

Writing in the Disciplines

Literary Criticism Interview: Prof. Genevieve Later

W. F. Garrett-Petts: Welcome to program 10 of our series "Writing yourself into the disciplines." Today's guest is Genevieve Later, Professor of English.

[The program opens with Professor Later in discussion with Will Garrett-Petts and 20 students from English 309 at UCC.]

Genevieve Later: I enjoyed English in high school but when I went to university I fully intended to be, in order of how I "bombed out," an engineer, an architect, a landscape architect--and that was only first year university. Then I came back after the summer and I thought, "you know, I really enjoyed English and I'm going to pursue that." But again, at every stage I decided to quit-- at the end of my Masters and then when I started my Ph.D. studies. I thought, "Well I'm just not sure about English. I just don't know if this is really what I want to do." But what happened is that I came in contact with a professor who really inspired me when I was in the Ph.D. Program. He really showed me that it was possible to go into English studies, that the discipline offered a meaningful and important way to think through things. Up to that point I'd had some teachers that didn't help me understand why Literature was important to anything. Once I committed myself to the Ph.D. level, of course, then it was fairly straightforward, but that took me until I was well into my twenties. My experience is representative, I think, of all disciplines. I would include even the hard sciences here. All disciplines are a form of knowledge, but they are also, more importantly, a way of thinking through a problem. Now the problem is going to change as you move from discipline to discipline, but literature is a way of thinking through a problem, usually a human problem of some sort. I see sometimes literature as falling between psychology and history, as a way of thinking through human interaction in a fairly precise fashion, depending upon what you're looking at, what you're reading.

English 309 Class: Would you say literature is separate from English and a whole? Would you say it is a distinct part of English or is it integrated with the whole of English?

Later: Well, one of the problems with English Literature, or English as a field, as a whole, has been a kind of traditional split that exists chiefly between Literature, and say, Rhetoric and Composition. Now, if you talk to some people, they would say it's a false split, but at least during the time I was going through my training in graduate school, that split was very real. So Literature, Literature is a separate discipline from Rhetoric and Composition simply because of the way institutions are organized. In that way, it really as I say, aligns itself more with History and those kinds of disciplines. But I think you can't totally divorce it simply because it is describing human experience and most of the humanities, and as I say, depending on how far out you want to go, into the social sciences and the hard sciences, we're all describing human experience at some level.

English 309 Class: What place does a student's ideas have in your class in the papers they write for you?

Later: Well student ideas are at the heart. After all, it's your education, your coming to university with, I hope, the expectation that you are becoming a more educated person. So the emphasis, as far as I'm concerned, should be on the students' ideas, the students' ideas are at the heart of the paper because you're in the process of exploring what you think, and the measure of an educated person, regardless of whether you go into English studies, professionally or not, the mark of an educated person is that ability to articulate your opinion clearly and precisely. I think that's really, we should make sure students understand and keep the focus there, in the paper-writing process.

English 309 Class: How is the information of a research paper in a Literature class organized?

Later: How is it organized? What do you mean?

English 309 Class: The research process of a Literature paper.

Later: Um, well I handle it differently at the first year level than I do at the upper level. If, for example, I'm working with a third or fourth year class, and I have some of you in the American Poetry class right now, typically what I will do is in the first paper, I will have the students simply talk about their own responses to the story, to the poem, excuse me, then when they go to write the second paper I will say, "ok, here's a problem that we find in this poem." Or I will say, "go to the library and you figure out what the problems are in the poem and then you add your voice to what other critics, because you are a critic as a student, you add your voice to what that exploration is." So when I organize research, more and more I'm trying to help students understand that the problems that exist in a poem, or a short story, or a novel, are really a part of the problems that professionals deal with. So ideally a student should be working on the same kind of problem as a literary critic, if it's a real problem. And the distinction I make between a real textual problem and a sort of fake one, is that for example, sometimes you'll have topics that students struggle with that an instructor has given them, simply because there's no real problem there. And so, you try to write a paper but there's no actual exploration. So you end up with a kind of descriptive paper that doesn't really go anywhere. And in that sense, and where research should help, is that research should be assisting you into solving the problem, but you have to understand what the problem is, right. And that should be either defined for you by the instructor or you should have the freedom to go out, and decide what the parameters of that problem are for yourself.

English 309 Class: How do you react to the inclusion of personal background or personal experience in a third or fourth year paper?

