first order meaning or the text itself as a isolated document—to a document imbued with social expectations and values—a fully formed myth. As mentioned in the chapter one, Barthes begins all investigative work into culture beginning with language as an originating point of meaning, which then is interpreted through semiological or mythical analysis, followed, then, by an application of the second order meaning of myth to the larger domain of culture. In this, Barthes situates his discussion of substance and form at the transformation of the linguistic, first order meaning into the semiological, second order meaning.

Form, as mentioned previously, is the name Barthes reserves for the signifier in the mythical form of meaning making. In the chart listed in appendix A, the second order signifier (form) shares the same space with the sign, or meaning, from the first order *"language-object"* (Barthes, 2001, p. 115). "On the plane of language, that is, as the final term of the first system, I shall call the signifier: *meaning*…; on the plane of myth, I shall call it: *form"* (ibid, p. 117). This may seem a mere play with definitions, but this small, almost unrecognizable transformation in the making of myth will become increasingly important to our understanding of the functioning of the five-paragraph essay as both a pedagogical tool and a supposed genre. As

we know from semiotics, the arrival at the sign is generally held as the accumulation of meaning; the transaction is complete. Myth permits us to view what happens after simple, first-order meaning is established.

> The meaning is *already* complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions. When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains. There is here a paradoxical permutation in the reading operations, an abnormal regression from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier. (ibid)

Here Barthes posits that the text, in itself, is complete. As the text makes the shift from "meaning" to "form," the specifics of the text evaporate in favor of definition in terms of larger structures.

However, form cannot ever be considered a neutral force. It is not the structure into which we pour our ideas, readily waiting to accommodate. Nor is it a helpful boundary that gently pushes back on ideas gone astray. Form is complicit in the making of meaning. It, however, unlike substance, has at its disposal the ability to appear innocuous, like an empty football stadium or prison or school. It can claim that without activity and interference, it does not hold content of

its own. The key problem in this debate is that most pedagogical applications of genre theory, which almost all involve following a prescribed template, reverse the order by which we should interrogate a text. In this method of application, genre is sought out as a stable, fixed form. Texts are then created to conform to this "genre" instead of Barthes's proposed text-as-first-order-meaning paradigm.

Substance, on the other hand, is perhaps the more valuable and higher-stakes debate. After all, most teachers entered the field for a keen appreciation or interest in the concepts and ideas of English studies, not just the way in which those ideas are governed by standards and conventions. Unlike form and its ability to consistently borrow an alibi to slip behind scrutiny, nearly all will agree that substance, the stuff of the ideas in play, is clearly divisive and political. Substance is also the place in which Barthes concedes ground:

> It can be seen that to purport to discriminate among mythical objects according to their substance would be entirely illusory: since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones. (Barthes, 2001, p. 109)

To many this would seem an inversion of our commonly held conceptions of the nature of substance, the stuff of ideas. Immediately my curiosity is piqued: are there any substantive limits to mythology, then? Barthes anticipates this criticism:

> Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. (ibid)

Ultimately, we are left in a precarious situation, exposed on all fronts to all of the stakeholders in the five-paragraph essay as genre debate. On the one hand, Barthes posits that forms are neither neutral nor insignificant, but instead as complex as the cultural myths and invisible ideologies that surround us. Secondly, substance—the hallowed ground for most teachers—is reduced to a mere representative pose: it exists in order to speak the myth and is relatively powerless without the semiotic connection of second order signifiers that exist beyond its own boundaries.

Myth and Critique

At this point, I will divert from my descriptive and definitional arguments surrounding the five-paragraph essay to my critique of the megalith of composition pedagogy. At this point, I have shown the

degree to which the five-paragraph essay exists as a myth in secondary composition instruction; the current debate over genre, substance, and form; and the way Barthes helps inform this debate. However, establishing the fact that social phenomena, including educational phenomena, are indeed myths represents only the first portion of mythology. Certain myths can exist benignly, and uncovering their mythical status does little to curb their widespread acceptance, if there is even a motivation or occasion to do so. Other myths, those that upon their discovery turn out to be malevolent, destructive, or disarming deserve different treatment.

This critique will engage two different approaches. First, I will re-examine the assumptions implicit in treating the five-paragraph essay as a genre as a basis for critique. Given the previous discussion, clearly there are consequences associated with continuing to implement the five-paragraph essay with the assumption that it is a genre. Second, I will shift from generic considerations to the effects of the five-paragraph essay on students and the five-paragraph essays effect and expectations of students participating in the myth. This discussion will take a turn, wherein I will situate the five-paragraph essay as a first order signifier and then examine what, exactly, is the mythical content behind the five-paragraph essay.

Five-Paragraph Essay as False Signifier

I maintain, and I will show, that continuing to refer to the five-paragraph essay as a genre is problematic. The five-paragraph essay ostensibly serves as a cipher, that is to say a placeholder, in the absence of a more clearly definable form. Treating the five-paragraph essay as a genre in itself commits an error; it tries to establish a genre based solely on a form. According to this line of thinking, any writing which includes an introduction followed by three developing paragraphs followed by a conclusion would be classified as the same genre, despite the content. When we talk about the five-paragraph essay in secondary English classrooms as a "genre," we are more appropriately referring to the genres of the literary analysis, literary criticism, research paper, essay or other unnamed liberal arts styled documents, each with a uniquely situated rhetorical exigence.

English teachers have students write five-paragraph essays on a variety of topics and within several genres. Literary analysis is a separate genre than a research paper on polar bears. Mixing these two topics into the same generic category and formal structure can be reductive, if not counterproductive to many of the other goals we hope to accomplish with writing instruction. There are thousands of examples of the genres we would like our students to emulate available in journals, magazines, and on the web. After all, beginning

with a critical interrogation of reality can never be a harmful pedagogical move.

A simple review of the types of documents we are trying to have students recreate presents a very different take on the formats we have been teaching in secondary schools for decades. In fact, when you look at the elements that are emblematic of the five-paragraph essay, namely introductions, thesis sentences, topic sentences, support, and summary conclusions, many tend not to appear at all in the writing we are hoping our students will emulate. Rhetorician A. Bain (1890), a traditional late Victorian teacher and grammarian, describes in one of his textbooks that "the opening sentence, unless obviously preparatory, is expected to indicate the scope of the paragraph....This rule is most directly applicable to expository style, where, indeed, it is almost essential." Bain's mode of instruction here is prescriptive: it tells students what ought to exist in idealized form. However, what is established here is more of a false signifier, which is a common flaw of prescriptive educational reasoning.

In contrast, Braddock (1974) carried out a study examining 25 articles and essays from major U.S. magazines. The idea was to create a survey of the types of writing about what literature, humanities and the arts really looked like in print. After all, this is what many of our assignments are emulating. What he found was

quite surprising: "...I estimate that only 13% of the expository paragraphs of contemporary professional writers begin with a topic sentence." Clearly, these writers are not being graded by the same readers as our students.

Five-Paragraph Essay as Harmful Pedagogy

Another common justification for implementation of the five-paragraph essay is the presence of high-stakes tests, many of which clearly ask, either explicitly or implicitly, for five-paragraph essays (or multi-paragraph essays, or another alibi). Hillocks (2002) notes that Illinois State writing rubrics are specifically geared to assessing the five-paragraph essay. Similarly, one could argue that many of the nationally successful writing assessment tools (the 6+1 Trait Rubric as one example) do not explicitly request a five-paragraph essay, but instead measure students on exactly those features present in the five-paragraph essay. For example, in the "Organization" section of the 6+1 Trait Rubric, a paper that should earn the highest possible score in the section, a five, demonstrates "An inviting introduction [that] draws the reader in; a satisfying conclusion [that] leaves the reader with a sense of closure and resolution." Additionally, papers earning a five demonstrate "Thoughtful transitions clearly show[ing] how ideas connect" and demonstrate "sequencing [that] is logical and effective" (p. 3).

Crowley (1990) further situates the five-paragraph essay as a prototypical example of the current-traditional model of composition. In this rhetorical model, writers work with units of language of differing sizes, each nesting within the next largest like a Russian matryoshka doll. One must first master word-level issues, parts of speech, and so forth before moving on to sentence-level grammar. Once words fit nicely into sentences, sentences are assembled into paragraphs and eventually into complete essays. Each level of study acts as a microcosm of the super-ordinate level: sentences, paragraphs, and entire essays should all introduce, argue, develop, and conclude as powerfully as possible, "select, narrow, amplify" (p. 70).

One certainty of teaching in the English Language Arts is that teachers will continue to face the reality of writing assessments and testing. In recent years, writing has taken a more dominant role in the role in the testing environment. While previous generations had multiple choice SAT and ACT examinations, students today are asked to write. Students and parents desire success on these "gatekeeper" tests. The results of the SAT and ACT can help or limit students' ability to attend different colleges, and perhaps help or hinder their ability to access other rewards. This line of reasoning clearly begs the question so familiar to teachers, should we teach to the test?

Regardless of an individual teacher's answer (and I can see many responsible, acceptable positions to this longstanding debate), it is time, I argue, to become more intellectually honest with our students. This paper is certainly not advocating that teachers should neglect the realities of the classroom, nor should they mindlessly follow irrational or irresponsible demands placed on them by external forces. To ignore the expectations of forces outside our classrooms is naïve and can hurt students in a variety of ways. What this situation offers us is an opportunity to critically discuss the interaction of writing, and specifically the types of writing so inherent to secondary discourse. It provides a chance to talk critically about genre, social class, race, and audience inherent in the test or writing sample.

