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METHOD THEORY
FINDING A CONNECTION AND MAKING MEANING IN LITERATURE

by

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SYNTHESIS*
MASTER OF ARTS
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

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Advisor: Professor Peter Taylor

Abstract: I believe in literature. I believe it is something more than just text, plot, and fictional characters. I believe literature and our lives are completely entwined and that we must use our lives and who we are to figure out literature, or we must use literature to understand our lives and who we are. My intentions for this paper was to establish a set of ideas that readers can use to make a connection to a text when a connection is not easily identified and from there, find meaning that could potentially change their life.

This paper chronicles my development as both a reader and a seeker, as both a student of the UMass Boston Critical and Creative Thinking Program and a reflector of life.

I wanted to create my very own “Theory.” What I was able to produce is a concept composed of various parts and techniques used to come together in search for connection, meaning, and action. My research began with reflection of my past experiences with literature from early childhood to college, what it means to me, and how I have connected to it. Included in this narrative is when I began to develop a distance between myself and the text I was reading, mostly out of frustration of not being able to find greater meaning in it. My experience with literary theory introduced a systematic approach to analyzing a text that I saw as a helpful, yet

flawed tool, establishing a system to study the text, while keeping myself from connecting to it. The “method” in method theory involves techniques used in Method Acting, a technique of acting in which the actor strives for an emotional connection to the role, an idea that I have adapted for a reader and literature. Metacognition becomes a way for the reader to be able to identify the connection they make. Action will allow the reader to transition the meaning in the book to meaning in their life; to create a way to learn or do something new based on the meaning they find.

I made several discoveries about what it means to truly connect with a text, most notably the idea of taking action based on the discoveries, that literature does not belong on the shelf, but alongside us like a map. My greatest finding though may be my own voice. Method theory is about the individual becoming confident and honest in telling their story. I was able to understand more about how I use literature to change my life and am hoping others find their own ways.

Ultimately, method theory is part Literary Theory, part Method Acting, part Metacognition, and part Action, all in the hands of an individual reader and seeker. It is a process of identifying and applying the meaning in literature to even greater heights. All these parts can be a valuable resource on an individual level, but when it comes to finding a connection in literature, my hope is that the sum of the parts of method theory becomes a useful tool for individuals who want more out of literature.

* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.



Method Theory

Finding a Connection and Making Meaning in Literature

Andrew Blom

Synthesis of Theory and Practice CRCRTH 694

The Revelation

After half a bottle of Wild Turkey Bourbon, I had to talk myself out of digging up the body of Jack Kerouac. I was in Lowell, Massachusetts with a friend, Joan, who now has her degree in Children's Literature, which is profoundly cool. I needed an escape from my life. I was scared and resistant to what I was becoming. I graduated from college about a year before and saw myself becoming the very kind of person I used to ridicule. I was becoming corporate, one of those people who put on a tie, sat in traffic, and paid for parking to work a job in the city. It was prestigious, but it was not what I wanted. I was having withdrawals from something that didn't even have... that feeling of being free. Though I was filled with ambition and desire, I had no bus ticket to take me there.

There's no describing the feeling of thinking you aren't living when you're still only 23-years-old. That's the kind of hell you wouldn't wish upon anyone. Our weekend didn't start out as one of those that typically concludes at a cemetery. We spent most of the time at her place rearranging her library. She had them in alphabetical order, which is a perfectly fine way to arrange your books, if you want to actually find what you want to read. I once arranged my books in groupings of how the author's died. There was a row for alcoholism and overdoses, a small group for old age, and the ever bleak, though completely full "suicide row," with Ernest Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson, and Sylvia Plath. Needless to say, I had extreme difficulty finding a place for "Edgar Allen Poe" (though, the literary community has had the same difficulty for the past 150 years.)

She had almost a thousand books, from Jane Austin to Emile Zola, from "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" to "World War Z." We pulled them off the shelf and laid them on the floor. We wanted to arrange them in an order that was different. We wanted the order to say something about her other than that she knew her "A, B, C's."

“Let’s put these in an order that means something to you,” I told her.

“How will I be able to find a particular book?” she asked me.

“You just will, like being able to look at a photograph and knowing when it was taken, where it happened, and the connection you have with it.”