Later: Well, I like it. One term I actually tried to bribe my students in to doing that. I said, "here's the paper, here are a collection of topics, if you want to use them, that's fine, if you want to develop your own, that's fine, and I will actually give you extra points if you incorporate

your own personal background or critical bias into the paper." I thought students would really enjoy it but students avoided it like the plague. I suspect it's because by the time students get to third and fourth year they are very comfortable with a certain kind of way of speaking in a paper that doesn't employ personal background. So, I think they're really honestly confused sometimes as to how to do that, particularly if you're working in a third and fourth year course where the teacher wants you to use critical sources and the teacher wants you to use personal background and how are you suppose to pull those two elements together. I think it helps students if they understand that often critical backgrounds of literary critics are working out of their own personal past, and we all are to some degree, I think the problem is that often literary critics and professional literary theorists don't articulate that as clearly as they should so students don't have models. You really have to have models for that kind of incorporation. No, I'm open to it, I just find that students tend to avoid it and bonus points will not move them.

English 309 Class: How do you think literary criticism has contributed to the progress of literature and how do you think it affects writers and authors?

Later: Well that's a complicated question because I think you have to isolate which group if you want to talk about influence or effect. Because certainly in writing literary criticism or literary theory, sometimes you'll have poets or novelists writing criticism so they are both creating so called creative writing, and then their comment upon creative writing. Then you might consider the side of, well what kind of impact does literary theory or literary criticism have on you as perhaps a third or fourth year student. And I think that really depends on how much your instructor highlights it in the course. I remember one of the things that really made me angry when I was an undergraduate, well actually not when I was an undergraduate because I didn't realize it was happening to me at the time, I didn't get angry until I was in graduate school, was the realization that when I was an undergraduate my instructors had been using a very specific literary critical method, close reading and its ally, new criticism, but I never knew that. And I was very angry because I thought that's a very important thing for me to know as a student. That's a case where literary criticism directly affects how I learn to read, how I'm graded, how my progress is seen through the course. And I had no idea. So literary criticism often affects people, particularly if we think of students, in very profound ways that often instructors, I find, are not very responsible or accountable for telling you about that. And it has a big impact on your day-to-day student life. Now, of course, things are different. I mean I went through, I was an undergraduate student about 20 years ago, and now, of course, I think that students at least have access to understanding about critical theories and literary criticism in a way that I didn't and so then you can be aware of the effects. Whether literary criticism of literary theory has advanced literature, I think that was the beginning of your question, I think it's a really debatable point. I have to expose my own bias here in that I'm a big fan of literary theory. I think literary theory in the last 30 years has enlivened the study of literature, although some people that you will talk to will say that the study of literary theory of literary criticism has actually pulled us away from the study of literature and I think that's a real debatable point. I think that literary theory generally has helped us understand how things are put together, how is literature put together, and literary theory also really forces us to say why it is important, why

are we studying this, what can literature, now, in the contemporary era, really help us understand about our world. And I think literary theory generally helps us do that. Although there certainly can be some problems along with that as I'm sure you've discovered if you've tackled the study of critical theory on your own or in a class.

English 309 Class: What's your advice to an upper level English student trying to incorporate literature critics into their essay?

Later: My advice would be, a couple of things come to mind. The first thing, know your sources. I think that when students go to the library there is a tendency to go to the shelves or go to the reference section and they see it's in print and, "whoa, let's pull it off the shelf, wow here's something on W.S. Merlin, let's go." And students don't stop to consider who this person is. Now I not saying you're going to know who the name of the wives and kids, I think that students need to understand if only from the review or the critical piece itself, what is the perspective of that person. And I tell my students, if you go to the library and you find a critical article or you find a critical reference piece and you can't figure out what the stance of that person is, bring the piece in, we'll talk about it. There's no need for us to keep this a mystery and I'm not trying to torment you with this assignment. The critic, the role of the critic in your paper should be as a help on some level. Whether you decide you are going to agree with this critical perspective or you're going to disagree with this critical perspective, you need to be able to understand the position that person is taking. Is this person, loosely, what kind of theory is promoting. The big difficulty I find in teaching third or fourth year now, in the millenium, is that you're not only teaching the material, whether that be the novel or the poem, or whatever, you're also trying to assist student in sorting through the critical theory. And the critical theory is absolutely overwhelming, as you may sense, I mean, you can probably think of five or six or seven major critical theories right off the top of your head. And the course that I teach are not particularly critical theory courses, so I'm doing this "one the side," if you will. We'll have a micro-moment with feminism or we'll have a micro-moment with biographical criticism. And I can't expect students to be totally conversant with those critical theories but at the same time I'm committed to understanding critical theory as an important way to assist students in understanding what's going on in the text, and again, working out the problem that should be inherent in the paper that they're working on.

