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Constructing critical readers and writers through the teaching of irony in the composition classroom

Bruce Stephen Wolcott

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CONSTRUCTING CRITICAL READERS AND WRITERS THROUGH THE
TEACHING OF IRONY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Bruce Stephen Wolcott
June 2001
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The construction of critically literate students must be paramount among goals in the freshman composition classroom. Many students come into our composition classrooms with limited reading strategies that often reduce a text to one meaning or perspective. Mariolina Salvatori refers to this reduction as a blocked reading, which logically results in a blocked response. Students' inability to read critically precludes them from responding in a complex and critical manner. Therefore, constructing critical readers must necessarily precede constructing critical writers in our classrooms.

The approach for constructing critical readers posited in this thesis employs conceptualizing both the complexity of a text and the importance of comprehending the context within which a text is both read and written. To illustrate these concepts, I utilize the rhetorical feature of irony.

In chapter one, I construct a working definition of critical literacy for the thesis by drawing, eclectically, upon various sources. At the heart of this construction lie Wolfgang Iser's theories of the text and his conceptualization of the relationship between reader and
text, Mariolina Salvatori's interpretation of Iser's theories of the text, and her explication of the reading process, and, finally, Linda Flower's assertions about what it means to be critically literate. The chapter culminates in the implication that written texts are complex phenomena requiring complex skills for their engagement, and, the assertion that students' realization of the complexity of a text must precede, or at the very least, parallel the acquisition of critical reading and writing abilities.

Chapter two illustrates the complexity of a text through an analysis of Jonathan Swift's irony in "A Modest Proposal." For this purpose, I employ Wayne Booth's four-step heuristic for reconstructing that irony. The analysis also illustrates the importance of comprehending the context within which a text is both read and written.

In chapter three, I have constructed a three-part unit that utilizes the teaching of the rhetorical feature of irony. The first part is devoted to assisting students in comprehending the importance of the context within which a text is read through assimilating a particular strategy for doing so. The second part is devoted to assisting students in comprehending the complexity of a text through the activity of reconstructing an intended irony in a piece of
contemporary writing, and in comprehending the importance of the context within which the text is written. The third part is designed to synthesize the knowledge and experience of the first two parts by providing students an opportunity to construct ironic arguments.

All three of these activities reveal the complexity of a text, and the importance of context in reading and writing critically. I hope to conclude through this thesis that teaching the rhetorical feature of irony in the composition classroom in the manner prescribed can significantly contribute to the construction of critically literate freshman.
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I dedicate this work to my wife Cindy whose loving and substantial support made my education possible, to my mother Martha who taught me the power of remaining positive in all things, and to the CSUSB English Department Faculty who contributed generously to my construction.
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CHAPTER ONE
CRITICAL LITERACY

A thorough search of guidelines for freshman composition across academia will result in one consistent tenet: an emphasis on critical literacy. Our own CSUSB guidelines for English 101 emphasize "the processes of writing and critical reading not only to communicate but also to generate thinking and to examine assumptions." A similar emphasis on critical literacy resounds throughout our colleges' English departments both in Literature and Composition. The attention given to critical literacy in this manner warrants a thorough examination of what critical reading and writing mean and how they may be applied in the composition classroom.

In simple terms, critical reading is a reading of a text below its literal surface. Literal refers to the primary meaning of language use as contrasted to alternative uses such as metaphor or other figures of speech. And so, critical reading could be as simple as deciphering a single metaphor found in a text. However, critical reading is seldom defined or explained in such
simple terms, and definitions are often accompanied by strategies for critical reading.

An extensive description of critical reading is posited on The Center for Critical Thinking' website. It states "critical reading is an active, intellectually engaged process in which the reader participates in an inner dialogue with the writer" (Center). The Center further states that people often do not read critically, missing or distorting some part of what is expressed. According to the extended explanation, the reader enters into the point of view of the writer. This particular perspective is certainly congruent with much of contemporary composition pedagogy that engages students in analyzing texts for specific features authors use to convey their point of view. The explanation concludes with the following assertion:

[A] critical reader actively looks for assumptions, key concepts and ideas, reasons and justifications, supporting examples, parallel experiences, implications and consequences, and other structural features of the written text, to interpret and assess it accurately and fairly. (Center)
However, critical literacy is more than reading critically. It subsumes writing as well.

One definition of critical writing asserts that it goes beyond arranging our ideas in relation to one another to understanding our own thesis, supporting it, and elaborating upon it so as to make it intelligible to others, including objections to it as well as its limitations. This requires a certain discipline of action. "Disciplined writing requires disciplined thinking; disciplined thinking is achieved through disciplined writing" (Center). This particular perspective is congruent with contemporary composition theory that suggests critical writing is synonymous with critical thinking or, at the very least, provides an opportunity for it. Fundamentally, critical writing is about constructing meaning and is a vital part of the readingwriting process. At this point, an examination of the connection between reading and writing could also prove informative.

The inference that reading and writing are connected is also a common tenet in the field of composition, and can be especially illuminating when we examine what it means to be critically literate. The processes are alike in that meaning is constructed through "actively engaging" a text,
either reading or writing it. This is less likely to occur while reading or writing passively. And therein lies the difference. Approaching a text more aggressively with an "inquisitive and critical attitude" renders a more generous and useful reading. Both reading and writing critically require this "inquisitive and critical attitude."

Andrea Lundsford too posits a reading and writing connection. Her observations were that "all language skills are related--the level of reading comprehension is related to complexity of sentence formation (or syntactic maturity) and . . . both are related to mature, synthetic thought processes" (qtd. in Salvatori 177). According to Lundsford, the two go hand-in-hand. She relates that students come to us as both poor readers and writers and their progress in these two areas parallels each other. However, Lundsford distinguishes her opinion in asserting that one necessarily precedes the other in stating "as our students' ability to manipulate syntactic structures improved so did their ability to draw inferences and make logical connections" (qtd. in Salvatori 177).

In Mariolina Salvatori's article Reading and Writing a Text: Correlations Between Reading and Writing Patterns, she agrees with Lundsford's belief that these two abilities
parallel each other in progress, but insists that critical reading must necessarily precede the ability to write critically. She states that "[a] writer’s ability to manipulate syntactic structures—their maturity as writers—is the result, rather than the cause, of their increased ability to engage in, and to be reflexive about, the reading of highly complex texts" (178). She relates, though, that whichever precedes the other the important thing is remembering the interrelatedness and benefiting from that in the teaching of composition. Any discussion concerning the connection between reading and writing would not be informed without illumining the phenomenon of text. For this purpose, I turn to the thoughts and theories of Wolfgang Iser.

Through Iser’s definition and description of the phenomenon of text, we can gain further insight into the necessity of becoming critically literate. From a phenomenological viewpoint,

[Iser] distinguish[es] between the ‘text’, the words on the printed page, and the ‘aesthetic object’, the imaginative realization of the text by the individual reader, and he argue[s] that
the text is a set of instructions for 'producing what it itself is not.' (qtd. in McCormick 36-37)

Iser further clarifies: "The literary work has two poles . . . the author's text . . . and the realization of it accomplished by the reader (qtd. in Salvatori 178). In saying this, Iser evokes the perception of the text as a kind of continuum of meaning and perspective. This perception of text as continuum helps us envision its scope, inducing us to read it generously.

