

“Developing critical thinking through critical reading and writing. The basic skills”

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Abstract – My paper discusses Washington Irving’s short story “Tom Walker and the Devil”. It argues that the story can be taught at both university- and high-school level but in different ways and suggests different approaches. Irving’s story can enable students and pupils to develop their critical reading and writing skills while at the same time learning to appreciate the value and importance of “good” literature. “Tom Walker and the Devil” is one of Irving’s finest stories in terms of theme, style and language. It also has the advantage that there is no shortage of critical sources – printed as well as electronic – on its themes, context and style. Some of these sources are identified in my paper.

Keywords: literary theory; academic writing; trading; letter

My paper addresses ways of teaching students to think and write critically as a preparation for a productive professional life. Learning to write an essay, project report, thesis, dissertation or an article is not so much a question of “writing up” research results as exploring how academic writing can be used to greater effect, and more specifically, to promote individual development within the conditions set by the Academy. As teachers we are concerned with freedom. Writing is about the practice of freedom because through it we explore and process our thoughts and values. Writing helps individuals to engage with others and to produce alternative versions of reality. It provides the conditions for production and transformation based on the writer’s *own* thoughts and understanding.

I raise an important question for readers and writers of academic texts: “how do we promote critical thinking that will result in writing that conforms to well-defined procedures for the collection and processing of data while at the same time maintaining and demonstrating a personal motive, approach and set of ideals?” As we engage in research, we sign up, consciously or unconsciously, to beliefs, values and attitudes of which we may or may not be aware. In the following discussion, I emphasise the importance of developing critical understanding and a personal academic voice, questioning assumptions and the status quo, reading between the lines when reviewing literature, strengthening interpretations, and constructing persuasive arguments that can withstand rigorous critical examination.

By focusing on one kind of writing, namely the literary essay, I shall demonstrate how a literary text, Washington Irving’s well-known Faustian tale “The Devil and Tom Walker”, can be used to develop critical thinking and writing. I explore how the ideas presented in the story can be discussed in an argumentative literary essay at college or university level in such a way that they reflect critical thought about such issues as the sanctity of agreements, the reliability of textual evidence, values in life, the relationship between money and happiness, abuse of human relationships and the integrity of human action. I briefly introduce a couple of websites that highlight different features of the tale. Students should be asked to study and evaluate these sites, and any additional sites that they may find, in terms of academic quality and critical evaluation. Which sites are useful and acceptable academic sources, and why? What other sources are available, and how do these compare in academic quality and critical thinking with those found on the Internet? These are particularly important questions for undergraduates who are only just beginning to learn how to critique texts in a convincing way and to present their critique in a manner that is acceptable to the Academy.

While my primary focus is on university students, I shall demonstrate in the latter part of my paper that Irving's tale can also be adapted for use at high school. My comments are based on a project conducted in 2005 at an American middle school. The results of this project, highlighted in the article "Trading Spaces with Tom Walker: Moving the Devil out of Fourth Hour", are briefly summarised and discussed.

1. "The Devil and Tom Walker". A short introduction

Irving's short story was published in 1824 as part of Washington Irving's collection of short stories *Tales of a Traveller*. Set in eighteenth-century New England, it is narrated by Gentleman Geoffrey Crayon, a fictional character. Though the story has been widely read and enjoyed since its first appearance, *Tales of a Traveller* was generally poorly received by critics, who described it as "unoriginal". It should be remembered that the short story was a relatively new form of fiction at the time, and many of its conventions were still being defined by such writers as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The theme of "The Devil and Tom Walker", i.e. the dangers of selling one's soul to the devil, owes much to Goethe's novel *Faust*. Irving adds to this theme the moral ideals common to New England in the early nineteenth century. In an area settled by Quakers and Puritans, religious piety was of utmost importance to citizens; the lesson of Tom Walker's ruin illustrated the sorrow that would befall greedy and unscrupulous sinners.

1.1 "The Devil and Tom Walker" at University

At university level, "The Devil and Tom Walker" can be used as a practice text for applying literary theory. Three theories are particularly suitable: New Criticism, Historical Criticism and Psychological Criticism. Each of these three, or perhaps a combination of two of them, can enable the writer to explore his or her argument in detail and select relevant and convincing evidence from the text to support this. The following discussion focuses on paragraphs one and two of the story. These paragraphs have been chosen as they are crucial in setting the scene of the story and establishing the mood, key ideas and conclusions. They are also sufficient to demonstrate my key claims.