To posit that the five-paragraph essay is a neutral, helpful tool ignores a substantial amount of evidence to the contrary. Johnson & Smagorinsky et al (2003) agree with Hillocks (2002), when they write, "the five-paragraph theme might be viewed as a way to socialize student writers into the discourse of large-scale assessments" (p. 142). I agree with this statement, though I wish to expand its scope. The five-paragraph essay, despite all of its useful applications in the classroom and helpful organizational structures that enable students to perform well on tests, does a great deal more than socialize students into the culture of testing—this mode of writing represents a

pedagogy, now clearly socially sanctioned through testing, of socializing students into dominant discourses and modes of thought.

The five-paragraph essay, inasmuch as it denies the subtlety of rhetorical environment and context in favor of the homogenization of form, acts as a training mechanism to steer student thought into predictable, recognizable patterns. This is most obvious in standardized tests where, unlike most forms of writing, where creativity, individuality, and contribution are valued, the value is placed instead on conformity, lack of originality, and predictability. Barthes (2001) addresses the way that commonplace items or processes can act as training mechanisms in the article "Toys." Barthes argues that children's toys are designed to prefigure adult life. This mimicry of adult life is not just meant to mirror the behaviors of adults, but the entirety of ideologies and activities. Barthes writes:

> All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man. (p. 53)

Barthes's "microcosm" highlights the training aspect of the particular objects, mirroring the promise of continued and persistent adaptability often associated with the five-paragraph essay. He continues that dismissing these children's playthings as insignificant is foolish, as:

French toys *always mean something*, and this something is

always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the

techniques of modern adult life: the Army, Broadcasting, the

Post Office, Medicine (miniature instrument-cases, operating

theatres for dolls), school, Hair-Styling.., the Air Force

(parachutists), Transport..., Science. (ibid)

Barthes is positing that all of the expectations, dualities, hypocrisies,

fixations, disdains, prejudices, etc. can be found imbued within the

toys with which children play. Toys are imbued with values: they

often have race, class, and gender representations that, for the most

part, mirror those values of the adult world, for good or ill. Similarly,

the five-paragraph essay exists as a "toy" with which students begin to

understand a particular type of thinking, one which is valued and

maintained in the middle-class adult world.

What I will argue here is that the five-paragraph essay operates

much like the toys Barthes mentions; it is a training tool to help

children or students begin to assimilate into adult life. It is not just a

battle over test scores, organization of ideas, or structured and

disciplined writing, but instead a battle for the minds and bodies of

students. In a personal communication with the authors of the

Johnson & Smagorinsky et al (2003) article, Faust (2001) commented

that "we want to beat the concept of the five-paragraph theme into their souls" (p. 136).

Like toys, writing can be indicative of particular modes of thought common to those who design the plaything or writing assignment. For example, since 1674, all French secondary students have been taught Boileau's couplet:

> *Ce que l'on conçoit bien, s'énonce clairement,*
> *Et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément.*
>
> If you think out just what you want to say,
> the words will come without the least delay.
> (Boileau, 1674, cited in Thody & Course, p. 70)

Barthes, according to Thody and Course, would argue that:

> Clarity is not an absolute, indispensable quality in prose. It is a class attribute, a way of writing which serves as a sign that you are a member of a particular class speaking to other members of the same class. Clarity is, Barthes insists, no more a universal and universally desirable quality than the habit of reading a page of prose from left to right. (p. 70-71)

Barthes develops this idea in his first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), arguing that this model of "clarity" in writing had a firm, situated historical force behind it. Barthes argues that the rise of the bourgeoisie in 17th century France brought about this shift. Thus, Barthes argues, fiction writing of the next three centuries became increasingly complicit in bourgeois ideology, as the writers, editors,

and readers shared a common expectation of texts. As a result, the naturalist and realist modes of fiction that became so pervasive took on the additional quality of becoming natural to their audience. Good writing, the writing produced in a particular style, became more highly valued than other registers of communication. This is very much like Barthes's essay on all-in wrestling, wherein he distinguishes that the modes of performance dominated by the middle class, such as theatrical performances, were believed to be better, more natural, or of higher value than the working class counterparts. These reverberations are still felt today, as particular modes of art or expression are valued as fine arts while modes of art more common to people of lower social standing are relegated to popular culture, common arts, or, at worst, trash entertainment. For the time being I will forgo an examination of the validity of these artistic judgments and instead focus on these class-based value judgments as they pertain to writing created in schools.

Back to Boileau's couplet, it is clear that in France a particular type of writing was both valued and encouraged. Writing that was thought out ahead of time, perhaps even outlined, was clearly preferred over other modes of writing that relied on spontaneity, creativity, or candor. Ultimately, the concept of good or clear writing invariably gives way to a more likely judgment of sanctioned or

supported writing. In this, writing is inextricably bound to the standards and practices of the community producing it, receiving it, and evaluating it.

We can clearly see this concept demonstrated in much of the scholarly literature about composition and African American students. For instance, Balester (1993) comments that the composition produced by African American students is often "judged uneducated, sloppy, and ugly, or believed to be a debased form of so-called correct English, with no discernible rules of grammar or use" (p. 2). Ball (1996) situates this disparity of judgment on her assertion that African American students' compositions reflect oral communication patterns instead of those commonly found in middle-class white discourses. Gumperz, Kaltman, & O'Connor (1984, cited in Ball) reinforce this notion, commenting that the styles and registers common in African American language are not easily translated into the modes of discourse found in schools, such as expository written prose. However, it is clear to most that study this subject that there are common, rule-governed features that are common to most writers from the African American community. In this, writers who fail to produce documents are not showing a failure of writing skills, but more a failure to conform to the dominant discourses present in education. This is perhaps summarized best by Gee (1989) when he describes

that "a Discourse is a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions non how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (p. 7). Gee's definition of discourse, and moreover his introduction of the distinction between Discourse "with a capital 'D'" and discourse "with a little 'd,'" shows us that use of language and literacy is far more complicated than the mere use of written or verbal language (p. 6).

Additionally, Nunnally (1991) cites his experience working with low income and ethnic minority students that taking their uncoordinated, sloppy, and disorganized thoughts and applying an external form, in this case the five-paragraph essay, greatly improved his students' writing. These "bland but planned" essays helped his students get into college. Other teachers surely follow this reasoning as well (p. 69).

Anyon (1981) echoes these claims, though she applies the same standards to all schooling instead of just composition. Additionally, Anyon focuses, quite appropriately, on social class instead of race as an indicator of scholastic knowledge. When Anyon interviewed teachers and students in a working class, or "tough," school, teachers revealed a number of prejudices and biases toward their students:

One fifth-grade teacher said, for example, "What these children need is the basics." When I asked her what the basics were, she said, "The three Rs—simple skills." When I asked why, she responded, "They're lazy. I hate to categorize them, but they're lazy." (p. 7)

Anyon comments that the students seemed to internalize this knowledge when she explains that "It should be noted that during discussions of school knowledge not a single child in either working-class school used words such as 'think,' or 'thinking.' Most spoke in terms of behaviors or skills" (Ibid, p. 12). Anyon comments that school knowledge in the working-class school is "Knowledge of 'practical' rule-governed *behaviors*—procedures by which the students carry out tasks that are largely mechanical" (Ibid). Rote learning of external rules and forms, such as the five-paragraph essay, clearly fits into this behavioral/mechanical mode of instruction.

Anyon contrasts the school knowledge of working-class children with three other environments: middle-class, affluent, and executive elite schools. Anyon found that students in middle-class schools and above were, generally, exposed to more thought-oriented and less behavior-oriented curricula. Students seemed to have a more open idea to their role in the creation of knowledge and had a much easier time adapting to the forms and discourses present in school.

My assertion here is that the myth of the five-paragraph essay is imbued with the discourse and expectations of white-middle class schools and staff. This is no wonder when we look at the makeup of our teaching force. Feistritzer (1996) reports that 89 percent of teachers in public schools are white (nearly 75 percent female), with African Americans and Chicano/Latinos contributing only 9 percent of the teaching force. Additionally, several studies have shown that assessment bias is likely among those who design standardized tests. Kohn (2000) reports, "standardized tests are unfair because the questions require a set of knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background" (p. 36). The writings produced for these standardized tests "are often scored on the basis of imitating a contrived model (such as a cookie cutter five-paragraph essay)" (p. 12). The five-paragraph essay, which is very often used in assessments as well as in classrooms, is implemented in a similar manner as the previously mentioned toys in that it helps to condition the child/student both mentally and physically.

Inasmuch as the five-paragraph essay can be seen to encourage predictable, disciplined, and organized patterns of thought common to white, middle-class discourse, the five-paragraph essay can be seen as a classroom management tool as well. Often times, the five-paragraph essay can becomes just as much of an exercise in following

directions as it is an exercise in writing. In this, the students' bodies can become disciplined to the norms and expectations of schooling in the same way their thoughts are being molded. The five-paragraph essay is a bastion of ceremonial markers of expository prose, some of which exist in other modes of writing, some of which are limited to classroom composition. For example, in a five-paragraph essay, a clear thesis sentence that previews the main points of the paper must be included as the last sentence of the first paragraph. Similarly, as mentioned above by Braddock, body paragraphs must begin with a topic sentence that clearly refers back to the thesis statement. Each paragraph should begin with a clear transition word and end with a sentence that operates as a microcosm of the coming conclusion. The value on a particular mode of thinking and organization is palpable, particularly the current-traditional rhetoric discussed above by Crowley (1990).

Some critics have charged that the five-paragraph essay exists because of the grading reduction it offers teachers. A teacher can scan a paper quickly, without regard to content, for the ceremonial markers of composition. Does the paragraph begin with something that looks like a topic sentence? Is the first word in the paragraph a transition? Does the thesis have three main points that are mirrored by the topic sentences? Does the conclusion include similar language

as the introduction? Software programs that look for these cues are easy, inexpensive, and readily available. This is confirmed through anecdotes about the ease of grading of five-paragraph essays. One story tells of a student who copied and pasted a single paragraph five times to make a complete, albeit nonsensical, essay. He was awarded the highest score. Another story tells of a student who decided to reverse the order of the paragraphs in the paper, finding the same results.