Salvatori interprets Iser’s statements to mean “the work is ‘indeterminate’ and ‘dynamic’ or better, indeterminate because continuously dynamic” (178). She insists that the work “cannot, nor should, be reduced to one meaning, to one perspective; the reader should not deny the possibility of subsequent revisions of meanings, subsequent modifications of perspective” (179). Unfortunately, this is exactly what often happens. Students often do not read critically, but in an uncritical and reductive manner. They actively resist this sense of indeterminacy and dynamism within the text that Salvatori speaks of. In conjunction with Iser’s concept of poles, Salvatori deduces that, while reading, an emphasis on either pole reduces the chance of a generous and critical
rendering (178-79). Salvatori refers to this reduction as a blocked reading, which logically results in a blocked response. When this occurs, neither have students comprehended the complexity of a text, nor can they write an adequately complex response to it: two manifestations of critical literacy. I will continue to use Iser’s theories to clarify this.

Paralleling the textual continuum Iser has constructed for us, he also posits a continuum for the activity of reading: “[T]he transaction between text and reader is an event brought about and regulated by the reader’s simultaneous engagement in the two contrasting and mutually monitoring activities of ‘consistency building’ and the ‘wandering viewpoint’” (qtd. in Salvatori 179).

‘Consistency building’ is the activity of stabilizing textual ambiguities, basically by ignoring them, and reading selectively for portions of the text that verify familiar meanings for the reader. This type of reading would, of course, render a less generous reading of a text, reducing and limiting perspective and meaning. On the opposite pole Iser affirms a ‘wandering viewpoint’: an activity that “tends to flesh out, to reorganize, and to proliferate the meanings a text proposes, [. . . .]
generat[ing] a reader's revision of previous perspectives" (qtd. in Salvatori 179). It is this particular activity that assists us in reading critically.

Salvatori states that 'consistency building' is the activity that readers "most instinctively tend to engage in," especially when the text is "characterized by 'blanks' or 'gaps' of indeterminacy" (179). In summation, when students are not prepared to read critically, using multiple strategies, remaining open to multiple possibilities, they tend to read in a manner that does not challenge or disrupt the status quo of familiarity. Students are not comfortable with ambiguity or the unknown. But who is, for that matter? Students are not comfortable with uncertainty either. However, Salvatori suggests that students should be enabled to "tolerate and confront ambiguities and uncertainties in the reading process." This in turn would assist them in accommodating and responding to the ambiguities and uncertainties produced in their own writing processes (180).

Many students come into our composition classrooms with limited reading strategies. They are often reluctant to, or have not been trained to, read much below the literal surface of the text. Students often reduce the
text to one meaning or perspective through the activity of ‘consistency building’, “deny[ing] the possibility of subsequent revisions of meaning [and] subsequent modifications of perspective” (Salvatori 179). They have not developed a stronger inclination for the activity of a ‘wandering viewpoint’ necessary for a generous and critical reading of a text. Much of this behavior stems from their previous experiences with reading and writing.

Secondary education writing pedagogy, and at times, writing pedagogy at the junior colleges, are partially responsible for this limited literacy. Many students’ experience with writing at these levels does not emphasize critical reading or writing. Students’ writing experiences are often for the purpose of testing recall of content. Examples of this would be book reports, history reports, non-thesis and non-argumentative type writing such as summaries. This knowledge-telling writing does not require them to construct knowledge or meaning of their own, merely reproduce the text. It does not require them to engage the text for assumptions or implications. Knowledge-telling writing has no opportunity for applying a ‘wandering viewpoint.’ The student is not required to question the text or search for assumptions, ambiguity or uncertainty
within the text. Neither is she required to decipher implications or assert consequences, merely reproduce the text. Using writing in this manner "encourages consumption of information, [but] not the transformation of it": the ability of the students to construct meaning for themselves (Flower 4). A five-year study of junior colleges conducted by Richardson, Fisk, and Okun revealed a "leveling-down effect in which institutions abandoned the goal of critical literacy in favor of the narrower goals of socialization and transferring information" (Flower 4). So, then, what should be our goals for critically literacy concerning freshman composition?

I will defer to Linda Flower's definition of critical literacy to inform this necessary pursuit. The definition she posits in the introduction of a book she co-authored, entitled Reading-To-Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process, moves beyond the limited and traditional sense of receptive literacy where getting information is emphasized for practical purposes such as reading the Bible and newspapers simply to comprehend with the implication for acceptance (5). Her definition of critical literacy is as follows:
Critical literacy typically means not simply building on but going beyond reception and understanding[;] The critically literate person questions sources, looks for assumptions, and reads for intentions, not just facts. [ . . . ] [It] may also mean coming into political or social consciousness and questioning both authority and the status quo. And it may even mean rising to a reflexive questioning of one's own assumptions and responses as a reader and one's own assumptions and assertions as a writer.

(5)

Flower's complex criteria for critical literacy in conjunction with other definitions and descriptions expounded previously in this paper consistently imply that written texts are complex phenomena requiring these very critical skills for their engagement. The application of these definitions and strategies to further students' critical reading abilities in the classroom may occur in various ways. However, one must be able to envision a complexity prior to comprehending and responding to it. Therefore, I believe that students' realization of the complexity of a text must precede, or at the very least
parallel the acquisition of critical reading and writing skills. One way to effect this realization would be through the study of irony.
CHAPTER TWO

ANALYZING IRONY

In irony, an incongruity is presented, and failure to decipher its intended meaning is a total loss of comprehension. This critical manner in which irony operates distinguishes it from its other rhetorical siblings. Wayne Booth states in his book *A Rhetoric of Irony* that "[i]ronic reconstructions depend on an appeal to assumptions, often unstated, that ironists and readers share" (33). A necessary element of that reconstruction is reading for the author's intentions.

Booth also compares other features of rhetoric with that of irony. In comparison to a metaphor, Booth presents irony as more complex. He establishes a reconstruction process for irony that has two steps one would not have to employ while constructing the meaning of a metaphor. First, the reader must fully reject the literal meaning; secondly, "[a] decision must [. . .] be made about the author's knowledge or beliefs (23). Therefore, irony could be a more effective rhetorical feature from which to teach textual complexity.
For the purposes of this thesis, I will adopt Hugh Holman's definition of irony. He defines verbal irony as a "figure of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words which carry the opposite meaning" (qtd. in Chen and Houlette 30). I will, for the purposes of this project, expand the scope of his definition to include the written text, even to the point of encompassing the schema of an entire text. When speaking of textual schema, I am referring to the intended and reoccurring manipulation of the rhetoric of a text to achieve a specific effect or result. Jonathan Swift’s "A Modest Proposal" is an eighteenth century example of a text that employs both figure of speech and textual schema to construct irony.

Swift’s thesis in this argumentative essay proposes that the children of Ireland should be sold to the rich for the purposes of being eaten as a solution to the wretched and impoverished conditions of overpopulation and lack of money in that country. To illustrate the irony in this thesis, I will employ the four-step reconstruction heuristic Wayne Booth provides for stable [intended] irony in his book _A Rhetoric of Irony:_

1) The reader is required to reject the literal meaning.
2) Alternative interpretations or explanations are tried out, --or rather, in the usual case of quick recognition, come flooding in. The alternatives will all in some degree be incongruous with what the literal statement seems to say—even contrary.

3) A decision must therefore be made about the author's knowledge or beliefs.