In terms of New Criticism, which focuses on linguistic and stylistic features in the text and the presence of opposites and contrasts as a means of creating meaning, there are a number of interesting features to note. All page references refer to the electronic version of Irving's story at http://classclit.about.com/od/devilandtomwalker/aa_deviltomwalker.htm. In paragraph one, for example, the mystery and danger of the setting are established in such phrases as "thickly wooded" in line 2, trees of "immense size" in l.4, and "ill gotten" treasure in line 11. That this has been a place of misery for a very long time is reinforced by the repetition of "old stories" in lines 5 and 9. The addition of "it is well known" in line 10 establishes that the story is based on common knowledge and should thus be familiar to the reader. That the story is "well-known" lends validity; as in all well-structured stories, this important idea is repeated in the conclusion, where the narrator notes that "the story has resolved itself into a proverb".

The second paragraph focuses on human contributions to the misery of the place. "Tall sinners" in line 14, the repetition of "miserly" in line 15, "emblems of sterility" in line 20 and the metaphor "den of discord" (enhanced by alliteration) in line 30 demonstrate that the evil of the natural setting is more than matched by the human presence both in and around the wood.

A useful feature of New Criticism is its focus on opposites and contrasts, which together enable the reader to identify the theme of the story. Students may notice, for example, such pairs as past/present; fact/fiction; piety/greed; good/evil and nature/man. Each one of these pairs or contrasts could be the subject of an essay or review.

By paying careful attention to the language, the New Critic can identify important themes such as the sanctity of agreements, the reliability of textual evidence, values in life, the relationship between money and happiness, abuse of human relationships and the integrity of human action. By studying Tom's relationship with his wife, for example, the New Critic can demonstrate how it is based on mutual abuse, a determination to "use" the other and a desire to attain as many advantages as possible at the expense of the other, as exemplified in the following two examples: "so miserly that they even conspired to cheat each other", l. 4; and "Whatever the woman could lay hands on she hid

away: a hen could not cackle but she was on the alert to secure the new-laid egg. Her husband was continually prying about to detect her secret hoards, and many and fierce were the conflicts that took place about what ought to have been common property", ll. 5-8.

In terms of historical criticism, students could investigate the date 1727 in line 13. How prevalent were earthquakes in New England at the time? How did they affect the population and how were they recorded? By providing a date, the narrator reinforces the earlier discussed idea posited in paragraph one, namely that what he is about to relate has a history, is an old story and is thus authentic. As numerous articles confirm, the most serious earthquake in the region took place on 10 November 1727 (see, for example, Sidney Perley, "Historic Storms of New England" and William D. Andrews, "The Literature of the 1727 New England Earthquake"). Students should study these articles and consider how their knowledge of the event and its consequences influence, negatively as well as positively, their understanding of Irving's story and also their willingness to accept its message. Another fruitful line of approach is to consider the role of religion in the lives of eighteenth-century New Englanders. Many had emigrated to escape persecution, for example. Given that Tom Walker becomes a fanatical reader of the Bible and churchgoer, it would be useful to explore the role of the Bible and the Church in eighteenth-century New England in order to establish to what extent Walker's conduct is unusual and how such conduct might have been viewed by settlers at the time.

In terms of psychological criticism, students could study the behaviour of the protagonist and/or those around him, and even the thoughts and ideas of the author himself. Students could first study the main concepts related to psychological theory. Each is explained in Steven Lynn's excellent *Texts and Contexts. Writing about Literature with Critical Theory* (2010). The main concepts include **Isolation** (understanding something that should be upsetting but failing to react to it); **Intellectualisation** (analysing and rationalising rather than feeling and reacting); **Repression** (selectively forgetting about whatever is troubling); **Projection** (denying thoughts and feelings by attributing them to someone else); **Denial** (falsifying reality); **Reversal** (asserting the opposite of the truth); and **Displacement** (shifting an emotion from its real target to another one). To what extent do any of these psychological concepts apply to Tom Walker, his wife or the devil? How do they help the reader to understand how the character reacts and with what consequences?

Once students have identified the idea that they wish to pursue, selected the most suitable theory, and identified pertinent examples in the text, they should make sure that they have understood all the vocabulary before beginning to plan their essay. Following are some of the potentially problematical words that appear in the text: terminate, morass, facility, prevalent, forlorn, termagant, celibacy, quagmire, precarious, impregnable, squaw, incantation, repose, delve, garb, swarthy, daunt, propitiate, surmise, trifle, freebooter, avarice, hew and prowess. Students may find it useful to consult such sites as "The Devil and Tom Walker. Vocabulary 50 words", which provide sentences in which the words are used.