Beyond the subtle markers of management, more concrete notions exist as well. Most five-paragraph essays must be created within a set time limit to exacting standards, particularly true on standardized tests, though not uncommon to timed, in-class essays. Many states have invested in document cameras that take a picture of the students' work products, cropping out the margins and other areas students are encouraged not to write. Students quickly learn that straying beyond the lines can be hazardous and come with many consequences. This discipline of the physical body, an instilling of a *technique du corps* all its own, has nothing to do with the ideas and thoughts supposedly produced through writing essays, but instead a training tool designed to discipline students' bodies and minds. Conformity is the key, encouraging students to create a document that is readily identifiable as an essay to the casual viewer instead of

creating crafted rhetorical documents. According to one paid grader of standardized test essay sections, it was common to

> only briefly scan papers before issuing a grade, searching for clues such as a descriptive passage within a narrative to determine what grade to give. 'You could skim them very quickly...I know this sounds very bizarre, but you could put a number on these things without actually reading the paper. (Kohn, 2000, p. 12)

As educators, it is vital that we are honest with ourselves as to the causes and effects of the pedagogical strategies we implement. Second, we need to find a way to be intellectually honest with our students about the pedagogies we employ, their usefulness, and the limits of their efficacy. One suggestion is to help students to interrogate the rhetorical nuance of the writing assignments themselves. In this, educators can begin to help their students to understand the balance of substance and form necessary to engage in thoughtful writing. Students can become empowered as mythologists in their own right, asking critical questions about the myths that govern their actions in class.

Chapter Four

Introduction: Vocabulary is Basic

Over the course of the twentieth century, the teaching of
vocabulary, along with grammar, is an activity nearly synonymous
with the teaching of English. Articles in practitioner journals such as
The English Journal have dealt with the most effective ways to teach
vocabulary, the words that ought to be taught, and the students most
in need of increased vocabulary.

If vocabulary is accepted as a persistent and important concern
of English teachers, it becomes increasingly important to better
understand what hidden assumptions and myths exist behind the
practices and participation in the teaching of vocabulary. In order to
uncover these myths, I reviewed over 75 years of articles in *English
Journal*, as it is the leading journal for practitioners of secondary
English language arts in terms of distribution and participation.
Though it would be ideal to look only at the past several years of
practitioner journal articles to try and isolate the practices of
vocabulary instruction *in situ*, the discussion surrounding vocabulary
instruction is surprisingly sparse. In a review of all articles published
in *The English Journal* from 1995 to 2005, a JSTOR search for the word
"vocabulary" returned 201 results. However, less than 10 of the
results were feature articles dealing specifically with vocabulary

instruction, indicating that most of the discussions surrounding vocabulary are immersed in the discourse of other topics not specifically related to vocabulary or vocabulary development in their own right, but the ways that vocabulary informs other discussions. Thus, it is more valuable to see the way the myths of vocabulary instruction developed over time, as it is clear that many other educational practices in the status quo are results of much earlier developments and beliefs.

Vocabulary, though, leads a double life. This chapter will explore a parallel set of myths: those myths about vocabulary that exist inside English language arts classrooms among its practitioners and those myths that exist beyond its walls. In order to accomplish this task, I will examine the ways vocabulary is discussed in two different contexts, paying particular attention to the reasoning behind why one needs to develop an extended vocabulary. The first set of texts draws from practitioner journal articles selected for their interest in vocabulary instruction. In this investigation, I look to two sources of information to help understand the underlying myths at work. First, I will look at what is explicitly said about why students need to engage in vocabulary study, or the *myth of presence*. The myth of presence, as indicated in Chapter Three in the discussion of the five-paragraph essay, focuses on the way in which myths can develop in plain sight of

their participants. Second, I look at what is not said by the author, what is taken for granted, or goes-without-saying: the myth of absence. This concept, wherein myths develop and flourish without the direct attention of their participants, is discussed in Chapter Two in reference to the practices of New Criticism.

If English teachers are the largest group actively trying to increase the public's vocabulary (for if they are not, they are certainly the most organized), there exists a secondary and parallel group trying to achieve the same goal. A simple search on Amazon.com or Google.com will return thousands of results of vocabulary building products, including books, audio cassettes and CDs, CD-ROMs, and online tutorials. As I will show, whereas the myths in the classroom primarily focus on words-for-their-own-sake or to enhance students' ability to decode increasingly difficult texts, the discourse outside of the classroom focuses on a different set of assumptions, namely the external signifiers associated with having a large vocabulary.

The dual nature of the discussion surrounding word-learning provides a fertile and interesting ground for comparative mythology. It also exposes an interesting tension in the making of myth: what happens when smaller groups within larger social settings operate as sites of independent myth creation? In this way, the differing notions of word-learning create what I call a *myth of symbiosis*. In this form

of myth, the beliefs and expectations of a closed community can be analyzed in terms of their relationship to the larger myths that surround the practices at hand; in this case, we speak of vocabulary. Just as in symbiotic relationships in the other arenas, such as the animal kingdom, the myth of symbiosis permits a view of two distinct entities, independent in some aspects of their existence and intentions but interdependent in other aspects of their interactions.

Barthes (2001) discusses the potential for myths to form within subsections of society, or "to a particular section of the collectivity" as opposed to "the entire community" (pp. 156-157). English teachers and scholars, inasmuch as they form a separate discourse community, hold the potential to develop myths that either differ slightly from those maintained in the entire community or to create myths that exist in few, if any, other communities.

Description of a Phenomenon: Vocabulary in Class

Overall, the largest prevailing myth with respect to vocabulary instruction is the underlying rationale for teaching vocabulary. It seems, at times, as though the argument among scholars and teachers has to do with the best methods to teach vocabulary for its own sake, rather than a clear articulation of what benefits could arise from students' learning of new words.

It is possible that among students, parents, and teachers in other disciplines that vocabulary instruction shares a level of recognition on par with, or perhaps exceeding, the five-paragraph essay. Also, much like the five-paragraph essay, the element most memorable of vocabulary instruction is not the content, but the method or mode of instruction. Michaels (2001) cites these all-too-familiar methods as worksheets and weekly quizzes, many similar to those found on standardized tests. This basic description of the methods employed for the learning of vocabulary is further embellished by Ellis (2002), when he explains:

> When you think of vocabulary, there is a good chance that you
> think of long lists of words from social studies or science
> textbooks, spelling word lists, or even the humongous lists of
> terms to study for college entrance exams. Zillions of flash
> cards also may come to mind. No doubt you share the common
> childhood experience of having to "go look up the words in a
> dictionary, write the definition, and then write a sentence using
> the term. (paragraph 1)

Here, Ellis is banking on the certainty that readers, both teachers and outsiders alike, will recall a similar or slightly varied experience with learning vocabulary in primary or secondary school.

Ianacone (1993) furthers the description of the common pedagogical practices in English language arts classrooms and introduces some of the potential implications of such a pedagogy, borrowing ever so slightly from Kurt Vonnegut's resigned, acquiescent mantra of acceptance of a state of affairs presented in *Slaughterhouse 5*:

> And so it goes: students are told to "look up" the meanings of ten, fifteen, or twenty words each week. Typically, an alphabetized list is distributed on Monday; a quiz is given on Friday. Students often spend Monday either singly or in pairs looking up...words [that] are out of meaningful context[.] ...If the quiz on Friday takes twenty minutes, then Monday's forty minutes plus Friday's time works out to approximately thirty percent of the classtime [sic] for the week. (p. 41)

Ianacone's description of the amount of instructional time required to teach vocabulary instruction is not dissimilar from my own experience in myriad classrooms. However, many pre-packaged learning courses in vocabulary study, such as *Vocabulary for the high school student* (Levine, 1994), not only include introductory activities to familiarize students with the words for the week, but also homework assignments and in-class activities. As mentioned in the introduction of this

dissertation, I have even seen one teacher occupy three out of five class days with vocabulary instruction.

Despite taking up a great deal of time in secondary English language arts classrooms, vocabulary instruction is often seen as an activity ranking lower in importance than other aspects of the classroom. For example, Ackerman (1969), in a description of how she set up a literature-based and outside-reading-focused classroom, tells of the way that vocabulary took a backseat to the rest of the unit. Ackerman's goal was to create an environment where students could read what they wanted as often as they wanted. The problem arose that simply reading for enjoyment produced very few measurable data on which to base grades. In an attempt to alleviate the burden of assessment from the act of reading, Ackerman describes how teaching vocabulary was a convenient method to quantify some aspect of student learning: "[s]ince grades are *de rigeur*, in our small high school, the students decided that vocabulary study based on words from current new magazines would be relatively painless, practical, and grade-yielding" (p. 1042). She reports that in post-unit interviews with students, representative comments included that it was a "[p]erfect six weeks except for vocabulary—too much time out" (p. 1044). Ackerman echoes these student sentiments, commenting that despite the fact that "students conceded that those words cropped up

frequently in their own reading," the overall "[c]onsensus was that vocabulary study took too much time from the reading period" (p. 1044). The prevailing interest here is finding ways to include vocabulary instruction into the curriculum without infringing on the time reserved for other pursuits.

Ackerman's analysis of vocabulary instruction in schools highlights a point that will be discussed in the next section; vocabulary, though arguably a major portion of language study, is often conscripted into service of another station of the academic trinity, reading and literature. This conscription is not necessarily problematic, as it certainly makes sense to imbed word learning into other literate activities. However, the desire to enhance other aspects of the English curriculum, in this case, becomes the goal, not necessarily the other possible goals of improving a student's general linguistic competence. Yet increasing the ability to sight-recall words while reading remains one of the only reasons cited for why students ought to learn new words. In most all other discussions of vocabulary instruction, the impetus behind teachers teaching and students learning vocabulary is either omitted entirely or situated as a mechanism to enhance another aspect of language development, namely reading skills or an element of overall grammatical competence.