4) Having made a decision about the knowledge or beliefs about the speaker, [ . . . ] choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings with which [one] can rest secure. (10-12)

Swift's thesis is ironic because, in the context of civilized humanity in which it is presented, the reader must: 1) reject the literal meaning. Seventeenth and eighteenth century Ireland, under the rule of England and influence of Christianity was, by all concomitant worldly standards, considered a civilized society. No civilized and Christianized society of this time period and geographic juxtaposition would have condoned the cannibalism of infants; 2) search for alternative interpretations all of which must be incongruous with what the literal statements seems to say. Because Ireland was
heavily Christianized, one could easily imagine an author writing an essay that would offer as a solution to the wretched and impoverished conditions of that country one that would include saving the children from these conditions, as opposed to devouring them. Evoking thoughts of such social concerns would probably turn readers' thoughts toward more obvious causes of these conditions: irresponsible, greedy, and morally indifferent wealthy English landlords, and corrupt or ineffective Irish politicians; 3) make a decision about the speaker's knowledge or beliefs based on all she knows about the context within which the statement was made. Even though the speaker's allegiance seems to be to the interests of the wealthy, he continually projects an aura of ethics. An ethical speaker logically would not propose something as uncivilized and unethical as cannibalism. An ethical speaker would be expected to exercise prudent judgment as to probable causes of the wretched and impoverished conditions and to acceptable solutions thereof; 4) reconstruct new meaning(s) that will necessarily be in harmony with the unspoken beliefs the reader has decided to ascribe to the speaker. These would include many of the speculations from step two and three listed above. Thus,
the irony: the speaker does not literally mean what he says. Swift’s ironic thesis is now set in place.

In order to effectively extend and sustain the pungency of this ironic thesis throughout the essay, Swift constructs a textual schema relying heavily upon both the perception of an ethical narrator and his use of verbal irony. In this particular case, the narrator of this thesis happens to be a persona that Swift is employing—much like a mask.

The persona is not Swift, or anything like him. The narrator Swift is constructing, however, is constantly projecting himself as ethical and, in essence, is the ironist at work. The pre-thesis projection of ethos in the essay works conventionally as a form of appeal for the narrator, postponing opportunities it will eventually create for verbal irony. The post-thesis projection of ethos is of like-construction, but now, because the ironic thesis has been performed, serves an additional function: that of creating a context that proliferates opportunities for verbal irony. Until the thesis is released, the reader is constantly persuaded by this ethos and the context for verbal irony is not yet in place. After the thesis is released, (and this does not occur instantaneously, adding
to the cleverness and impact of the textual schema), the reader continually finds herself saturated with this projection of ethos, providing the context for the verbal irony. It is then the post-thesis ethos the narrator is constantly projecting and the verbal irony that accompanies it that are the essential elements of the textual schema that so effectively extend and sustain the pungent irony throughout the essay. If the reader did not find the narrator ethical, it would lessen the shock of the negation involved in rejecting the thesis--perhaps thwarting the necessary initial rejection of its literal meaning altogether, thus diminishing the irony's pungency, penetration, and strength. Also, the necessary context for the possibility of verbal irony would not be in place. Let us examine further the textual schema of the narrator's ethos and verbal irony that Swift employs for this particular purpose beginning with an understanding of the former.

Ethos is derived from the Greek and refers to the character or values of a person. It is also one of the three general forms of appeal used to persuade in rhetorical discourse, the others being logos (referring to logic and reasoning), and pathos (referring to feelings and
emotions). Ethos, however, is often found, not separately from either logos or pathos, but intrinsically interconnected with them in its application for appeal. Try to imagine the difficulty of interpreting an appeal as ethical if it was also illogical, or interpreting an appeal as logical if it were also unethical. Applied effectively, these three general forms of appeal possess the power to render credibility for a speaker/writer, (an essential element in rhetorical discourse), in the eyes of an audience, and even more so when inextricably applied. Aristotle, suspecting ethos to be the most important form of appeal, said "it might be [. . .] the most authoritative of proofs" (qtd. in Benson, Prosser 57). Consequently, the appeal of ethos should be found permeating any effective rhetorical discourse.

Initially, there were dissenting beliefs as to the application of ethos. The Platonic school believed it must be inherent in the rhetorician. If a man were ethical, his ethics would automatically be reflected in his speeches and writings. According to Edward Corbett, "'No one gives what he does not have', as the Latin maxim puts it" (94). However, Gorgias and his following believed somewhat
differently. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates reiterates Gorgias’s previous assertions in the dialogue as follows:

> [T]here is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know. (qtd. in Benson, Prosser 15)

According to this interpretation, one only needs to give the appearance of being knowledgeable. According to Aristotle, “[t]he ethical appeal is exerted [. . .] when the speech itself impresses the audience that the speaker is a man of sound sense (phronesis), high moral character (arete), and benevolence (eunoia)” (qtd. in Corbett 93). This is a shift of focus from ethics inherent in a speaker/writer to appearance of ethics in a speaker/writer through his rhetoric.

Aristotle gave us additional insight into the importance of ethos and its effects by defining what makes a speaker credible.

The speakers themselves are made trustworthy by three things; for there are three things, besides
demonstrations, which make us believe. These are, intelligence, virtue, and goodwill.

(qtd. in Benson, Prosser 150)

In relation to the application of appearing ethical, Aristotle also gave us instruction as to the means of achieving the appearance of these particular attributes necessary to "make one believe."

Now the means of appearing intelligent and good are to be got from analysis of the virtues; for the same means will enable one to give such a character either to another person or himself.

(qtd. in Benson, Prosser 150)

For example, friendship falls under the category of goodwill. If we were to determine the most persuasive characteristics of friendship through analysis and rhetoric, we could then project those characteristics as a speaker/writer, projecting the appearance of goodwill. More simply, ethos can be analyzed, constructed, and projected.

If a discourse is to be persuasive, it must be permeated with the appeal of ethos, establishing its credibility through the projection of intelligence, virtue, and goodwill. Jonathan Swift’s satirical essay “A Modest
"Proposal" offers excellent illustrations of the projection of ethos and its effects. Swift's projection of ethos in his narrator, as well as the narrator's use of verbal irony, effectively extends and sustains throughout the essay the pungent irony he constructs, strengthening the ironic and derisive reasoning he applies to this particular Irish dilemma.

Intelligence represents the ability to think and reason. It is one of the three general elements of ethos Aristotle stated could be analyzed, constructed, and projected as a means of establishing credibility in rhetoric. The appearance of intelligence can be projected in several ways: (1) establishing reasonable and convincing arguments; (2) acknowledging other viewpoints; and (3) appearing knowledgeable (Horner 54). The speaker/writer must give the impression of having done his homework, especially where specific knowledge or quantitative details are required. This can also be achieved by quoting a reliable source as the origin of one's information.

In paragraph thirty-one of "A Modest Proposal," the narrator projects the appearance of intelligence by establishing a reasonable argument:
But as to myself [. . .] I fortunately fell upon this proposal, which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something solid and real, of no expense and little trouble, full in our own power, and whereby we can incur no danger in disobliging England. (Swift 2186)

The narrator is arguing that his proposal is reasonable in that it offers the usually reasonable appeals of being novel, of little trouble or expense, and something the Irish can do within their power that will also evoke England's indebtedness.