English 309 Class: How well do have to know the context or the background of the piece that you're criticizing before you put it into context?

Later: That's a very sly question because it depends on what kind of critic you are. Certainly new criticism argued that you didn't need to know very much outside the poem at all, but, for example, if you pursue biographical criticism, it is crucially important that you know something about, not only the biography but, obviously, also some of the history, all I can do, I tend to handle this on a author by author basis in the classroom, I say, "here is a poem by Robert Frost called Home Burial. In the poem the couple has lost a child. If you are going to work on this poem in a paper, what do you think, does it matter to you as a reader to know that Robert Frost also lost a child when the child was very small? Does that matter to you?" I tend to throw the

question back at the student and say, not sort it out by yourself, but to say, "what do you think? How does that matter when you go to read the poem?" Some students say it matters a great deal. Other students say, "well I'm not so sure it matters too much." Does it matter that Sylvia Plath committed suicide? Some students think so, some students don't think so. All I can do, and I think this is, as an instructor my job is to be candid with the students about my own position. So, and frankly, my own position on this is not monolithic. I mean, in some cases I feel I can't get around the biography. Going back to Sylvia Plath, it may actually be impossible Sylvia Plath anymore without understanding her biography. Not that I personally think it should be that way, I'd like to think that the poetry stands on "its own," whatever that means, but it may actually, simply because of what people know about Sylvia Plath's life, it may be impossible. So I tend to go author by author. I try to be candid about my own position. And at least that lets students know, or students have a choice at that point whether they want to express their own opinion or whether they want to take the safe route. And we all know what that's code for, ok.

English 309 Class: I was wondering when you're reading a piece of writing and you're analyzing it, or criticizing it, do you try to keep a totally objective mindset or you allow for some subjectiveness?

Later: Do you mean reading a student paper or do you mean reading a piece of literature?

English 309 Class: Both, actually.

Later: Personally, I don't believe in the objective anymore. And sometimes what I will say in class is, "the fact is dead." I don't believe in facts anymore. If we were worlds? enough in time we could talk about how that works out in all kinds of disciplines but I'm not objective. Certainly I think the tendency is to see the instructor as some sort of neutral god's eye viewpoint. But no, of course not, believe it or not, I am a human being with prejudices and a history. And I can't get around that. I have to, when I read a piece of literature, I have to read it and understand as I read it, the nature, precisely as I can, the nature of my prejudices or my biases or my perspectives. So obviously when I go to read a student paper, and I think this is more to the point of your question, am I neutral? No, I certainly hope not. Because I am a human being responding and reading to another human being's work. I'm not a robot. And I don't think you want me to be a robot. We are, or I am engaged in the process of grading the work and, unfortunately, that's the way the system works. I have to put this little number on your paper. But I think students worry about...sorry, if the instructor isn't neutral, is the instructor fair. And I think is a kind of tension that exists between those two words: she's fair, she's neutral. Well I'm not neutral, but I hope I'm fair. And I think that's what one has to sort out. And of course that links to another word, which is trust, which is sort of a funny word to talk about when you talk about the relationship between a teacher and student. But I think that trust is very important. If a student doesn't trust me on a professional level, personally, who knows, but on a professional level, if a student doesn't trust me professionally, then we have a problem that I'm not sure I can sort out in the course of 13 weeks. I think in that case the best I can do is to be able to account for what I've done with your paper. And every instructor should be able to do that. Every instructor should be able to give you a clear account of what he or she thinks of that and