Thus, with the high-end possibility of somewhere between 30 and 60 percent of class time during the average week of language learning in the secondary English classroom with questionable efficacy and engagement, it is of particular importance at this moment to interrogate the assumptions of these practices and the overall purpose of this instruction. In the next section, I will analyze the fundamental myths at play in vocabulary instruction in secondary English language arts by analyzing the underlying justifications and reasoning for including vocabulary instruction in the curriculum.

Vocabulary Assets

It is no secret that we live in a world of words. We use words on a daily basis to communicate and think; of the entire faculty in a high school, English teachers are most responsible for the study of language and, hence, words. Questions, though, about which words are most essential to productive participation in society, how many total words one needs to be a competent social participant, and myriad other questions help frame the issue for the discussion about vocabulary and pedagogy in secondary schools. The not-for-profit educational advocacy group cast.org summarizes the reasons for implementing vocabulary instruction well:

By high school, students with a diversity of backgrounds and skills are immersed in content area instruction. Yet all students,

and particularly those who are struggling, are confronted with vocabulary and concepts that are unfamiliar or misunderstood. Those misunderstandings interfere with comprehension of content area curriculum. Robust vocabulary instruction and comprehension strategy instruction can combine to create depth and breadth in understanding words, concepts, topics, and themes of high school content area materials. (www.cast.org, p.1)

In this approximation, words lie at the heart of content understanding in all aspects of school. By proxy, cast.org implies that without the necessary tools, in this case words, to make sense of the concepts in school, students are doomed to fall behind. Words, in this line of thinking, are an essential precursor for all other cognitive activities in the classroom.

The next section will examine the rationales for teaching vocabulary in schools. Regardless of the specific reasons for teaching vocabulary, there certainly exists a common belief among teachers, true or not, that students need vocabularies larger than those they develop out of school to be successful in school. Moreover, there is an accompanying belief that vocabulary can be developed and nurtured through direct instruction or other educational intervention. Both of these statements can be givens in this discussion, for if either

assumption was not present, vocabulary instruction would have ceased to exist long ago. In other words, the accepted premises of students' perceived need to learn vocabulary coupled with students' ability to learn are necessary precursors to any pedagogical intervention.

Vocabulary Deficits

Based on the available literature by and for secondary English teachers, there seems to be a prevailing myth at play, true or not, that the vocabularies that students develop outside of school are insufficient for the goals of the English classroom. Much of this thinking follows the pattern that comprehension of words allows the integration of new words; we define words using words, and, thus, the more words we have at our disposal, the greater number of words we will be able to integrate. However, Freeman & Freeman (2004) cite numerous studies that indicated that knowledge of words themselves is insufficient, favoring instead knowledge of concepts. In this understanding, the number of words a student is able to define is not as important as the student's ability to incorporate those words in a meaningful way into the concepts that these words represent. Regardless, much of the focus in vocabulary research in the past century has focused on how many words people need to know versus how many words they actually know.

Estimates of how many words an average person has or needs at her disposal at any time vary greatly between sources. The lowest estimate available comes from Hirsch & Nation (1992), who speculate that 5,000 words ought to be sufficient for most all readers. This estimate is based on looking at the highest frequency words contained in novels and other books read for pleasure. Higher estimates include Nagy & Anderson (1984), who argue that the entire battery of texts used through grade 9 demonstrate an estimated 88,700 word families, though high school seniors have an average lexicon of about half this, around 45,000 words. Pinker (1994), based on an analysis of Nagy, takes into account proper nouns and names and emerges with a figure of around 60,000 words. Between these estimates, D'Anna, Zechmeister, & Hall (1991) estimate that a given adult knows around 17,000 words. This wide range of estimates is to be expected, as research in this area is typically divided into those who look at people and those who look at texts people read. There is also a disparity between those who see variations of similar words as a single word or as several different words: run, running, runner, and so on. Additionally, most studies choose to either look at "receptive" or "productive" aspects of language. Receptive studies focus on a person's ability to identify a particular word in the context of written or spoken language (Waring, 1999). In these studies, it is less important

that a person is able to provide a dictionary definition of a word but is able to understand the generalized concept of the message. Productive studies, conversely, look at performative competence in language, namely the acts of speaking and writing. Waring also cites, "It is received wisdom that a learner's Receptive or Passive vocabulary is larger than the Productive or Active vocabulary" (p. 1). This makes sense intuitively, as it is decidedly easier to understand an unfamiliar word in context than it is to use it correctly in the appropriate context.

Beyond this, most authorities agree that the vast majority of a person's functional vocabulary comes from being immersed in a language, or what the National Institute for Literacy calls learning "the meaning of most words indirectly, thorough everyday experiences with oral and written language" (www.nifl.gov, para. 3). There is substantially less agreement as to how this immersed learning occurs, and it remains a healthy and vigorous debate among reading theorists and psychologists. The debate is generally split between two types of word-learning experiences: those that occur within a formally structured environment designed to facilitate the particular type of learning and those that occur without direct, intentional intervention. The former concept, wherein learning occurs in a structured, direct environment, is generally called explicit instruction. This mode of learning accounts for the practices engaged in classrooms of teaching

words with the goal of a student learning those precise words. The other form of word-learning, essentially learning without explicit attention on the act or goal of learning, carries several different names. Though implicit is generally the term used to describe the non-explicit modes of word acquisition, authors, such as Hulstijn (1989) prefer the term incidental, defined as "learning of vocabulary as the by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning" (p. 271). Rieder (2002) explains some of the differing definitions of differing terms for the similar phenomena in this debate: "This [confusion] can be illustrated by the diverse terminology used, contrasting e.g. 'incidental' vs. 'intentional' learning, 'attended' vs. 'unattended' learning, or 'implicit' acquisition vs. 'explicit' directed learning" (p. 24). For the sake of simplicity, the terms implicit and explicit will suffice for this discussion.

Of course, it is not adequate to equate all explicit learning with schooling and all implicit learning with out-of-school experiences. It is completely safe to assume that implicit and explicit learning of vocabulary take place in nearly all environments. Moreover, this assumption points to the fact that a staggeringly overwhelming amount of vocabulary is learned outside of school, regardless of whether this extra-curricular learning takes place implicitly or explicitly (Stahl, 1999).

Despite the fact that students function quite well in their home communities with the words they absorb strictly by participating in those communities, educators nearly universally find the vocabularies available to students insufficient. The National Institute for Literacy adds, "Although a great deal of vocabulary is learned indirectly, some vocabulary should be taught directly" (nifl.gov, para. 4). Every aspect of the discussion that follows is predicated on this basic, mythical assumption: direct instruction works to increase vocabulary. These two assumptions, that students' baseline vocabulary skills are insufficient and that vocabulary can be taught directly, exist to such a degree that they clearly go without saying. All educational interventions aimed at improving vocabulary necessarily rely on these two assumptions, lest the intervention be carried out in the absence of belief that any change could occur.

Deighton (1960), for example, highlights the first principle, that students' vocabulary is lacking, when he writes, "Why do we find such relative poverty of expression among high school students and among their parents?" (p. 82). Deighton continues:

In the black-or-white world of student life, persons, automobiles, books, and clothes are all favorably referred to as *cool* or *neat* and unfavorably designated as *square*. These undifferentiated mass-words have only a positive or negative valence. They tell

nothing about the person or thing under observation. They

merely project the speaker's own reaction. (p. 84)

The "relative poverty of expression" Deighton discusses here

surrounds the perceived inability of his students to produce nuanced,

articulate opinions. However, it becomes clear that Deighton is more

interested in his students producing thoughtful, nuanced responses to

the literature being discussed in class. Producing such responses to

literature is clearly a necessary goal for students, even today, to do

well in school.

To expand Deighton's "relative poverty," Doemel (1970)

provides a possible answer: lack of experiences. She comments that

she "observed, as with the "culturally deprived" student, that one of

the primary reasons for lack of vocabulary development in my

students was a lack of experiences which would have broadened

vocabulary" (p. 79). Many of them had never been outside the city

limits of their own town, not to mention outside the state or the

country. They had no concept of what was happening in the world,

nor did they care. Newspapers were "for finding out what was on at

the drive-in!" (p. 79). The view promoted by Deighton and Doemel

point to a view of language and specifically vocabulary that will be

discussed later in this chapter: the Cultural Literacy movement of E.D.

Hirsch (1999).

Why Teach Vocabulary?

Barton poses the largely unvoiced question, "Why Teach Vocabulary?" in his 2001 *English Journal* article. He replies to his own question: "As you are no doubt aware, a conventional response to this question is, 'Because my students need to learn new words'" (p. 82). Barton, speaking for his fellow teachers, highlights the assumption that knowing more words is superior to knowing fewer. Additionally, words, seemingly, are of benefit either for their own sake or are beneficial for a reason that is not openly discussed. Reinforcing Barton's emissary comments on behalf of his colleagues, Clark (1981) comments, "Students do need help in increasing both their recognition and use of vocabularies" (p. 16). However, Clark, in her article, moves directly from this sentence into methods for achieving the claim. In other words, Clark argues that students need more words, and then offers several strategies and resources for facilitating this learning, but she omits the rationale behind why students need increased vocabularies in the first place.