Because this passage is post-thesis, the projection of ethos within it creates the necessary context for verbal irony. One example of verbal irony occurs when Swift's narrator states that he "fortunately fell upon this proposal." The reader, previously aware the narrator is proposing that the children of Ireland should be sold to the rich for the purposes of being eaten, may begin to reconstruct the intended irony at this point. The proposal of such carnage cannot be reconciled with the idea that the discovery of such a solution is to be considered good fortune. For the same reasons the reader rejects Swift's original proposal, it follows logically that such a
solution should also be rejected as good fortune. In a civilized world, children are valued. The civilized reader cannot reconcile the selling and eating of children as an ethical solution, nor can she reconcile discovering such a solution as fortunate. The continued projection of ethos by the narrator at this point augments these negations. Neither can the reader reconcile that an ethical narrator believes the discovery of such a solution as fortunate. The inability of the reader to reconcile the ethics of the narrator, his projection of intelligence, therefore ethos, with his claim of good fortune discovering such a proposal, extends and sustains the pungency of this outlandish proposal by sustaining this dichotomy of incongruous context of ethical versus unethical.

In another passage, paragraph thirty-two, the narrator projects the appearance of intelligence by eloquently acknowledging other viewpoints:

After all, I am not so violently bent upon my own opinion as to reject any offer proposed by wise men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual. (Swift 2186)

The narrator is acknowledging other possible viewpoints, and, at the very least, entertains that there may be valid
ones among his audience other than his own. This demonstrates intelligence because it is always a reasonable argument in and of itself.

In this passage, also post-thesis, the narrator's projection of ethos continues to sustain the context necessary for proliferating opportunities for verbal irony. His reference to considering other proposals “which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual” strikes us as ironic because we cannot reconcile his proposal with the notion that it is also all these things. The civilized reader cannot accept the cannibalism of infants as an innocent, cheap, easy, or effectual solution. The civilized reader would place a much higher value on an infant’s life, not find taking that life easy, nor find the proposal morally or logically effectual. She would reject a literal statement of this kind. However, the following passage offers us a contrasting situation because it occurs before the thesis of the essay is fully rendered.

In paragraph seven, the narrator defers to opinions of reliable sources (merchants) to project the appearance intelligence. This passage refers to the salability of a child; salability being a subject a merchant would be well versed in:
I am assured by our merchants that a boy or girl before twelve years old is no salable commodity; and even when they come to this age they will not yield above three pounds, or three pounds and a half a crown at most on the exchange; (Swift 2182)

In addition, the narrator gives the appearance of having done his homework by investigating and demonstrating the worth of a mature child, using a knowledgeable source.

At this pre-thesis point in the essay, the ethos being projected by the narrator functions in the conventional manner of appealing to the reader to believe the narrator. Because the thesis is not in place—has not been established—the reader has no reason, or context, for rejecting the literal meaning of what the narrator is communicating. This example illustrates my previous assertion of the way the textual schema Swift employs operates before the ironic thesis is performed.

Virtue, the second of three traits Aristotle believes makes us trustworthy, most often refers to moral excellence, righteousness, or goodness. The appearance of virtue can be projected by the rhetor in several ways: (1) simply stating one's "beliefs, values, and priorities in
connection with the issue" being addressed ("Cicero encouraged rhetors to extol their 'merits or worth or virtue of some kind, particularly generosity, sense of duty, justice and good faith'" (qtd. in Crowley 92).), (2) comparing yourself or your case to other persons or cases of "known integrity," and (3) "[placing] the issue within a larger moral framework" (Horner 55).

Swift's narrator projects the appearance of virtue in the following pre-thesis phrase found in paragraph four, where he says that his virtuous priorities have been that of "[turning] [his] thoughts for many years upon this important subject [the overpopulation of Ireland]." In this case, Swift's narrator is acting on Cicero's advice to "extol [his] merits or worth or virtue of some kind" (Crowley 92). Similar to the previous pre-thesis example concerning the projection of intelligence, the reader has no reason, or context, for rejecting the literal meaning of this phrase.

In paragraph seventeen of the essay, the narrator compares himself to another person of integrity to project a virtuous appearance:

A very worthy person, a true lover of his country, and whose virtues I highly esteem, was
lately pleased in discoursing on this matter to offer a refinement upon my scheme. (Swift 2183)

Although the narrator never names this person, the narrator extols him as a “true lover of country” with highly esteemed virtues. Then, he associates himself with this person by illustrating acceptance by this person of his [the narrator’s] scheme. The esteemed associate was pleased to discourse about it.

In this post-thesis passage, Swift’s verbal irony abounds. In conjunction with projecting virtue by association, to say that this virtuous person was “pleased in discoursing” about the proposal and “offer[s] a refinement “ of it is ironic. The reader is inclined to reject the literal meaning because of the incongruity of juxtaposing the gruesome proposal with the idea of it being pleasing to discuss or refine.

Projecting the appearance of virtue can also follow the form of “[placing] the issue into a larger moral framework” (Horner 55). The original issue was framed in the epigraph as “PREVENTING THE CHILDREN OF POOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR PARENTS OR COUNTRY” (Swift 2181). In paragraph twenty-one, Swift’s narrator now places the issue into the larger context of religious
and political conflict by stating in reference to his proposal:

[I]t would greatly lesson the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly overrun, being the principle breeders of the nation as well as our most dangerous enemies; and who stay home on purpose to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender[son of James II]. (Swift 2184)

According to Oliver Ferguson, author of Jonathan Swift and Ireland, after James’s army was defeated, all the acts, including the Attainder Act of 1689 that provided for the redistribution of Ireland “in favor of the Catholics,” were declared void. Consequently, the Irish Protestants would always remember the near misfortune and never again allow their security or power to be jeopardized by Catholics (Ferguson 15). “[England] feared that the Catholics would defect to the Pretender’s cause [. . .]” (Ferguson 24).

In the midst of projecting virtue in this manner, the dichotomy is established once more. Swift presents (even though at this point it is tongue in cheek) a seemingly ethical narrator who postulates an obviously unethical premise for his proposal: lessening the number of Papists in Ireland. The civilized reader must reject the literal
premise, believing the ethical narrator must have meant something different—even opposite to it—that could in no way be congruous to the literal statement.

The third general element Aristotle claimed would make the speaker trustworthy is goodwill. This element most often evokes attitudes of kindness, friendliness, or benevolence. A rhetor may project the appearance of goodwill by: (1) reviewing points of agreement, common interests, and concerns that the speaker/writer shares with his audience, (This projects a friendly attitude induced by like values.), and (2) projecting the appearance of benevolence through the rhetoric itself (much like extolling one’s virtues to his audience) (Horner 55).

The narrator projects the appearance of goodwill by insisting, in the epigraph (“FOR PREVENTING THE CHILDREN OF POOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR PARENTS OR COUNTRY, AND FOR MAKING THEM BENEFICIAL TO THE PUBLIC”), that his proposal shares the common interests and concerns of his audience. The key phrase here is “MAKING THEM BENEFICIAL TO THE PUBLIC.” The narrator is making the case that his proposal addresses common interests and concerns by being beneficial to the public. In this manner, he projects the appearance of goodwill. In this pre-thesis
phrase, the opportunity for verbal irony created by Swift’s textual schema is not yet in place.