how that relates to the grading system. Now, sometimes what I will do...part of what you're asking is in, has to do with student anxiety or concern about being graded for their opinion, if the instructor has a different opinion. And this is a classic question. Maybe you've asked this question before the first paper in a class. You put your hand up and you ask, "well do you want my opinion." And perhaps that's a very strange question, I'm not sure, and perhaps somebody can clarify this for me, I'm not sure what the alternatives are. Either I want your opinion or I want this fact that I no longer believe in, or I guess the only other option is that you're asking me if I want my opinion back in your paper. Ahhhh, I got some nodding papers here. The mystery is solved! Let's go a little farther into the dance here. Let's say that the student honestly puts up her hand and says, "do you want my opinion on this paper." And I nod and I say, "yes, of course I want your opinion." The student goes off, writes the paper, hands the paper in, because I'm a trustworthy, if not neutral grader, I mark the paper and put a "C" on it and I hand it back to the student, and what's the first thing the student says? "I got a 'C' because she didn't agree with my opinion." What the teachers next move in the dance is to say of course, "well it wasn't your opinion that was the problem, it was the fact that you didn't articulate your opinion clearly and precisely. Do you trust my response? I don't know. I suspect, in many cases, you don't, you think this is some strange put-up job, you know. But really it's not. I think students have to understand that from my point of view, keep in mind that in some cases I've been teaching, I may have taught a story over six or seven years. I can play the game from any corner of it. That is to say, my personal investment in having you believe exactly what I believe about this short story or poem, is it's not that I don't care, but that's not my job. My job is not to convince you that Genevieve has the last word on this particular story, my job is to help you understand what you think. But somehow the question of opinion gets tangled up with the question of interpretation. So that a student's opinion...let me back up. Maybe what the student is saying or asking or indicating is that once we start putting the work "opinion" on the table, all of a sudden I no longer can grade that. I'm not sure if that's what's happening, but I suspect it may be. But opinion is what everybody's working with, going back to your question about neutrality. Since I'm not neutral and you're not neutral, then basically what we're trying to negotiate on your paper, when I read your paper, is not your opinion versus my opinion, but how clearly have you expressed your opinion with an intent to persuade. Sometimes I have been in a situation, actually this happened this term, where I gave an "A" to a student paper and I did not agree with the student's position. I did not. Boy, it killed me. "I don't want to give this student an 'A' on this paper. I hate this position. I don't believe in this position." But I could not come up with good reasons, try as hard as I might, why the student had not proven his point. So I give him the "A" and I felt bad. In the sense that he had demonstrated his point, it was clearly his opinion, personally I didn't agree with the opinion, but he had carried out the terms of the assignment so I had to give him the "A."

English 309 Class: Do you notice a progression of writing from first to fourth year? Are you looking for different things in a first year paper that you're looking for in a fourth year paper?

Later: Oddly enough, no. I think that, for example, going back to the questioning about critical theory and how critical theory is employed and used in upper level papers. I start first year

students on the idea of critical theory. For example, when we talk about fairy tales, I will bring in some commentary and I will say, "this is how a feminist critic looks at Cinderella. This is how a Neo-Marxist critic looks at Cinderella." Now I don't go on and on about it, I say, "you need to know that professionals have different opinions and here is how they articulate those opinions. And first year students aren't stupid. First years students are ready for that. So what happens as we go along the merry road between first year and third and fourth year is simply a matter of elaboration and development. And typically, by the time the student reaches third or fourth year, they may be exploring the same questions on a text that they explored in the first year, the only difference is that the student is now employing and negotiating and working out his other opinion with the help of some critical theorist, which perhaps they didn't get to in the first year. But no I don't see the problems as being all that different. What I look for doesn't change all that much. It's perhaps more in scale than in degree.

English 309 Class: So it's common to use contemporary theory to a classic piece of work?

Later: Absolutely. Because the alternative to that position...if I don't use critical theory...what critical theory is simply doing in that case is saying, "I'm going to tell you very honestly how I'm approaching this piece of work." If I don't do that with a piece of work, even in first year, what am I saying? My students don't know what criteria I'm using for success in that piece. My students are trusting some sort of what I call the "fake neutral position." So if I'm not using critical theory, and critical theory, believe it or not, protects students in the classroom because critical theory actually, at least if you're working with the critical theory you know where the author stands. A teacher who does not articulate, either her own critical perspective or that of the folks that she has you looking at, isn't being fair to the student because you are studying something without knowing what the perspective or bias of that person is. I think that's really important and I think that critical theory is simply one way of articulating, "ok I'm telling you now, I'm a feminist critic, this is what's at stake for me in Cinderella." And of course having said that, horrible things are flashing through my head. I mean feminism is a very, very broad category, ok. There is no monolithic feminist perspective. But critical theory in the classroom protects you.

English 309 Class: Does that mean that, this is my theory and my interpretation, is that what makes a classic a classic? That it transcends time and theory?