Among the many articles written on vocabulary in the last three-quarters of a century, this omission is a common pattern. Most articles in practitioner journals, and websites too numerous to mention, dive straight into a particular practice or activity to help enhance student learning of vocabulary. What this trend points to is

either a common understanding among teachers of the reasoning for learning vocabulary or an assumption that the learning of words is good for its own sake. In either case, though I think the former is more viable, there is a strong level of common understanding among English teachers, an acceptance that there is an underlying assumption that goes-without-saying, a myth. Kahle (1972) emphasizes the mythical notion of vocabulary when he writes:

> As a second-year eighth-grade English teacher one of the
>
> biggest problems I faced was the teaching of vocabulary. That
>
> my average and below average students needed vocabulary
>
> building went without saying. But I felt the standardized, twenty
>
> words a week, memorize-the-definitions-for-a-matching-test
>
> programs weren't the answer. (p. 286).

Kahle continues that drill-and-kill methods of memorization and recall were the accepted norm among English teachers, in his experience, even though much of the implementation of this teaching method did little to enhance student learning. Kahle's observation is supported by researchers, such as McKeown (1993), who found that memorization of words and dictionary definitions does not promote word learning.

In the Service of Another Master

Vocabulary education is not limited to the English classroom. Most disciplines within American high schools see the need to enhance

students' vocabulary reserves to deal with the complexities of the particular subject matter. Science teachers teach the words necessary to define complex concepts such as *Deoxyribonucleic acid*, *chlorophyll*, or even processes like *oxidation*. History teachers need students to know particular words in order to understand the underlying concepts these words signify: serf or democracy or labor. Thought among English teachers and curriculum developers follows a similar trend: we need words to better understand the concepts in class. But if the domain of the English teacher is all printed material, what body of vocabulary should we address?

Doemel's earlier mention of newspapers is interesting and suggestive. Throughout the years, many teacher/scholars have discussed newspapers either as the goal of or pathway to vocabulary mastery (White, 1948; Baxter, 1951; Sanders, 1960). In this Jeffersonian-inspired method, it seems as though the goal of vocabulary instruction is to create readers competent to engage in the civic discussions only available through newspapers. Newspapers-as-goal pedagogy highlights another key assumption in the intra-English discussion about vocabulary: the purpose of vocabulary instruction, when articulated, is primarily to serve the goals of reading instruction.

Vocabulary is usually seen, or at least treated, as part of the reading curriculum instead of a subset of the language-study

curriculum.   Words, under this approach, are a necessary and modular component of a larger skill or activity.   Burroughs (1982) supports this model by arguing that the purpose of vocabulary development is to increase students' ability to decode difficult texts; therefore, students should be able to access a wider variety of texts in and out of the classroom.   Smith (1997) echoes this thinking, commenting, "From a teacher's point of view the issue [of vocabulary] in the classroom usually revolves around how to improve the student's reading comprehension, whether it be in content area reading or in the language arts" (paragraph 3).

Beyond the emphasis on vocabulary to enhance reading, which certainly occupies most of the interest among primary school teachers, secondary classrooms typically have an ulterior motive for having students with developed reading abilities.   Literature and literary study are estimated at occupying well over fifty percent of class time in high school English classrooms (Applebee, 1992).   Basic comprehension and decoding, though certainly still highly valued on standardized tests, serves as a tool itself to help students access literature. Readence & Seafross (1980) summarize the position of teachers in this regard nicely when they write, "If young people are to read with understanding and enjoyment, they must develop their vocabularies." As if confirming that this simple fact goes-without-saying, they add the

comment, "Obvious? Of course" (p. 43). This reasoning highlights the two desired outcomes mentioned above: students need words to decode text and students need to decode text to read and enjoy literature. Additionally, entire books have been written to address the issue of how to employ vocabulary in order to enhance students' appreciation of literature. Yinger (2001), for instance, created vocabulary units designed to allow students better access to the frequently taught books *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Chocolate War*. In a complementary way, Sanders (1960) comments, "I knew my pupils in American literature had trouble with O. Henry's word power and couldn't appreciate the literary elements until they understood" (p. 483). Vocabulary, to Sanders, was at the heart of his students' understanding and appreciation of the text at hand.

Ultimately, the practitioner articles mentioned above all point to a similar, commonly held understanding of the nature of vocabulary. The next section will look at another site of vocabulary instruction: the private sector. In this section, vocabulary will be shown to be more of a form of cultural literacy than a tool to help with higher order thinking and decoding skills.

The Vocabulary Myth in the Marketplace

In the world beyond the English language arts classroom, vocabulary enjoys a different set of myths. Unlike in the classroom,

where vocabulary is primarily seen as a necessary tool to help in other academic pursuits, in the private sector, marketing myth of vocabulary focuses much more on the external signifiers associated with success: respect, money, and power. Conversely, a lack of vocabulary is not discussed in terms of a lack of access, but judgment. Despite this inversion of the vocabulary discussion, what the private-sector vocabulary proponents do enunciate quite well is their reasoning for why individuals need vocabulary and how a particular product of method achieves this goal.

This next section will track three primary myths. First, all of the products share the assumption in common that vocabulary is linked with intelligence, or at least perceived intelligence. Second, a large vocabulary provides or is necessary to success. Third, vocabulary is relatively easy to acquire through the use of tapes, CDs, or workbooks. In order to explore these myths, this section will present the ways in which vocabulary is discussed outside of classrooms by looking at two vocabulary enhancement products: Verbal Advantage and Executive Vocabulary Power Words.

Verbal Advantage

The first product, Verbal Advantage, is the most aggressively marketed of the vocabulary building products. Upon visiting the product website, the user is greeted with the first claim, in large print

and colorized, "Now you can amass a Harvard Graduate's Vocabulary [sic] in just 15 minutes a day!" (www.verbaladvantage.com). While certainly a clever marketing slogan meant to attract the attention of Internet surfers, most of whom ostensibly have 15 minutes a day, an important and recurring trend appears. There is a complex set of meanings at work in this single sentence. First, vocabulary and education go hand in hand. Second, Harvard produces individuals with large vocabularies. The page continues:

> Studies over many decades have proven that a strong command of the English language is directly linked to career advancement, to the money you make and even to social success. To move ahead in your career, your vocabulary level must at least equal the average level of the members of your profession. To excel, your vocabulary must surpass that of your colleagues.

Note that instead of the instructional benefits commonly mentioned by teachers, the tone of the advertisement for this product and those products that follow focuses far more on the same skills as being important in a manner that exceeds their surface, functional value. The words "advancement," "success," and "excel" particularly demonstrate this tone of achievement over competence.

In addition to the value-added nature of the advertisement, a second tone enters the advertisement for Verbal Advantage: "Every

day, people judge you by the words you use." This second impetus for learning vocabulary, fear of judgment and inadequacy, similarly constructs a different image than English teachers. The passage continues, "Rightly or wrongly, they make assumptions about your intelligence, your education and your capabilities. Nothing makes a better impression than a solid mastery of the English language." Several issues abound in this relatively short statement. First, the statement hedges by asserting the possibility that when people make assumptions about your intelligence or capabilities based on your vocabulary, they could be correct or incorrect. However, this assumption is stated and implied much more explicitly above in the advertisement, where the consumer is promised a "Harvard Graduate's Vocabulary," clearly solidifying the notion that educated people, like those graduating from Harvard, have large vocabularies while you, who probably didn't receive a Harvard diploma, need some work on your word power. Beyond the assumption of education comes the assumption of intelligence, which has long been associated with level of education. There is also a clear confusion between knowledge of words and a command of a language. In this line of logic, words themselves have the power to bind together an entire language system, independent of grammar, syntax, and usage. Further, the value of vocabulary, or as it is restated here, a "command of the

English language" is not of value in itself, but for its broader connotative aspects of education, intelligence, and abilities."

The key theme highlighted by the Verbal Advantage product aligns itself with a cultural literacy modeled framework: there are certain facts, words, or concepts that an educated individual ought to know (Hirsch, 1999). In this, vocabulary is seen less as a tool to help with a larger cognitive task, the purpose understood among school teachers, but as a marker of education, intelligence, success, and social class. There is also an established in-crowd versus out-crowd message: "your vocabulary will surpass that of most executives and professionals, including those with advanced degrees. You will then be speaking with the vocabulary power of the top 5% of all adults-the most successful, highest-earning people." In this statement, connotations of superiority emerge, as one may "surpass" others in skill, even those with lofty accreditations. One also holds the potential to enter a level of distinction by surpassing 95% of adults to join the vanguard of "the most successful" and "highest-earning people."

Interestingly, nowhere in the entire advertisement for the Verbal Advantage product does it mention increasing one's ability to increase the ability to comprehend or disseminate texts. The entire focus of the product, at least based on the discourse surrounding the product,

focuses on the performance of words, particularly in oral discourse. This theme is repeated and accentuated in the next several products.

Executive Vocabulary Power Words

The second product, Executive Vocabulary Power Words, echoes many of the same claims and engages many of the same rhetorical techniques as Verbal Advantage. In fact, one of the first claims the website makes is identical except the final word: "Every day, people judge you by the words you choose" (www.executive-vocabulary.com). This claim echoes the same spirit of inadequacy and a fear of judgment found in the discussion of Verbal Advantage. However, the single word variation does demonstrate a slight difference as the words are not synonyms for each other. "Use," defined as "to put into action or service" or "to carry out a purpose or action by means of," speaks to a model wherein one does the correct thing, in this case choosing the correct word, given a situation (Agnes, 2000). "Choose," on the other hand, is defined as "to select freely after consideration" or "to have preference for," which is perhaps a more critical, deliberate verb (Agnes, 2000). There is, perhaps, no correct answer, but many available answers, and the more answers one has at his or her disposal, the better chance of accurately expressing oneself.

The passage continues to echo claims from the Verbal Advantage page, particularly evoking a feeling that vocabulary is an important

signifier to others, even if their judgment is faulty: "Whether what [people] think is true or not, what you say says *a lot about* your intelligence, education, and status" (www.executive-vocabulary.com). Once again, fear of inadequacy provides the impetus for product selection.