Swift’s narrator also gives the appearance of goodwill in paragraph thirty-three by projecting benevolence through the rhetoric itself, offering himself as an impartial and objective problem solver who has nothing to gain, and whose only concern is that of the general public.

I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country [. . .]. (Swift 2187)

Credibility is enhanced when personal motives are dispelled and impartiality asserted. He attempts to project this by disavowing any personal motives save sincerity.

Once again, the civilized reader is forced to reject the literal meanings of “sincerity of heart” and “public good” presented within the same context of the literalness of the proposal itself. The reader cannot accept the incongruity that the literalness of Swift’s thesis could possibly emerge from, literally, a “sincere heart” and, literally, represent the “public good.” Because of this, she is forced to search for alternative interpretations,
make decisions about the speaker’s knowledge or beliefs, and choose new meanings. The preceding and limited examples only begin to demonstrate how intelligence, virtue, and goodwill are effectively projected by Swift’s narrator, establishing the necessary ethos for the purpose of extending and sustaining the pungent ironic thesis in Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” through creating a context for the proliferation of verbal irony in the post-thesis text.

The previous illustrations are only the tip of the iceberg of complexity with which Swift writes and the reader reads. However, they suffice as a point of entry into conceptualizing the complexity of a text. From such an analysis, a student begins to comprehend the possible scope of interpretation that can exist in a given text, and she can begin to read with such a possible scope in mind, expanding the possibilities for meaning through context. To not do so creates the possibility for a limited interpretation, similar to Salvatori’s explanation of students reducing the text to one meaning or perspective, denying further opportunities for additional meanings and perspectives; and therefore, logically, creating the possibility of a limited response to the text when they write. This raises logical questions concerning Swift’s
essay: What if the reader reduces Swift's essay to one meaning, one perspective? And, what if that meaning were merely literal? What happens if a reader fails to reconstruct Swift's intended irony? Or, any intended irony for that matter?

The preceding analysis makes the answer to the latter question obvious: a total loss of comprehension. This is essentially the phenomenon that differentiates irony from its other rhetorical siblings. Wayne Booth compares the reading of metaphor and irony to illustrate this difference. He asserts that a metaphor is like an irony in the sense that a reader cannot accept its face value and must reconstruct new meaning inferred from what is literally stated. But, unlike reading irony, Booth suggests, when reading metaphor "what is rejected is primarily the grammatical form of the claim" (22-23). In contrast, reading irony evokes no such rejection of its grammatical form of the claim—merely the rejection of the literal meaning. And, in metaphor, he contends that readers know immediately that the author desires them to make a comparison, even in the absence of the cues for simile like and as. At this point the reader engages in extending and adding meaning, not rejecting meaning as in
irony. Booth follows that, in reading metaphor, there is "no moment of shock [. . .] demand[ing] for active negative judgment" (23).

And so, although metaphor requires a decision on behalf of the reader, it is a decision to add meaning to the literal statement—not a decision between the literal meaning and a new interpretation as in irony, which requires the rejection of the literal meaning before comprehension can begin. Therefore, in reading irony, if the literal meaning is not rejected, there is a total loss of comprehension. The literal must be rejected and alternative meanings sought out. In metaphor, the literal is preserved for the purposes of the comparison.

In addition, there is no inclination to dispose of the literal when reading metaphor in that the literal is not incongruous with its intended meaning. The experience the literal renders is similar to the experience its intended meaning renders. The attributes of the literal are projected onto the intended meaning. A comparison could not be made if this was not the case, and the metaphor would not be successful. However, in irony, to not reject the literal meaning of the statement leads to a failure in
deciphering the irony; thus, the loss of comprehension. Let’s illustrate this through Swift’s essay.

Failure to decipher the irony in “A Modest Proposal” would render a reader who believed that the narrator was serious about selling infants to the rich for the purposes of being eaten as a way of improving the wretched conditions of overpopulation and lack of money in Ireland at that time. The result is a total miscommunication—a total loss of comprehension. So, how does the reader know what is actually being communicated? How does the reader know to reject the literal meaning of the proposal, begin searching for alternative meanings based on decisions made about the author’s beliefs and values, and finally choosing a meaning to replace the literal? Reflecting back on the preceding analysis, the answer seems to lie in the context in which the proposal is made.

The context in which Swift presents his essay’s ironic thesis is substantial. Seventeenth and eighteenth century Ireland under the rule of England and influence of Christianity was, by all concomitant worldly standards, considered a civilized society. No civilized and Christianized society of this time period nor geographic juxtaposition would have condoned the selling of infants to
the rich for the purposes of being eaten as a way of improving the wretched conditions of overpopulation and lack of money among the masses. Even though the ethically corrupt actions of those exploiting the Irish were incongruent with common interpretation and practice of Christian tenets and contributed greatly to the wretched conditions of the Irish, this type of corruption was often an inextricable and common occurrence in government. However, there were no known cases of peoples practicing Christian Doctrine in conjunction with cannibalism in Europe, even though Swift uses such a metaphor in his essay. Cannibalism would be too blatant an incongruity to survive. The majority of the Irish practiced the Catholic faith. It is this particular and substantial context that creates the possibility for Swift's ironic thesis in "A Modest Proposal." Swift's irony would have been easily reconstructed by most of his readers.

In like manner, the context for Swift's verbal irony is also substantial. As illustrated in the previous analysis, Swift creates a context for the proliferation of verbal irony by constructing a complex textual schema for the purpose of extending and sustaining the pungency of the primary source of irony: his ironic thesis. The schema
element that provides for the proliferation of verbal irony is the narrator’s persistent projection of ethos. The persistent projection of ethos in the form of intelligence, virtue, and goodwill juxtaposed against the unethical thesis, generates prolific incongruities that easily convert to an abundance of verbal ironies.

In both sources of irony I have illumined in Swift’s "A Modest Proposal," the importance of comprehending context has emerged as essential to the success of comprehending the irony. It is the context within which the essay is read that causes the reader to sense the incongruity and reject the literal meaning of what is being presented. Because of the notoriety of Swift’s essay and our knowledge of a heavily Christianized Europe of that period it might be difficult for us to imagine, but a reader unaware of the ethical context of Swift’s society may very well fail to decipher the intended irony. If her context was ethically different, she may not sense the incongruity, precluding the possibility of rejecting the literal meaning of the statement—the first step in Booth’s heuristic for reconstructing an irony. And, neither would she be able to make prudent decisions about the speaker’s beliefs or values—the third step in Booth’s heuristic.
Steps two and four would logically not figure into her experience either.