University students studying literary theory should already be familiar with the structure of academic texts. It should thus be sufficient to remind them of the key sections of an essay as well as how to edit their text. A short hand-out should suffice. An example, devised by myself, is to be found after the list of references: "The requirements of an academic text in English".

Before embarking on their own essay, students may also find it useful to study a well-structured and elegantly written article about "Tom Walker and the Devil". One such article is Charles G. Zug's "The Construction of 'The Devil and Tom Walker'. A Study of Irving's Later Use of Folklore". Students can be asked to identify the argument, theoretical stance, contextual background, overall structure, coherence, language, style and tone and the general effectiveness of the article. They should also check the extent to which the first and last paragraphs tally: is what is promised in the introduction delivered in the main body of the article and summarised in the conclusion?

1.2. "The Devil and Tom Walker" at High School

In this section I base my comments on White and Haberling's investigation in America, reported in the article "Trading Spaces with Tom Walker: Moving the Devil out of Fourth Hour" from 2005. It is important to know that "fourth hour" is a Biblical reference, referring to Matthew 14.25, where Jesus walks over the Sea of Galilee and his disciples

are frightened at his sudden appearance. At the time, Jews divided the night into four watches, the last of which was between 3 and 6 a.m., just before it became light. The metaphor suggests that the pupils move out of darkness and fear (of a text) to light – to a point where they not only understand the text but can also relate to its key ideas and characters.

As Haberling and White demonstrate, Irving's text is difficult for high-school pupils in three primary areas: the context, concepts and vocabulary. White and Haberling experimented with pre-reading preparation in order to help the pupils understand what is meant by "trading" and how crucial this concept is to understanding Irving's short story. The pupils were asked to play a "trading spaces" game in which they must rank sixteen priorities in their own lives: new stereo system; vacation; friends; car or truck of choice; new house; job I enjoy; high school diploma; family; money; sense of humour; popularity or fame; good looks; talent (musical, athletic, artistic, etc.); happiness; independence and others (see p. 12 of Haberling and White's article). The objective of the trading spaces game is to dispose of one's lowest ranked options. This is achieved in three rounds, in three different groups.

After the first round, Haberling and White remark:

we were amazed at the level of energy and the degree of seriousness which the students brought to the task, perhaps because of the competitive nature of the game. Like Tom Walker, they desired to accumulate as much as they could -they wanted more than any other classmate. Even though they didn't yet know it, they had already made a connection with their soon-to-be neighbor, Tom Walker. (P. 13)

In addition to playing the game, the pupils were asked to answer the following questions in a short piece of writing for homework: *What types of trades did you make today which you would not make in real life? Why did you make those trades today? What types of trades did you make today that you would definitely make in real life? What might those trades tell you about your priorities?* This exercise in critical thinking enabled the pupils to "see new things about one another . . . to see past some external differences to notice more significant areas of similarity and difference in terms of priorities" (p. 13), and gave the teachers/researchers a "helpful window into the lives of many of our students" (p. 13).

After the final trade game and a group discussion of the story, the pupils were given two writing tasks: to imagine that they are Tom Walker and to write a letter to the inhabitants of Boston. The instructions are reproduced below:

We're going to do some writing in our journals. Here's the focus of our writing. Just before killing Tom, the devil grants Tom one last request. Tom's request is that he be allowed to write a letter to the people of the town. Take the next few minutes to write a letter from Tom to the people of Boston. The letter will be published in Boston's newspaper. What do you think Tom would most want to say to the people of Boston about himself, his experiences, about them and their lives? What advice might he give? What parting words might he share? (We'll be trading these letters with partners in just a few minutes. (p. 16)

Having completed the above task, the pupils were asked to respond to the above literary letter. The instructions were as follows:

Trade with a partner. Read the letter. First, write your name in your partner's journal. Now write a rebuttal from the devil, also to be published in the newspaper. How would the devil respond? What would he want to say to the people of Boston in response to Tom's letter? (Alternative: Write a letter from Tom's wife responding to Tom's letter). (P. 16)

Haberling and White conclude that by playing the trade game, answering the questions for homework and completing the above two literary letters, the pupils were better able to relate Irving's story to their own lives. They also developed their powers to both think critically about the main ideas in the story and to process these in their own writing.