Once fear of judgment has been established, the advertisement sets out a series of claims, labeled as facts, drawing correlations to the large benefits bequeathed to the verbally endowed. The introductory sentence of this section reports, "It's an undeniable fact: Countless studies *prove* that a strong command of the English language is directly linked to success in all areas of your life."

The first claim, "Fact #1," reports the findings of Johnson O'Connor (1934), date of publication not mentioned. According to Executive Vocabulary's interpretation of the O'Connor study, "Studies show that executives score higher on vocabulary tests than their underlings"; "underlings" is not one of O'Connor's words (www.executive-vocabulary.com). The second claim, "Fact #2," cites how "other studies show that vocabulary scores are the ONLY measure found to consistently correlate with income levels" (ibid). This claim is supported by the evidence from a Human Engineering Laboratory study that correlated salary with number of words known. Incidentally, the Human Engineering Laboratory was founded and is

run by Johnson O'Connor, the same author as the previous study (Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation, n.d.).

These two claims reinforce the notion of the correlation between wealth, power, and influence with vocabulary. Of course, there is no mention here of any causal relationship between the two; this claim does not indicate if more educated people have better vocabularies and, thus, gain better employment or if there is some relationship between people who use big words and corporate promotion practices.

O'Connor's (1934) study itself focused on manufacturing industry jobs, analyzing the hierarchical power relationships between executives, managers, foremen, shift supervisors, and laborers in industrial environments in the 1930's. Thus, there is a clear motivation for Executive Vocabulary to downplay the publication date of this study, as the study itself does not account to the changes in the American economy over the last seven decades, failing to account for the shift away from manufacturing toward Postfordism or Fast Capitalism. And as the new economy requires more education, there have not been recent studies trying to replicate the relationship between corporate level and number of words known. This is especially difficult now, as corporate structures have been "flattened" due to technology, making many corporations less hierarchical, often

with only two or three levels between the CEO and lowest paid employee in the company (Friedman, 2005).

The point here, however, isn't that the information that is cited as a fact is at best outdated, saying nothing of the methods used to reach the study's findings or the conflict of interest in a researcher who sells vocabulary products of his own investigating the dearth of words known by the poor, but instead that such information could be included in an advertisement as a fact, a truth claim beyond reproach. Such a claim relies on the belief among potential customers that there is, indeed, a correlation, if not a full causal relationship, between vocabulary and economic success. The presentation of the two facts in the advertisement is not done in a persuasive way, at least not openly so. There is no attempt to convert someone's opinion from the opposite point of view, ostensibly that vocabulary is insignificant. If that were the case, a compelling argument would have had to first take into account the position of the receiver of the message and then present effective counter information. But this is not the circumstance. Claims such as these require only the addition of highly powered truth claims to validate the pre-existing notions in the customer's mind.

Similar to the Verbal Advantage product, Executive Vocabulary does not mention increased comprehension or access to difficult texts

as a goal. The expressed goal of this product, as quoted from the CEO, Joanna Milo, is to "build an executive vocabulary that grants you instant credibility and persuasive power" (executive-vocabulary.com). Executive, as used in the previous quotation, is then defined as "[h]aving the power, authority, ability or competence to execute." Interestingly, for a product that is claiming to increase the consumer's ability to learn words and their appropriate contexts, this definition of "executive" is not found anywhere other than on the Executive Vocabulary website.

Finally, similar to many of the educational approaches to discerning upon which words to focus, Executive Vocabulary claims to have "culled words from thousands of business documents and news articles," and, "verified that all of these Power Words are consistently used throughout leading business and news publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, *Time* and *Newsweek*." This methodology is similar to that employed by several educational researchers, including Thorndike (1921, 1944), Rinsland (1945), who both looked at the words most commonly used in reading materials students needed to decipher common texts. This method of determining word lists can be established as a standard method, as even textbook programs rely heavily on this methodology of finding words frequently used (Harris & Jacobson, 1982).

Ultimately, these two examples of private sector vocabulary products reinforce the commonly held belief outside of school that the ability to use extensive vocabulary carries with it a powerful set of connotations: education, culture, social class, influence, and power.

It is important to distinguish at this point that the implicit assumptions present in this vocabulary product and the one that follows are not necessarily exclusive to the private sector. It is speculatively possible many, if not more, teachers hold a similar set of beliefs in the socially transformative potential of vocabulary. What is certain is that if these beliefs exist among teachers, the beliefs fail to be discussed in a meaningful or direct way. Several possible reasons exist for such an omission. Primarily, there could be a strong motivation among practitioner journal editors to steer the professional discussion away from such arguably elitist claims. In fact, there is surprisingly little discussion in these journals about one of the most immediate and pressing demands for vocabulary instruction for high school students: standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, both of which still contain vocabulary sections. This external motivation for vocabulary learning is rarely mentioned in the literature surrounding the practices of English language arts. Again, there is little evidence that teachers do or do not believe that vocabulary is important for these types of tests. In other words, in the current discussion, it is

difficult to gauge to what degree teachers' attitudes and beliefs may mimic the beliefs presented by the private sector vocabulary companies mentioned above.

This is not a new tension for teachers. Labaree (1997) frames this tension well. To Labaree, the American educational system is in a state of tension among three competing models: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. The democratic equality approach, which echoes Jeffersonian notions of education, "argues that a democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner" (p. 42). Echoes of this approach can be seen in aspects of the English educational literature, for adequate comprehension of texts is surely necessary for full democratic participation. The second approach, social efficiency, "argues that our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles" (ibid). Aspects of this philosophy of education can be seen in the advertisements for vocabulary products, inasmuch as these advertisements correlate economic prowess and vocabulary development. However, the private sector perspective is best enunciated by the final educational model presented by Labaree. "The social mobility approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students

with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions" (ibid). The discussion of vocabulary in the marketplace is steeped in this type of rhetoric. Individuals are responsible not only for their own economic success, but also the external signifiers that accompany that success. In this, vocabulary becomes the commodity to demonstrate education instead of being a result of such an education. It would be unfair to exclusively indicate the marketplace for this type of thinking. It is entirely possible that classroom teachers, particularly those who instruct college-bound students or Advanced Placement students, hold similar attitudes and beliefs. For example, the language sections of the SAT and ACT rely on word knowledge as a marker of education instead of general educational competence. Thus, it becomes dangerously easy for teachers and students to associate vocabulary knowledge with external signifiers (college admission, high test scores, academic success).

Myth of Symbiosis

In the discussion surrounding the learning of vocabulary, everyone is selling a product. In English classrooms, the product is usually an approach to learning vocabulary: a new game or a crossword or an activity that promises to create incidental learning. These activities, approaches, and games make up the bulk of the discussion of vocabulary. However, beyond the goal of reading

comprehension, the goal for why these activities, these products, need to be embraced is surprisingly absent, as demonstrated in the discussion above.

The marketplace, on the other hand, clearly understands its product. Cultural capital is perhaps easier to make into a commodity than the more abstract goal of increased comprehension. These products also don't mention the primary justification for vocabulary instruction in schools as a goal: to increase textual comprehension.

This is not to say that the private sector is doing a better job than the discipline of English language arts. As the analysis of the two products shows, there are many, many problematic assumptions that underlie the design and implementation of such products.

The social and cultural benefits of vocabulary aren't completely foreign to the discipline of English. Many decades ago, English scholars paid a great deal of attention to correlations between vocabulary and intelligence. Multiple studies in the 1920's through 1940's looked at the lack of vocabulary of developmentally delayed students. Other studies, such as Hughes (1925), sought to correlate the quantity of words known by junior college students with an intelligence test, the Army Examination Alpha. Hughes found the following:

...vocabulary ability is in very direct relationship to

"intelligence." It was found in this study that the total number

of years completed by students in high-school English and

foreign languages correlate much less highly with ability to

recognize the meaning of words than does intelligence as a

measured by the Army Examination Alpha. (p. 621-622)

Hughes's research, along with many of the other researchers seeking

to find a correlation between vocabulary and intelligence, fails to take

into account many of the necessary variables that could contribute to

such a correlation, for instance dialect, social class, educational

opportunities, race, or prior experience with aptitude or other

standardized tests. Serious questions also stand against many

varieties of intelligence tests, including the Army Examination Alpha,

which is no longer in use. But this research, or at least the attempt at

research, goes surprisingly silent among English teachers and

researchers after about 1950. Instead the discussion in the literature

shifts in the direction of how to teach vocabulary, what words to teach,

and how to make such study more interesting.

It is essential for the discipline of English language arts to

reevaluate why we spend so much time with vocabulary instruction.

The first step is invariably to help better understand why such

interventions are necessary. What goals are we trying to achieve?

What is the best way to achieve the goals? Where to these goals rank in relationship to other objectives in our classroom? As Labaree (1997) suggests, until our educational system manages to reconcile the competing claims that serve as rationales for why and what we teach students, it will be difficult to determine what direction education ought to take. Much like the previous chapters, vocabulary was shown to hold the status of myth in secondary English language arts. And this is too bad. Words, concepts, ideas, all hold the power to both create and embody signs, the essence of semiology. A more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the operation of vocabulary both as a social and semiological signifier could certainly help the discipline of English as it looks forward to a new era of practice and pedagogy. The next and final chapter will continue the investigation into the scope and utility of Mythology, briefly discuss additional myths that need to be addressed, and articulate how the practitioners in the discipline can become empowered through Mythology.