Later: Transcends time and theory...hmmm. There are always two ways of looking at a question like that. What you're getting into is something that I call the timeless argument. That there are some works that are so fabulous that they go beyond any bounds of time and space. Personally, I have trouble with that. Typically the way I approach this problem is to say, look at your anthology, for example. Anthologies, contrary to popular belief, do not fall drop from heaven. Somebody nails them together. So if, for example, someone chooses to put a poem, let's say, I'm just pulling this out of the air, from the seventeenth century into your poetry anthology, ok. Is it because the worth of that poem is incredibly timeless, or, and this is an idea that I'm more in sympathy with, that it makes it into the anthology in 1999 because it still somehow serves our purposes. This a question I'm not altogether convinced on but it's something I toy with. For

example, when I teach the American Literature Survey in the second year, I teach a poet name Phyllis Wheatley. A black slave poet, you may have heard of her, who wrote pretty good neo-classical poetry in the style of Alexander Pope. Now some anthologies include Phyllis, some anthologies do not include Phyllis. Now, is the failure to include Phyllis something about Phyllis's timeless quality, or is it about the investments of the people who put together the anthology? This I'm puzzling over. Are there, for example, undiscovered timeless writers that didn't make it in because of some institutional or structural reason? This is an honest question from my own point of view. I don't know the answer to that. But I'm hesitant to suggest or to believe that there is this mysterious, timeless thing, this timeless idea, that somehow value can be cut off entirely from one's historical perspective. And in that, I hope you understand that I am revealing my own critical bias there, right. And to say that if you believe in timelessness or the timeless quality of any art, I'm not saying that's wrong, I'm saying that it me pause because what I see practiced in the arts generally is a preservation of what suits our interests on some level. And we could have a long argument about how that works with somebody like Shakespeare but not today. We won't have that argument today.

English 309 Class: When you put together your course, you said that an anthology is about this thick. How does you choose? Do you go by what's expected to be taught in that time period or do you choose what you think best represents that time period?

Later: I think it's a little of both. I think, certainly I'm very aware when I teach American Literature that I'm not serving my students very well if there are certain people, for example, people like Faulkner or Fitzgerald or Hemmingway, people that are considered central to the so-called American Literature cannon. At the same time, I think about people like Phyllis Wheatley, who is sometimes included in this course and sometimes isn't included in this course. And I say, well this is a very hard decision to make because I could spend that time with Phyllis Wheatley in the class or I could spend another day on Faulkner. And I hope students are aware that these decisions are very, very difficult because for every person you bring in somebody else gets left out or cut back. So I try to do a little of both. Certainly, something else you have to figure into the mix, is when was your instructor trained? Not how old the instructor is because that could often be quite deceptive. What you want to know is when you instructor graduated from graduate school. What a lot students don't realize is that there are fashions and trends in graduate education like anything else. There not quite extreme as women's hemlines but certainly when I went into graduate school in the 80's, when I came in to graduate school, the critical theory called deconstruction, Jacques Derrida what very, very hot. People were deconstructing this right and left. By the time I left graduate school in the early 90's, deconstruction was effectively dead. People were no longer, at least in my program, were not really interested in that anymore. So that, in terms of how I pick things for a course, when I was trained we were moving from deconstruction back into a greater understanding, an awareness, of, for example, minority writers. So, for example, all the folks in my cohort who were teaching second year english were all teaching Tony Morrison, for example, and African-American writer. So when I go to pick, coming from the time in graduate school that I did and what was not "fashionable", but I guess that's the best word, when I was going through. Because of my graduate education I have this awareness that I should be, on some level, including minority

writers. No so much women writers. Really by the time I came in, it wasn't a question anymore whether you should include women, but there was a question of, for example, ok, how much time in an American Literature Survey are you going to devote to African-American writers? What are you going to do with Native-American writers? Those kind of questions were of concern. So if it's something you want to know from your instructor, I think you have a right to know. Be discreet about it but it may give you some valuable clues as to why certain things are in the course. And I think that that's one of the biggest distinctions between university teaching and high school teaching. Often high school teaching is very controlled in term of what people have to teach, particularly toward a provincial exam. University teachers are completely free, in most cases, to pick what they like, which can either frustrate or delight students.

English 309 Class: You've mentioned a lot of what you look for in a student paper and what you like to see when students articulate their ideas. For the final question and in closing, can you just sum up how the student can write an 'A' paper or what you look for in an 'A' paper?

Later: What I look for in an 'A' paper. Maybe I should say what happens in a 'B' paper. The 'B' paper is a paper that is technically proficient. The difference between a 'B' paper and an 'A' paper is that in an 'A' paper I see the student's mind at work. The student has not only clearly articulated her ideas but she is clearly working out the problem. Students who are technically proficient but who, for whatever reason, decide not to or refuse to engage the problem at the centre of the topic, can't get an 'A' from me, because the 'A' demonstrates that you have accomplished what I see to be the highest goal in my classroom, is that you have clearly worked out and precisely worked out your new understanding of the piece of literature.

English 309 Class and Professor Will Garrett-Petts: Thank you for speaking with us today—for sharing your insights and experiences. Applause.