We placed them in an order that made sense to her. From left to right, the ones with an emotional connection to different times and people in her life, books that said connected to her childhood, her family, places she had been, with characters and plots that reflect her life experiences. She didn’t have to explain herself. She just knew. These were connections that didn’t require explanation. She did it her way, and only her way. There is the purpose of all of this, but I will get to that.

After doing this, we were left with about a dozen books that we just couldn’t place. We paused when we picked up her copy of Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road.” This book was important to me. The only problem was I didn’t know why.

Love at First Page

Now, let me explain something. Books mean something to me that many won’t quite understand. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to work with books. I wanted to find a way to get paid to read books. This of course confused teachers and may or may not have contributed to an early retirement of my high school guidance counselor, whom several years later did not even recognize me in a department store (I make that kind of impact on lives).

“So, you want to be a writer?” They would ask.

“Not really.” I would say.

“A teacher then.”

“Well, I really wouldn’t want to get up that early.”

“What about a copy editor?”

“What’s a copy editor?”

I genuinely wanted a 9 to 5 job, Monday through Friday, with weekends and summers off, to sit in a chair and read books. Maybe a medical plan. I tend to jump off things a lot. I was that kid who purchased the most books at the Scholastic Book Fairs, from money I collected from recycling cans I found around the neighborhood. I was that student who couldn’t wait for the summer reading lists to come out. I was that person who became an English major not to get a job but because I love to read. There is this funny thing about reading. When you’re young, you get to chose what kind of books you want to read. If you’re lucky enough to get read to at night, you’re probably going to have a say or two in what you read. When you get a little older, you pick out books at the library that you enjoy, and whether you know it or not, you make life long connections with characters and authors. One of my favorite childhood memories was having a “sleep-over” at my elementary school on Dr. Seuss’s Birthday. I went as the Lorax, we ate “Green Eggs & Ham” made with food coloring, and just read and read and read into the night. There was something incredible during those moments. Reading meant something to us. There was a connection. There was a spark. We all had a favorite Dr. Seuss book. But more importantly, it was a book that was meaningful to us. You were encouraged to read something that you could connect with, or see yourself in.

When I read, I was able to find connections to the text that changed my life. I used what I knew about the world to understand the text and vice versa. Reading was my entire life and that hasn’t changed. What did change is how and what people wanted me to read.

Turning the Page

Something terrible happens when you grow up. What we read and how we read changes. We stop reading books that we chose; books that are meaningful to us, even if we don't realize that. Our curiosity over the characters and moments fades away. There may be no two worse words in the English language than "assigned reading." Eventually, they took my Dr. Seuss away and told me what to read. In fifth grade, I was told I had to read "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen. It was a good book, but I wanted to read other things. I said to my teacher that I probably wouldn't be able to "use it" for anything. They never understood what I meant by that.

"It's important that you expand your understanding of the world," they would say.

"That's fine. But I'm having trouble enough with how big my world already is. I'm quite fine with that." I said.

"But it's a novel about survival in the wilderness."

"So it takes place in middle school?"

I was a difficult student. Still am. This began my animosity towards reading. From what I would call "The dead-dog era" with "Where the Red Ferns Grow" and "Old Yeller" to "The Scarlet Letter" and "Harry Potter." I'm not sure which will cause me more disdain from the literary community: my apathy towards literary theory or "Harry Potter?" Now, I am aware that these books are important. They introduce vital themes and structure, important for development of a reader and a human being. So, we must discuss something perfectly clear. That while I was unable to make a connection to these books, that doesn't mean other people weren't. This is all about making a connection. This is not about me. This is about what books mean to us. If you make a connection, you make connection. It's about being honest with the text, letting the writing speak to you, and then taking action. Back then, literature caused me to take action, but it was a sad story. I skipped reading for about 5 years. It was like a heavyweight boxer stepping out of the ring. I transitioned to what I called the "the television era."

That's the difference between reading and television. With television, you are in control of the remote. You find things that you want to watch. I didn't want to read what I was reading.