Chapter Five

Next Steps

Just as Barthes's discussion of myth focuses on the naturalized ways of thinking and acting in a semio-social setting, this dissertation focused on several ways that naturalized aspects of the profession of English language arts develop and persevere, often to the detriment of students, teachers, or the profession itself. Chapter One laid out the basic methodology and presented the argument for adding Mythology to the inquiry methods available to teachers and researchers alike. Chapters Two, Three, and Four applied the method of Mythology proposed in Chapter One by looking at three different myths for three separate reasons: the practice of New Criticism for its invisibility, the five-paragraph essay for its nature of being both completely visible and entirely pervasive, and the teaching of vocabulary for the way it demonstrates the ways in which myth can develop in isolated communities. While each of these myths was chosen for the reasons listed above, it is in no way a comprehensive list of the myths at work, both benignly and maliciously, in the English language arts.

As stated in Chapter One, Mythology exists among myriad methods for investigating naturalized phenomena in educational settings. It is not a panacea, but instead holds the ability to serve as a useful tool for particular forms of investigation. Thus, this chapter

will also address some of the limitations of Mythology as a method of inquiry in secondary English language arts.

In this final chapter, I will lay out the future intentions and hopeful applications of Mythology in English. First, I will discuss several of the topics from which the discipline of English stands to benefit from further analysis, particularly Mythological analysis. Second, I will discuss what I hope to be the future of the Mythological method. Finally, I will discuss the inherent limits of Mythology and the ways these inherent limits can be avoided or turned into strengths for the discipline.

Agenda

The three myths discussed in this dissertation represent a limited survey of the possibilities of Mythology. But myths, by their nature, will continue to flourish in the field of English. Moreover, as the field advances toward a currently undefined future, new myths are sure to develop.

This dissertation focused on myths that accounted for the currently understood breadth of the discipline: literature, composition, and language study. This choice was strategic, but also potentially flawed. This model, sometimes called the tripod, triumvirate, or trinity, has existed in many different forms for most of the 20th century. The relationship and balance between the three areas has

changed dynamically throughout the short history of English as an applied discipline in public schools. At some times the discipline has focused more on "basic" skills such as spelling, grammar, and handwriting while at other times more classroom time has been dedicated to reading and appreciating book-length literature (Applebee, 1974; Myers, 1996). What I mean to suggest here is that the three-part structure of English language arts, under its sundry names, is perhaps a myth that was necessary to accept in order to visualize this project in a meaningful capacity. It is unclear if the trinity will remain the central organizing structure will retain its current status as the master of all English curricula or if it will be replaced by the ever-fluctuating change of information, technology, language, and culture. Many questions abound, the answers currently undetermined.

What shall we do with the amazing new developments afforded to writers and readers by electronic publishing media? What shall we do with consumers who have the ability to simultaneously produce global feedback to what they consume? What shall we do with language as we enter a century where the number of languages spoken on earth is decreasing dramatically? What shall English, as a discipline, do to adapt to the changes in the English language, the dialects that have yet to develop through globalization and immigration? What will English curriculum look like in the event of a

dramatic increase in charter schools and vouchers? What shall we do with literature in the face of new textual forms too numerous to mention?

These are just a few of the questions that emerge to complicate the current model of English language arts as it exists in secondary schools. Mythology provides teachers and scholars a method to interrogate the practices and materials that English may retain in the coming years while simultaneously helping teachers and scholars to interrogate newer phenomena as they arise. Perhaps the tripod or trinity will one day be referred to as the now-extinct triceratops: a fossilized dinosaur and relic of the past.

Grammar

Beyond the controlling myths of the entire discipline, many more sites of classroom practice and solidified curricula are viable targets for mythological inquiry. The importance of direct grammar instruction and the arguments supporting it certainly deserve to be scrutinized. The continued practice of direct grammar instruction among teachers, despite the multitudinous claims and arguments opposed to this approach to language awareness, begs many questions, particularly what myths can still be in play outside of the research community to allow this practice to flourish.

Reader Response

Next, while Chapter Two focused on the literary techniques and associated pedagogy of New Criticism, another applied literary theory has entered the scene in the last 30 years, arguably consuming a great deal of New Criticism's role as a basic classroom practice: Reader Response. Reader Response criticism began philosophically in a way very similar to New Criticism; it attempted to respond to the dominant literary methods of its day and tried to improve upon them. Interestingly, Reader Response's harbinger was primarily New Criticism.

Through several decades of practice, though, Reader Response has had the opportunity to imbed itself in the discipline in the similar way that did New Criticism (Appleman, 2001). As a generation of teachers began teaching with a new set of improved, deliberate methods, students had the opportunity to absorb and naturalize this process as being simply how English got done. It is possible that Reader Response now enjoys a status of being natural, default, or that which goes-without-saying, though this certainly needs further inquiry and close attention. Perhaps some of the most fertile ground to investigate in the coming years will be the ways in which the two prevailing literary philosophies of the 20th century negotiate with each other to form cohesive classroom pedagogy.

Literary Study

Literary study itself has enjoyed a certain degree of privilege throughout the past century. The tradition of literature being the humane center of English extends for over a century (Hook, 1979; Graff, 1987). At different times throughout this history, English teachers have been seen as guardians of the language, moral value instructors, and, in Mathew Arnold's language, "The preachers of culture" (Mathieson, 1975). Aspects of this position are carried forward to the current day, as even NCTE's 1996 teacher preparation standards argue that literature should be central to the humane tradition of English. The central role of literature in English, like many of the instructional methods that accompany it, deserves to be investigated in a more substantial way.

Several issues accompany the revaluation of the role of literature in secondary English classrooms. For example, if literature were debased as the majority stakeholder in instructional time, what should take its place? There are numerous possibilities, including a renewed interest in the production of texts in a variety of modes and forms or a shift in consumption away from fiction and poetry in favor of other forms of text, including expository, nonfiction, and many others.

Cultural Literacy

Outside the domain of direct classroom practice and curricular theory there still lies a great expanse of underlying ideology to

examine. While the three myths in this project hint at some of the dominant myths at work throughout society, some myths hold a powerful position of privilege and simultaneously enjoy perpetual alibis that conceal their true operations. The Cultural Literacy movement, authored and steered by E.D. Hirsch, has grown in popularity and numbers in the 15 years. The theory builds on Hirsch's central assertion: in order to achieve a liberal society, you must have a conservative education. Cultural literacy acts as a lightning rod for critics, particularly because of its adoption by conservative educational institutions and advocates. But the political debate is largely at a standstill; the opposing sides have found their trenches and little, if any, persuasive arguments can be made from either side to influence the other.

What is perhaps most interesting about Cultural Literacy is how it manages to create and implement an entirely contained semiotic system. By controlling what "facts" are allowed to be discussed in classrooms and controlling which words, images, and ideas get discussed, the Cultural Literacy movement enjoys the ability to define the reality it purports to describe. As the pervasiveness of Cultural Literacy expands, the veil of influence expands with it.

Future Goals

Just as I have found Mythology a useful and helpful method to help interrogate aspects of English language arts, it is my assumption that other teachers and scholars may find the methods of inquiry of value as well. The hope for expansion takes two primary forms. First, Mythology will need to expand its relative influence in the field. Second, the field needs to become more familiar with Roland Barthes; this project barely scratches the surface of how Barthes can help us conceptualize and work within the field.

The study of myth holds a great deal of potential to help both practicing teachers and researchers alike better understand some of the implicit aspects of the discipline. As I have already argued, one of the largest benefits of Mythology is its relative ease of implementation. Theory is always implicit in practice, regardless of how many wish the contrary. Every action in every classroom is always imbued with an underlying, and often invisible, theoretical justification. As I have argued previously, a danger emerges when teachers adopt practices and methods because they are either comfortable or familiar. Accepting that aspects of the discipline are just-so enables a space for the avoidance of theory and allows the belief that one can operate outside of theory under the rationale of the natural. Thus, Mythology can offer busy teachers and curious scholars an avenue of critical

investigation that allows them to both unpack the naturalized status of practices while simultaneously problematizing those same practices.

One excellent first step to examine the potential applications of Mythology on a wider scale could be to do a class project or paper with a group of secondary English methods course participants. Mythology would provide students with an accessible method for unpacking some of their assumptions about the operation of the discipline they are about to join. Of course, this is not an easy task. The level of self-critique and disciplinary inquiry can certainly be uncomfortable for aspiring teachers. Using Mythology as a method, students are able to begin with their own understanding of the nature of the discipline as a starting point for interrogation. Taking the time to tease out each student's understanding of what is natural or institutionalized helps to provide a starting point, but certainly not a solution, to unpacking the inherited aspects of English.

From the starting point of the commonly held understandings of the discipline, students can then move on to problematize and de-familiarize the practices that appear to be so natural. This process of making the familiar strange should be able to assist students in taking a more critical stance in the discipline.

Students would also need to verify that their experiences are, in fact, representative of the discipline as a whole, not just localized or

personal phenomena. One of the best ways to investigate the expansiveness of a particular phenomenon is to look to practitioner journals. Students would be able to get a sense of the larger discussion in the field, how their views fit into this discussion, and if this discussion accounts for the strengths or problems present in the myth.

This type of investigation can help prospective English teachers meditate on their apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) as well as make better sense of the classroom practices they will observe through their class visits, placements, and internships. Thus, one of the first key steps for the future of Mythology will be to allow opportunities for potential Mythologists to practice.