Through this study and analysis of the irony in "A Modest Proposal," limited as it may be, one can begin to comprehend the complexity of a text and discern the importance of context in reading and writing critically. This is certainly an augmentation upon my original hypothesis that only envisioned illustrating the comprehension of textual complexity as a means for increasing students' critical reading and writing abilities. The question remaining now is: How do we teach students to read and write with this complexity and importance of context in mind? The following is a prospectus for constructing a teaching unit for the purpose of shedding some light on how these premises might be practically applied.
CHAPTER THREE
UNIT PROSPECTUS

The fundamental goal of this unit is to illustrate to students the complexity of any given text and to illustrate the possible—even necessary—context within which critically reading and writing a given text must occur. For these purposes, I propose a three-part unit. The first part is devoted to comprehending the importance of context through assimilating a particular strategy for doing so. The second part is devoted to comprehending complexity through the activity of reconstructing an intended irony in a piece of contemporary writing. And, the third part is designed to synthesize the knowledge and experience of the first two by providing students an opportunity to construct ironic arguments of their own. For the purposes of delineating these tasks, I will defer to Salvatori's assertion that critical reading must necessarily precede critical writing. Therefore, a student must read critically in order to respond critically. And, as a point of entry into the importance of context in reading critically, I suggest deference to Iser's 'wandering viewpoint': an activity that "tends to flesh out, to
reorganize, and to proliferate the meanings of a text [. . .]" (qtd. in Salvatori 179). As stated previously, Iser’s ‘wandering viewpoint’ is the activity that assists us in reading critically. So, what are the strategies for reading in this manner? How can we teach students “to flesh out, to reorganize, and to proliferate the meanings of a text?” One certain way is to teach them to read with context in mind. Every student reads within a context, but often times that context is limited and too narrow to produce a generous and critical reading of a text. One way in which we can expand the scope of the context within which students read is to teach them a heuristic for that purpose.

One such heuristic for this very purpose can be found in John Peters’ The Elements of Critical Reading. In a chapter from his book titled Five Ways of Interpreting a Text, he posits a stratagem of five perspectives a student can employ for reading and analyzing texts through a heuristic of questioning. Peters takes the five perspectives of social, emotional, rhetorical, logical, and ethical, and develops a set of questions that inform those particular perspectives in any given text. To illustrate their effectiveness, he uses three distinct models of text:
Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address—"the 'classic' document of historic reputation," Joan Didion’s "On Going Home"—"the contemporary personal memoir," and Lewis Thomas’s "Making Science Work"—"the expository or argumentative essay" (163). For the purpose of rendering, through summary, the essence of Peters’ heuristic, I will only include examples of these texts when necessary for comprehension.

Peters first addresses the social perspective, which interprets a text in relation to society. The first question he introduces is: "What social concerns does the text reveal?" Peters suggests one strategy for answering the question is to "think about what general function or usefulness the text may have" (164). Looking at a text through the eyes of social function can point us in the direction of potential social concerns addressed by the text.

Another strategy for answering the question is to "think about any problems or conflicts the text may address" (164). Peters asserts that "because all writing involves contrast, [a] [reader] can reexamine a given text’s contrasts to see if any of them is [sic] social in nature" (164). Often times though, the social contrasts in a text can be easily perceived.
The second question concerning social perspective Peters offers is: "How does the text relate to the past?" This is a logically sensible question in that it is common knowledge that social concerns change throughout time. If the text was written at some point in the past, it is logical to consider what social function it may have served at the time it was written and how those social concerns differed. Written in the present, a reader would have to discern its relationship to the past through its present social function. Peters suggests non-fiction as a clear illustration of this. An example of such would be a history textbook. How it would relate to the past would depend largely on its interpretation of the historical period in focus (165).

The last question Peters introduces in relation to social perspective is: "How does the text relate to right now?" This particular question is mostly aimed at texts written in the past. This question causes the reader to ponder if social concerns raised in the past remain relevant today. Is society still struggling to resolve them? One example would be race relations. Writings from the sixties concerning equality between races still inform much of our current thinking on the subject. Reading a
text from a social perspective assists the reader in expanding in scope the context within which she reads a text, and allows her to “view a text in relation to the world around it” (166). The second way Peters proposes a reader look at a text is through the emotional perspective.

Peters asserts that even “though some texts seem emotionless (a legal contract, for example), most writing appeals to human feelings in one way or another” (167). In rhetorical discourse, pathos—referring to feelings and emotions, is one of the three general forms of appeal used to persuade. Because it is often a rhetorical strategy used by authors to persuade, a reader should naturally read with this perspective in mind. The first question Peters urges a reader to ask when considering the emotional perspective is: “Does the text contain objects of emotion?” This question encourages the reader to search for and recognize objects within the text that are “invested with strong emotional significance” (167). Even though emotive symbols are more prevalent in literature, they can be found in non-fiction texts as well. An example of these would be emotionally charged language representing not only objects of emotion but also the “moods associated with them” (169). Designating and examining objects of emotion found in a
text is another effective strategy for increasing the reader's scope of context within which they read.

The second question Peters introduces under the emotional perspective is: "Do you find evidence of conflicting emotions?" Peters, asserting previously that contrast is essential to any text, encourages the reader to read for emotional contrasts as well. Emotional contrasts would include any emotions that have natural opposites such as happiness vs. sadness, triumph vs. defeat, et cetera. Peters insists that "by recognizing [the] emotional contrasts [a reader] can learn something about the emotional range of the text". He reminds the reader that, like other aspects of a text, emotional conflicts are not always reconciled, often resulting in irony (168).

Peters' third question relating to the emotional perspective is: "What is the tone of the author?" This particular question is aimed at deciphering the attitude of an author, whether toward her subject or as a normal characteristic of her prose. Even though tone can be informed by aspects such as diction and prose style, Peters reminds the reader that this exercise is "risky" and largely subjective in that a reader often "infer[s] tone [based on] personal responses to the subject matter of a
text." However, it is a risk that readers must engage in because the author’s own emotions are often the ones that impact the reader most (169).

The third perspective Peters proposes to expand the scope of a reader’s context is the rhetorical. This perspective analyzes form and style, and operates not only to broaden the reader’s scope of context, but provides many opportunities for the reader to assimilate skills and features the author herself employs to achieve certain effects in her writing. By examining how the author constructed the text, the reader then can gain insight into advancing her own writing ability. So, this particular perspective, if applied thoroughly, has the obvious advantage of enhancing a reader’s critical writing abilities as well.

Peters’ first question for the rhetorical perspective is: "How can the text’s form be described?" This question requires the reader to categorize the work in relation to fiction, non-fiction and the many genres and subgenres that follow. I see the benefits from this as being twofold.

First of all, it requires the reader to identify the work. Knowing more specifically what type of writing the reader is engaging can help the reader begin developing
expectations of form that can assist her in critically reading for what those features inherently produce in a text. An overly simple example of this would be identifying a text as an argumentative essay. Because this is, at times, a highly predictable form, a reader may predictably expect to find a thesis statement, and she can begin reading for such.

Secondly, specific genres often serve specific writing purposes. An example of this would be the autobiographical writing of interpreting an event. If the reader is familiar with that genre, she can expect that, at some point in the writing, the author will reveal the significance of the event in relation to her [the author’s] life. Thus, she can begin reading with this specific feature in mind. This prepares the reader for a more detailed reading of the work.

The second question Peters introduces for the rhetorical perspective is: What rhetorical modes do you find in the text? Rhetorical modes are strategies or methods a writer employs for achieving various functions in writing, including narration, description, definition, summary, comparing and contrasting, classification, et cetera. Autobiographical essays that interpret personal
events in the lives of writers can be expected to provide vivid descriptions of the event and adequate narrative action to communicate as accurately as possible and persuasively as possible the actual event itself, providing a way for the reader to experience the event, thus comprehending the significance of the event (171).