The Next Chapter

When I entered high school, I felt a return to literature. I was reintroduced to text that were true to me. I was hooked on "The Outsiders" and "The Catcher in the Rye." I felt connections with the characters and a sense of honesty in the prose. It took my understanding of my world to a whole new level. They were not like the books I was introduced to when I was in middle school; books that tried to expand my world. These books were showing me around the world I already knew. My connection was firm. My confidence in choosing what I read and how I read it was building.

I have never read Moby-Dick. It seems like nothing more than a story about a man who hates an animal. I wasn't able to AP English because of it. Well, the feeling was mutual. My teacher refused my admittance into class on the grounds that I'd "be a distraction to the other students."

"Yeah," I thought, "but isn't that the point to this business we've chosen?"

Anyways, I have skipped most novels from William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. I rolled my eyes as college professors dished out one classic story, poem, and novel after another, from the likes of Ben Johnson, Geoffrey Chaucer, and William Shakespeare.

I hated "Beowulf," didn't understand "Atlas Shrugged" (though I tell people I did) and have never read anything by a Russian and I probably wouldn't understand any of it anyways.

I read Hemingway. He is one of my favorite writers, but I would probably gravitate away from him at a dinner party as he goes on and on about a bullfight or 45 minutes describing a dinner party with his war buddies and I'll look at him and say,

“Ok. Ok. Ok., save it for your next book.”

I have decided to live a life in which I surround myself with books that I want to read. Books that I can relate to. But that doesn't solve a larger issue. There will always be books that we don't have a connection to. But we must try and “get” something from it. After all, a book, in the most metaphorical sense, does not actually exist without us. I remember I drawing I did once in high school. It was a copy of Charles Dickens' “A Tale of Two Cities” in a forest. It begged the question that if a book was in the middle of a forest and there was no one around to hear it, does it have meaning. I thought then and thought now, of course not. We are the ones who read books, buy them, put them on our shelves, surround ourselves with everything that can offer us. Literature will always be in our lives, regardless of if we want it or not, from being read to as children to be assigned it as young adults. If this is the case, we need to find a way to fit it into our lives. We need to find a way to make meaning when we think meaning is not there. That is why I am proposing this new kind of “method” to help connect to literature. A method, that did not come about overnight...

Making Meaning

All of this went through my mind in Lowell when we were staring at this beaten down copy of “On the Road.”

“How could this not mean anything to you?” she asked.

“Well, it's a story about an adventure and I've never left Massachusetts.”

For me, “On the Road” was fearless story. A story with characters who improvised as they went; where every new page could begin with an orgy of merchant sailors and end with Christmas dinner. A story about people with grease on their hands trying to keep a grip on life. How could someone like me

who had never been out of the state of Massachusetts, never traveled on the open road, never developed the kind of friendships and escapades in that book, possibly find a connection to it. That was the key to all of this. It didn't have a connection to it, so I had to find one, or make one. I wasn't going to give up.

I wish I could have asked him. I wish he could tell me what it is I should do with this book because reading it and finding meaning in it was just not enough. That's what I thought that night, as the Wild Turkey went down my throat like a rusty spoon. So of course, I thought, why not? Let's go ask him. She of course was up to it. Everyone should have the kind of friend who is up to heading to cemetery.

Jack Kerouac is buried in Edson Cemetery, a few blocks away. We packed four peanut butter and jam sandwiches and my remaining bottle of Wild Turkey. People leave mementos at Jack's grave marker including copies of his books and loose cigarettes. They even leave copies of their own writing, seeking some sort of feedback from ghosts and strangers alike. It was a Tuesday morning. There was nobody near his flat marker. There's a larger monument about 10 feet away. I find it a little ironic the man who spent his life chasing something is now fixed into the ground, but maybe he was satisfied with what he found and maybe he would be ok resting in the ground.

As we brown-bagged our bottle and ate our sandwiches next to his monument, I didn't have a clue what to do. Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe it was the sense that I just really didn't need an answer. Or, maybe finding meaning was going to take a little bit more effort on my part. There would be no digging up the dead that day. I came to realize that finding meaning was something that I had to do on my own. No theories, sources, or dead authors could help me. I apologized to Jack for bothering him and left behind the other half of my bottle of Wild Turkey and all belief that it was up to other people to tell me how to find meaning in literature. My focus now would be on me.