2. Concluding Remarks

Irving's short story is both complex and deep. It is suitable for both university students and high-school pupils

though in very different ways. For university students, "Tom Walker and the Devil" provides excellent opportunities for applying literary theory, discussing the structure of a short story and article, learning new vocabulary and practising writing about literary texts. For high-school pupils, Irving's short story provides practice in approaching literary texts from a playful and instructive perspective and identifying with fictional characters. It also allows pupils to appreciate that even when a story appears to be impregnable and perhaps even irrelevant, all fiction can be understood at different levels and is above all about what makes us human-beings. Irving's short story has not only withstood the test of time, it also offers valuable opportunities for both university students and high-school pupils to practise critical thinking and explore and process their thoughts in writing.

3. References

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Appendix

The requirements of an academic text in English

The primary requirement of an academic text is that it communicates a message clearly, unambiguously and elegantly. If a text fails to communicate it is always the fault of the writer and not the reader! See below for guidelines.

Guidelines for writing an academic text in English

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Divide your work up into an introduction, main body, and conclusion, containing the following information:

Introduction

Statement of the aim/argument/hypothesis and supporting claims/arguments

Main Body

Description of method and materials. This needs to be sufficiently detailed to allow replication of the research. It should be clear why the particular method and materials have been chosen and how they are relevant to the aim/hypothesis/argument.

Results. These need to be stated clearly, arranged logically, and related to the aim of the study/analysis.

Analysis. The results should be analysed in relation to the theories discussed at the beginning, and the implications and consequences of the results shall be clearly stated.

Conclusions and recommendations. These arise logically out of your results. It should be made clear what the original contribution of your text is to the field.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

In terms of language correctness, make use of the Word grammar and spelling checks. Pay attention to underlined words/phrases that indicate incorrect punctuation and/or spacing.

Decide if you are going to use British or American English. Set Word to your chosen language.

Certain grammatical errors are not admissible. These include concord errors, i.e. agreement of subject and verb, tense mistakes and confusion between adjectives and adverbs.

Make good use of topic sentences to identify the subject of each paragraph (remember, one idea only per paragraph).

Use linking words to enhance the coherence of your text. For examples of useful linking words, see

https://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/4_WritingSkills/writing_tuts/linking_LL/linking3.html

Check that your style is consistent. It should be formal but not pompous. It should also be elegant! Avoid the use of such ambiguous words as “nice”, “good”, “bad” etc.

Avoid the use of contractions: write “cannot” rather than “can’t”. Contractions are not acceptable in academic texts.

Avoid personal pronouns wherever possible: repeated use of “I” or “we” makes your text pompous.

Avoid over-using the passive form as this may create ambiguity, i.e. the reader does not know who has performed the action.

Avoid starting sentences and paragraphs in the same way and/or using the same words.

Check for favourite expressions that you use repeatedly. Use a thesaurus such as *Roget’s Thesaurus* to help you find suitable synonyms (see <https://education.yahoo.com/reference/thesaurus/>).

EDITING

Always leave plenty of time for editing your text: it makes the difference between an acceptable and an excellent text! Leave several days between finishing writing your text and editing it.

Check the points identified above.

Reduce the number of words for each revision. Removing words and phrases usually results in a more coherent, effective and elegant text!

Ask a critical friend to help you edit your text. Below are some guidelines that he/she can use:

Content and organisation:

What are the most effective features of the paper?

Are the evidence, interpretation, conclusion and illustrations effective?

How well adjusted is the text to the reader's knowledge and understanding?

Do the different sections, e.g. background and theory section under- or over-estimate the reader's knowledge?

Is the title relevant and informative?

Where and how does the writer provide essential contextual information?

How aware is the writer of previous studies in the area and how effectively does he/she illustrate and use this knowledge?

Is the aim stated clearly and in sufficient detail?

Are the materials and methods described in sufficient detail and sufficiently clearly? Is there any information that is missing and that would make it difficult to replicate the study?

Is the material representative of a wider population or corpus?

Is the writer's study clearly linked to previous studies?

Are the results sufficiently well supported by evidence?

Is there a clear distinction between interpretation of the data and speculation?

Have all aspects specified in the aim been covered?

Language and style:

Mark sentences and phrases that you find particularly effective; also mark those that are vague or ambiguous.

Mark repetitions.

Mark ineffective or missing links between both paragraphs and sections.

Mark where the author has indicated how he/she wishes the text to be read. Are these indications clear or does the reader need additional signposts?

Mark passages that are too informal.