More formal essays inherently contain other modes of writing as well. "Impersonal essays tend to employ rhetorical modes suited to research reporting [such as] ... definition, summary, classification, illustration, process analysis, and comparison/contrast [Peters' emphasis]". These modes are used to distinguish differences that "help explain a problem and/or point to its possible solution" (171). Also, understanding how an author organized the content of an essay can enhance a reader's analysis of the text. Specifically, the modes of classification, process analysis, and comparison/contrast, can be effective ways a writer organizes information, and discerning the mode can assist the reader in following the writer's presentation of the content. Identifying the mode can also provide the reader with important clues as to the function of a text which in turn provides insight into its meaning (172).
A third question Peters offers concerning the rhetorical perspective is: "How can the author’s style be described?" He conveys the difficulty a reader might incur concerning this task by including the thoughts of E.B. White on the matter: "Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind?" (qtd. in Peters 172). However, this being said, the reader should not preclude such an endeavor. A simple example of how style can enhance a reader’s comprehension of a text is parallelism or coordination. When content is presented in a text in a grammatically parallel form, the reader can assume that each item in the sentence is of equal value. Added benefits of grammatically parallel sentence structures are that they are more easily read and remembered.

The fourth question concerning the rhetorical perspective introduced by Peters is: "What about ambiguity?" It is an understatement to say that words mean different things to each of us. I often use this phenomenon to help students comprehend the necessity of developing their writing abilities. I first get them to expand the scope of what they believe could serve as a text to include a stop sign for traffic. Then I ask them to
envision how drivers respond differently to the sign as they approach and drive through the intersection. This easily illustrates how readers can engage the same text [word] and end up with a different interpretation. Then, I reiterate the importance of developing writing skills to counter such difficulties that writers inherently face.

Peters parallels this in stating that, "saying someone is a 'proud person' could be taken as a compliment or a rebuke, depending on the intent of the speaker and on the understanding of the audience" (173). He further clarifies this in explaining that although dictionaries provide us with general definitions—denotations, readers define words based on personal connotations that are derived through their own personal experiences of usage. In addition, it is important to remember that ambiguities are sometimes good things and enrich the meaning of a text. One strategy for locating a 'good' ambiguity is to recognize a term the author may be struggling to define (174).

An example Peters employs as an illustration of this is the way Joan Didion continues to expand the meaning and her use of the word home in her personal memoir essay. At one point, Didion uses the word to refer to her childhood house in central California. Later she uses the word
abstractly to mean "a sense of home." This particular ambiguity is central to understanding what her essay is about. The ambiguity between both ways she uses it signifies the difficulty she is talking about: how to define home. Unlike the good ambiguity Didion constructs in her essay, bad ambiguities occur for various reasons, including "mixed metaphors, misplaced modifiers, equivocation, et cetera, and contribute little to the reader's understanding of a text (174). The rhetorical perspective allows the reader to examine the construction of a text as a way of proliferating meanings through a larger scope of context. Peters' fourth perspective is the logical.

This particular perspective focuses on the method of reasoning employed by the author to reach her conclusion. The function of such a focus is to evaluate the persuasiveness of a text in asserting its conclusion. The first question Peters introduces under the logical perspective is: "What debatable issue is raised by the text?" An issue is considered debatable if it remains controversial. In other words, there is no consensus about an adequate or appropriate solution to a particular problem. There may also be more than one debatable issue.
raised by the text. Peters uses a passage from the Gettysburg Address to illustrate a text raising a debatable issue: [Lincoln speaking] "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure." Whether the nation would survive the civil war it had engaged in was certainly an unresolved issue. By the mere fact that the war was continuing at the very time of Lincoln's speech implies the issue raised was still very debatable (176).

The second question in the sequence of the logical perspective is: "What conclusions does the text reach?" When questions of controversy arise in a text, it is logical to expect a stated position to evolve in a method and manner designed to persuade the reader of the validity of that position. Peters suggests first "identifying the conclusion itself" (177). Strategies for critical reading often encourage readers to pre-read a work in the method of glossing over the text, including identifying the thesis statement and conclusion of an essay. Clarifying both the issue and conclusion are an essential beginning in evaluating the path of logic connecting them.

The third question in the sequence is: "Does the text contain sufficient evidence?" This query invites the
reader to evaluate whether or not the writer has provided convincing reasons for her conclusion. At this point, Peters suggests identifying whether or not the reasoning seems to be inductive or deductive. Although most texts of any length often incorporate both, one may prove more prevalent than the other. Identifying the type of reasoning helps us evaluate it. Deductive reasoning can often be sketched out in the form of a syllogism. Because it is deductive the reader would look for a certain type of evidence: statements that might fulfill major and minor premises of such a syllogism. If the reasoning is inductive, the reader would have to evaluate particular facts and instances arranged to induce the reader to believe some general principle. Peters reminds the reader that,

because deductive premises are 'givens' based on faith, and because inductive hypotheses can be overturned by future exceptions to the rule, argument remains a process in which opposing viewpoints are always possible. (180).

This brings us to his next question: *Does the text take opposing arguments into account?* The acknowledgement of opposing viewpoints is a good rhetorical strategy often
used in argumentative discourse. Peters' suggests that identifying opposing viewpoints can provide the reader a point entry into other arguments that "lie beyond the scope" of a particular essay (181). I would add that the nature of that alone could easily increase the context from which the essay is read, creating opportunities for the proliferation of meaning.

The fifth and final perspective Peters' proposes a student can employ for reading and analyzing a text is ethical. He urges readers not to "overlook the question of moral values" and ethics, especially when the text "discusses or depicts human behavior" (182). The first question Peters submits for consideration under the ethical perspective is: "What is the highest good envisioned by the text?" He states that, "[i]n moral philosophy the sumnum bonum—the highest good—is the ultimate ideal toward which ethical behavior is directed" (182). Peters explains that the history of ethics offers, among other things, duty, happiness, and perfection as prevalent concepts of what might be potentially considered the highest good. He suggests that although these may not be the culmination of the highest good, they "do often serve as signposts marking
the main ethical routes along which many texts are moving" (184).

The second question relating to the ethical perspective is: "What ethical convictions does the text reveal?" This sequences the first question under ethics. Peters insists that once the reader discovers the highest good a text is striving for, she [the reader] can then investigate what convictions might be associated in achieving that ideal. Ethical convictions are convictions relating to the evaluation of behavior as either right or wrong, or a gradation of such. Peters offers three major categories for potential consideration as including altruistic, egoistic, and political. He concludes this perspective in stating that, "even when the text does not seem to make an issue of ethics, the reader should search for whatever ideals may be implied—and whatever ethical convictions may be apparent" (185).

The culmination of Peters' essay is the rendering of a comprehensive and effective heuristic for expanding the scope of context within which students read a text. By applying the five perspectives through the asking of specific questions provided for each, a reader can proliferate the meanings of a text, rendering a generous
and more critical reading. As Peters illustrates, the heuristic may be applied effectively to texts across the disciplines.

Therefore, to accomplish the goal of teaching students the importance of reading with context in mind, I will ask them to read and outline Peters’ essay (similarly to what I have just delineated) for the purposes of assimilating it. In conjunction with this, I will require them to read different genres of text from at least two different disciplines, and journal answers to the questions Peters’ heuristic provides. This will provide them with the opportunity to practically adapt Peters’ method. The importance here is the diversity of the texts, not the specifics of genre or discipline. The diversity of the texts will increase their experience and effectiveness, hopefully building their confidence in reading and responding in this manner.

I will follow these activities with discussion groups for the purpose of sharing journal entries responding to these particular questions. In groups, students can discuss their experience, share their insights from reading within this prescribed context, and brainstorm possible solutions to some of the difficulties they may have
encountered applying some of the perspectives to certain texts. Having accomplished our first objective, I will direct them to the second sequence of the unit.