As Kerouac himself explained to a student in 1961, “Dean and I were embarked on a journey through post-Whitman America to find that America and to find the inherent goodness in American man. It was really a story about 2 Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him.”

I wanted to travel. I wanted to get out. I wanted to fall in love and greet life with an optimistic rudeness and a rolled-up cigarette that Jack did. But my life back then was devoted to sitting in traffic. My youth being used up in an office. I starting to find an escape in “On the Road,” and that’s when it started to mean everything to me. It meant that there was an alternative life out there for me, that somehow, in some other universe, I would be the lonesome traveler heading towards whatever was still mine.

I devoted the next year of my life finding a way to create a meaning in “On The Road” that was unique to me. I found myself, “On the Road” or should I say, in the sky. Perhaps the death of the American Dream begins and ends with the rise in gas prices. Never the less, I purchased a one-way ticket to Oregon to restart my life. I moved with only a checked-bag and carry on. I had two pairs of jeans, three t-shirts, some rolled up socks and underwear, a sweatshirt, two flannels, a jacket, and my softcover copy of “On the Road.” It was not so much for something to read, but a travel companion, like a map. I saved up about \$2,000 and went West in search for “something.” Maybe God like Kerouac said, but maybe just to watch the stars from another plot of land, or maybe just to say that I did it.

Once I arrived, I had no place to stay and didn’t know anybody. It was that right kind of balance of fear and freedom. The same kind of feeling Jack experienced during his own adventures. I bounced around youth hostels for a few weeks and did my best to spend all my money and max out my credit cards. Everyone who ever accomplished something has probably spent a night or two in a bus station.

But no matter what happened, no matter how many meals I missed or how many holes I was putting in my shoes trying to find the last bar to close, I was free. I was living the life I always wanted. I was living the life of Jack Kerouac and "On the Road." Along the way, I started to appreciate that novel more than I ever had before. I was finding meaning in the characters and moments that could not be taught. It was a connection that was real. I had to live it. I had to experience it. I had to be alone to truly appreciate the loneliness, desires, and melancholy of the fable that is the American West. It was as if the book had not only encouraged me to do this, but made sure I knew that this was what I needed to do, and that everything would be OK.

After a few months I settled down. I found a place to live, a job, and some friends. One of them, Natasha, took the lead in making me feel at home. I ripped out the most famous passage in "On the Road," the one that goes, "the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" and gave it to her to thank her for her hospitality.

Still, my connection to "On the Road" changed. It was now about stability. It was now about Natasha. It was no longer a book about being lost but about being found. I found the same thing that Jack was looking for.

Natasha and I took a bus to see the Pacific Ocean at Cannon Beach. I brought my copy with me. I felt like it had done everything for me. Its pages were no longer crisp and white but worn and yellow, with its most famous page resting on Natasha's bureau. I wonder if she still has it? That day, I left my copy on the beach. It meant so much to me. I had that copy since middle school. I took it with me to college. It was the only book I took with me to Oregon. It traveled 3,000 miles and helped me find that

undefinable thing I was looking for. I thought that maybe somebody will find it and it could help them the way it helped me.

And that's the key to this whole thing. Literature means something to all of us that is unique and different, and constantly changing. A meaning that only your life can understand; a meaning that can change your life, or help you figure out the one you have. There can be moments that you can use literature to find out what is really go on, while at the same time, being able to identify a deeper connection to the text.

“College was very confusing times”

This realization that we need a way to find meaning in literature was a struggle. Aside from my experience being forced to read books that said nothing to me about my life in middle school, I had a second encounter with something similar in college.

I was introduced to literary theory on the third floor of Hafer Academic Building during my senior year at Curry College. Prior to this, the most useful the Hafer Academic Building was to me was a small cafeteria on the first floor that featured the campuses' only milkshake vending machine. I entered that classroom with an abundance of curiosity and fear as I found it quite puzzling that I, an avid reader and English major, had not yet been introduced to what I perceived as a vital component of literary comprehension. Though I soon found out this was not an accident, as literary theory is seldom taught in high school and the English department at Curry had seemingly found teaching literary theory at a liberal art school with a student body made up of mostly nursing, criminal justice, and business students an unmovable feat.