In addition to the expansion of the concept of myth among scholars, practicing teachers, and pre-service teachers, there is a deep, untapped resource available through the further study of Roland Barthes and his possible contributions to English language arts. There are too many possible topics to mention here, but I will list a few. First, I would like to inquire deeper into Barthes's understanding of literary formalism. Barthes found a way to be simultaneously text-centered, formalistic, and empowering to the reader. New Critics, our domestic variety of literary formalists, focused on the need to deny authorial intention and biographical or historical circumstances in order

to preserve the sanctity of the text. Barthes takes what seems to be a similar stance in his famous essay "The Death of the Author," arguing a similar point but for a different purpose. For Barthes, the death of the author gives rise to "the birth of the reader" (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). The control of an author/God prohibits a variety of interpretations from being possible. Thus, to Barthes, the only way to open the ability of readers to generate meaningful interpretations is to dispense with the author/God and assume the interpretive role. This differs significantly from New Criticism inasmuch as New Critics focused on the importance of dispensing an authorial reading in favor of a single, consistent reading based in the text. Barthes, in this way, bridges a gap between the formalist ideals of the New Critics and the empowering interpretive ideas of Reader Response. Barthes seeks to empower readers through the systematic study of the text. This approach is not entirely new to English, as similar projects to mediate the polar positions of Reader Response and New Criticism have been proposed by Rabinowitz & Smith (1997) and Scholes (1985), among others. However, it would be interesting to pursue the nuances that exist among the theories.

Another interesting area of future Barthesian inquiry would be to take a deeper look at Barthes's view of teaching. As a career teacher, Barthes meditated often on the roles and dilemmas of teaching,

particularly in his essay "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers" (1989). In this essay, Barthes investigates the distinctions between the three positions, particularly focusing on the permanence of speech, the main method of delivery in teaching. Mostly, though, I think it is important that Barthes become part of the discussions as we continue to think about language, literacy, texts, writing, teaching, and the myriad other topics Roland Barthes focused upon.

Barthes for Barthes's Sake: Limitations of Mythology

Mythology, while certainly useful, is not the panacea for educational research; it offers a solution to a pressing problem. This section will address some of the inherent shortcomings of Barthes's method of inquiry that I have adapted to educational research. First, I will look at interpretive challenges that apply to all applications of Mythology. Second, I will look at methodological concerns and areas where I have deviated from Barthes's original method of inquiry.

To begin, any claim one makes in the ideological domain merits a counter interpretation. Much in the way Barthes discusses how myths, in their nature, have multiple available alibis to demonstrate more innocuous, less revealing aspects of the myth under consideration, the mythologist, both in social and educational arenas, encounters the possibility that another interpretation of a phenomenon

comes close or matches the descriptive capacity the researcher is positing on the myth in question.

An example: there is an apocryphal story about teachers in the mid twentieth century who, despite urging from progressive educators, continued to align the students' desks in rows instead of circles, groups, or other configurations. These teachers even went so far as to apply masking tape on the corners of where the desk should be at all times. My initial reading of this situation indicated to me a traditional, rule-governed group of strict pedagogues denying access to the new-fangled methods coming out of universities. Upon closer examination, however, an alternative interpretation of this example demonstrates a completely different set of teacher attitudes and beliefs. According to the story, many of these teachers might have been engaged in a very subversive, activist project to counteract the impending increase in classroom size. By regulating where desks were "supposed" to be in the room, these teachers could have been trying to prevent the addition of any new desks, thus limiting the influx of new students.

Likewise, the possibility exists that other interpretations of the premises I deal with in this dissertation are available. The myths I discuss in each of the three central chapters represent complex issues with complex historical and ideological trappings. In an effort to make the chapters present a cohesive interpretation of a given myth, I may

have set aside certain possibilities in favor of others. For example, there is certainly room for teachers to occupy a middle ground between the inheriting of myth I describe and the critical practice of English I advocate. A teacher could certainly be aware of the historical and ideological complexities surrounding the practice of New Criticism yet still decide to employ this literary theory for a number of reasons, including wanting students to do well on standardized tests like the AP English exam or wanting students to be prepared for future grade level challenges that may be taught using New Critical language and techniques. Teachers need to make difficult decisions multiple times every day, and I don't mean to imply that teachers are mindlessly enacting pedagogies that have become mythical without any degree of critical interrogation. As mentioned previously, the decisions I made as a teacher with respect to established pedagogies were difficult, often requiring compromises to satisfy competing demands, such as time and energy, that are inevitable in the practice of teaching.

The second limitation of Mythology has to do with the method of inquiry developed by Barthes and the necessary liberties I have taken with Barthes's project to suit the needs of the educational arena. Research and analytical methods shift between disciplines on a regular basis. The techniques of the social sciences, such as ethnography and surveys, have become part of the educational discourse in recent

decades. Methods that arose from medicine or law, such as the case study, are freely used across nearly all disciplines now (Stake, 1995). Even the methods crafted by marketing and sales departments, in the form of focus groups, now exist as standard practice in myriad disciplines (Kleiber, 2003). Each discipline, or at least a discipline's participants, adapts methods to fit the localized research questions and problems at hand.

In this tradition, Barthes's Mythology has not made the journey from his original context, a semiotic method of social analysis, to English education completely intact. Barthes's myths were short, offhand, and subjective. Despite their relatively rigorous validation, particularly in the concluding chapter of *Mythologies*, Barthes chose the myths on which his articles would focus on the basis of his personal interest. The environment of education, particularly with documents like dissertations, requires a greater deal of "proof" of a particular phenomenon. One must always look beyond one's own experience to see if an idea is validated in the larger community.

For many of these reasons, I wonder if the technological creativity and distribution afforded through web logs, or blogs, might be an appropriate venue for the publication of future myth research. Just as Barthes created *Mythologies* based on his monthly column intended for wide distribution, it might be that Mythology's best

intended audience might not be in scholarly journals but in a more casual, digital setting.

But I digress. The focus of this section is to explore the tensions with Barthes's understanding of the role of the Mythologist and how that role is unnecessarily limiting given the current state of affairs in English language arts.

Barthes discusses the role of the Mythologist in the final essay in the book *Mythologies*. Barthes constructs the Mythologist as a perpetual outsider; one must be separate from the social circumstances one is observing in order to perform an adequate critique. Barthes defines the mythologist as a sarcastic outsider who must refrain from full participation in myth:

> To decipher the Tour de France or the 'good French Wine' is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by them. The mythologist is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality; for him, to be in society is, at best, to be truthful…His connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm. (p. 157)

Furthermore, a mythologist "cuts himself off from all the myth consumers, and this is no small matter" (p. 156). As English teachers and researchers, this cost is perhaps greater than in the larger society. As a social critic engaged in, say, investigating the myths of American reality television shows, the cost is minimal. The critic remains

connected to the society as a whole but is just deprived of whatever personal or escapist solace these shows might otherwise offer. The Mythologist cannot discuss the shows at the office without being an outsider, but this lack of participation in a single myth in no way distances the Mythologist from broad social participation.

The cost for a practicing teacher or researcher to excise and alienate herself off from her colleagues is far too great a cost for the price of critical clarity. But I argue that this exclusion is unnecessary and even harmful. If this deviation from Barthes's understanding of the Mythologist is a deviation from Barthes's method, so be it. Besides, Barthes was famous for his tenuous alliances with existing political groups and methods in his time. He was a Marxist when it was convenient and at other times dispensed with the ideology. The cost of self-negation of one's own personal and professional identity is a cost too great to pay. However, this situation is not an either/or, but a both/and. It is entirely possible for teachers to be both Mythologists and participants in the domain they choose to investigate.

Primarily, we need all of the talented, reflective individuals as possible to participate both in the practice of teaching and the meta-discussion of teaching and learning. Barthes's assertion that alienation is a necessary precursor for Mythology is somewhat problematic. First, we must understand that in order to identify the myths at play,

particularly in an isolated or limited community, one must be within that community. Second, Barthes wishes us to understand that we must, in some ways, become an outsider to this community in order to begin to reveal and displace the status of the myths we needed to be inside to identify. Given these two premises, it seems as though teachers are the only qualified Mythologists, for teachers and scholars of the discipline are the only individuals in the appropriate location to perform these critiques. To do otherwise would perpetuate the current state of affairs where outside critics, political leaders, and pundits take on the role of criticism while teachers are then relegated to victims and reactionaries.

Barthes (1985), in his essay "What Would Become of a Society That Ceased to Reflect upon Itself?" wrote that intellectuals, a class in which he included teachers, have "laughable accusations brought against [them]" (p. 197). He continues:
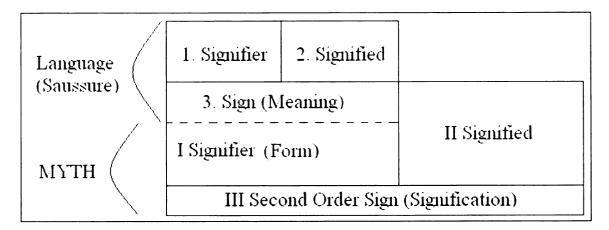
> The intellectual must be both an analyst and a utopian, he must calculate the world's difficulties, and also its wild desires; he strives to be a philosophical and historical contemporary of the present. What would become of [the world]? And how can we see ourselves except by talking to one another? (ibid)

Barthes is discussing the consequences and benefits that emerge from critical reflection. With it, we grow more powerful but stand at odds

with the existing institutions and power structures we seek to uncover. Without it, we are faced with a world in which those same power structures rule and control without check. Given the options available to teachers and intellectuals, the examined life, though possibly less comfortable, still rings true as the only life worth living.

What this situation demands is a new definition of what an English teacher is and does. Teacher/Mythologists have the essential, yet arguably difficult, position of both participating within a discourse while simultaneously critiquing and being responsible for its future development. Internal participation solves many of the problems posed by Burns (2007) when he discusses the current relative poverty of participatory activism among NCTE Members. I can think of no better future for the discipline of English language arts than for it to be governed by a group of critical, thoughtful, reflective, and disciplined practitioners who simultaneously create the reality they describe.

Appendix A

Language (Saussure)	1. Signifier	2. Signified	
	3. Sign (Meaning)		II Signified
MYTH	I Signifier (Form)		
	III Second Order Sign (Signification)		

Appendix B

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