As stated in both my original and my modified hypotheses, I believe that students' realization of the complexity of a text must precede, or, at the very least, parallel the acquisition of critical reading and writing skills. Because of the critical way in which irony operates, more complexly than its other rhetorical siblings, it can be an effective means to illustrate the complexity of a text.

In step one of the second part of the unit, I propose that students observe as well as participate in reconstructing the irony of a text. In class, students will participate in a combination lecture and discussion illustrating both Booth’s four-step heuristic for reconstructing irony and a practical application of it reconstructing the irony in "A Modest Proposal." To further these purposes, I will use my analysis of "A Modest Proposal" to inform the discussion and to guide the illustration of reconstructing Swift’s irony through Booth’s method. A second step in part two will require, as an out-of-class assignment, that students reconstruct an
irony on their own, illustrating that reconstruction through Booth's four-step heuristic.

Step two of the second part will require students to read, outside of class, a contemporary essay employing intended irony. I have chosen Linnea Saukko's *How to Poison the Earth*, an ironic argument written in the genre of process analysis. In this essay, the student writer presents the reader with detailed instructions of how to poison the earth. These instructions are a parody of the typical process analysis and a satire on the way contemporary society responds to current environmental problems. After a brief in-class analysis of this particular genre of essay—process analysis, I will introduce the text to the students in class and illustrate the exercise I will require them to perform at home by guiding them through a first example of reconstructing Saukko's irony. The following is an explication of this introduction minus any speculation of potential and ensuing discussions that might attend.

The first incongruity the reader is faced with is the title itself: "How to Poison the Earth." This declarative statement implies the existence of the interrogative from which it is derived: "How would you poison the earth?" In
the context of our contemporary environmentally conscious society, either of these statements is incongruous: they are not in harmony with the environmental beliefs and values contemporary society espouses: to detoxify and preserve the earth and its environment, as far as possible, to its previous, more natural state--free of manmade toxins and natural toxins egregiously displaced by man. The incongruous statements evoke a contrary agenda: to contaminate and poison the earth toward the ends inherent in such an agenda.

The contemporary reader, reading from her environmentally concerned social context, must invalidate these statements—rule them out. The contemporary reader must believe the contemporary writer could not have intended the literal meaning of this declaration. This is the exact moment of negation Booth refers to when the reader fully rejects the literal meaning, providing she has engaged in this initial step of comprehending the irony as opposed to misreading it. If, however, the contemporary environmentally concerned social context is not evoked and engaged—as unlikely as it seems, the result would be a total loss of comprehension. The reader may actually, then, believe the writer’s purpose is to provide adequate
instructions for such an agenda. Her context, however, performs a like-function to the context for the reader of "A Modest Proposal," virtually insuring the success of this particular step in reconstructing Saukko’s irony.

In this absence, then, of meaning, the reader is compelled, almost intrinsically, to proceed to Booth’s second step: trying out alternative meanings which come flooding in, and, which are to a large degree necessarily out of harmony with what the literal statement appears to say. Speculatively, and in the spirit of irony’s facetiousness, these might vary from our society “needs to pass stronger environmental laws concerning the use of whiteout” to our society “needs to stop the potentially toxic manner in which it disposes of radioactive waste.” In reality, the alternatives at this stage are too difficult to illustrate. This difficulty will, however, diminish as the reader proceeds to Booth’s third step: a reader now makes a decision about the writer’s knowledge or beliefs.

According to Booth the reader will mediate at this point, because the context within which she reads has yielded Saukko’s statements as absurd, the belief that, unlike those statements, the writer’s beliefs and knowledge
are not absurd. The absurdity of the writer is rejected in much the same way the reader rejects the absurd literal meaning of the incongruous statement and in much the same manner and logic. The assumption then can be made that the writer's beliefs and knowledge are the opposite of absurd, moving the reader to step four: the reader chooses a new meaning based in part on decisions made about the writer's beliefs and knowledge to dissolve the incongruity. Because of the decisions ascribed to the writer, the reader can, with some certainty, conclude that the writer means to communicate, ironically, the opposite of what she says: How Not to Poison the Earth.

At this point, I would instruct the students to take the essay home and in like manner reconstruct as much of Saukko's irony as possible, recording their reconstructions and analyses of such in their writing journals for the purposes of sharing and evaluating their experiences in executing the exercise when they form discussion groups upon returning to class.

The third part of the unit consists of synthesizing the student's knowledge and experience acquired from the preceding exercises for the purpose of providing an opportunity for them to construct their own arguments.
employing irony. A proposed assignment for the purposes of fully assimilating an understanding of the complexity of a text and the importance of context to the process of critical reading could possibly read as follows:

Employing your knowledge of process analyses' essays, your knowledge of Booth's four-step heuristic for reconstructing intended irony, your knowledge of the importance context plays in the construction of and comprehension of intended irony, and periodically reviewing Saukko's essay to serve as the genre model, write a three-page process analysis essay, employing irony, that satirizes a current social concern in our world (other than the environment).

In-class workshops where students exchange essays would follow for further practice in reconstructing the irony in other students' essays and examining the importance context played in these reconstructions. John Peters' heuristic for increasing the scope of the context within which a student reads can be incorporated as well; if not for comprehending an incongruity, at the very least, as a vocabulary for articulating the necessary context provoking the initial negation. I submit the unit in the form of a
prospectus, finding it more useful in this manner in that a teacher could more easily adapt it perhaps to their own texts and execute it according to the time they may be willing to invest in it.

Assimilating a heuristic like Peters' could prove an invaluable component for enabling students to become more critically literate. The application of this specific method of questioning alone can easily increase the scope of context within which students read. Moreover, it provides a model of complexity itself within which students can envision reading, and must be taught to read. Success in comprehending and assimilating, even realizing, the effectiveness intrinsic to such a heuristic to proliferate meaning for readers is as much an illustration of the complexity of a text as reconstructing irony.

However, reconstructing irony also helps students envision the complexity of the text in relation to reading and writing it. Illustrating the complexity of a text in this manner can serve for students as incentive, even imperative, for developing the ability to expand the scope of the context within which they read. Learning to read in a more complex manner in response to textual complexity will certainly yield more generous and complex readings.
that logically will generate more complex written responses.

In any case, employing them together in a unit of composition to enhance critical literacy could be even more effective. This multiple approach and application is probably more persuasive because it provides a point of entry for the students' realization of the importance of context in both reading critically and writing critically. Employing them together in a unit provides added insight into the intrinsic relatedness of reading and writing. The previous analysis of "A Modest Proposal" illustrates the larger scope of context within which the reader must read to comprehend Swift's irony, and it demonstrates the probable considerations of context Swift may have employed in constructing that irony. Subsequently, the analysis effectively illustrates the complexity of the text, which is essentially the motivation for assisting students in employing more complex approaches to reading and responding in their writing.

The unit I have proposed engages students in assimilating Peters' heuristic, adapting it through practical application, reconstructing of both Swift's and Saukko's irony, and constructing irony of their [the
students' own. All three of these activities reveal the complexity of the text and the importance of context in reading or writing critically; and together, acknowledge the students' realization of this complexity as paramount in achieving the goals of these assignments. The culmination of these activities--critically literate students--should be the ultimate goal in composition classrooms.
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