Our room was small, and the computer was often on the fritz. My friend Matthew was the building's IT support staff member and was often a visitor/distraction as we attempted to connect to the internet or upload power point presentations. My academic career has seemingly taken place in that

award gap between no technology and the perfection of it, when chalkboards gave way to dry erase boards and over head projectors begot to digital collaboration and education. Matthew was a self-proclaimed intellectual but if asked about literary theory would probably cluck like a chicken and install a software update.

Anyways, this was our English capstone course. It would take four years and more than 15 English courses before literary theory was tossed in our direction. Well, not tossed but hurtled towards our faces at an alarming speed. We were deeply embedded as English majors. The few, the proud, the sexual frustrated English majors of Curry College, whom on Saturday nights would be trading in keggers at the all-girl's dorm for D.H. Lawrence, whom ironically, I thought would probably rather want me to go to the kegger than be in the basement of the library reading his books.

None of us knew what literary theory was or applied it to any of our previous courses though I suppose Reader-Response theory is something that we just all inherently do whether we're aware of it or not. I even attempted to develop a better literary community by reestablishing the English & Literature Club (the necessity of the & in between English and Literature was of great debate I assure you) to try and promote the written word. We did not have much success though we managed to have several pizza and movie nights. I was also successful at avoiding the copyright fee for showing these films in public by having a short education lecture prior to each film which was borderline at best on being educational. I would have discussed literary theory with some of the non-English majors in the club but didn't want the pizza to go cold, so we usually skipped it.

Back in the capstone course, our professor and us spent the year attempting to promote literary theory. We were frightened by it. Not frightened by the complexity but that these were concepts we had known all along. Literary theory just gives them a name.

Mary Klages in "Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed" says, "Literary theory isn't something you learn, it's something you become aware of. You already have a theory, or several theories, about literature, but you may never thought about them or articulated them."

Everything's changed once you're aware of it. I was worried that using literary theory would take away from the things that made me unique. I wanted my classmates to be themselves. I wanted to hear their views of the text. And they wanted mine. Is this single minded? Perhaps, but our minds are a product of unique experiences and that should be the forefront of finding meaning in text. This changed the way I started reading text. For the remainder of the semester and for most of the remainder of my college career, I wasn't being myself when I read. Because of this, I wasn't making the kind of connections I made when I was younger, the kind of connections that could change my life and better help me realize who I was. I want to be able to make a connection that is personal, find meaning that changes my life, and then do something about it. You are in control of how you find meaning in literature and that does not have to be defended through a theory but from your life experience. When you read, you have the right to be your own expert; to use your life experience to both find and defend the meaning; to stripe yourself down to the bare essentials, without the shadow of literary theory overcasting and altering the meaning you find.

What matters to me when it comes to reading isn't the plot, the languages, the characters, the story, or anything esthetic like that, but whether the text has meaning for me. Meaning that can help explain something about who I am, or better yet, meaning that can help change my life.

For me, I can't seem to find meaning in the "classics" or books that don't say anything about my life. I am not trying to make excuses for skipping certain kind of books (other than "The Scarlett Letter") but rather to provide another side of literature. One that centers around you, the individual.

There are many ways to find meaning in text. Most notably, literary theory centers around an approach that places the methods of the theory at the forefront and the beliefs of the individual, with a few exceptions, in the background. While literary theory is a worth-while method to finding meaning, it may not be as helpful if the reader cannot connect with the text, in a similar way that I cannot connect with the “classics.”

What we need are methods that work for people like us. Readers who are interested in finding real meaning in the text that is most important to us. A method for people who are no longer interested in reading to escape their lives or to take them to faraway places, but to tell them about the meaning that is already in their lives.

The Method

Method Theory is a way to find meaning in literature that I have “created” to try and make a connection and then hopefully, meaning. I say “created” because what I have done is take four different but separate ideas and bring them together. Each need to work in together, and in order, to try and find a connection and ultimately meaning in literature.

To find a connection, a reader must first analyze the poem using a literary theory; any that could potentially connect a reader to a text. Next, they should create an way to connect to the text, which we will refer to as creating a “method,” which can include reflecting on life experience, creating a life experience, or substituting moments and emotions to create a connection; all of which are important aspects of Method Acting. Then, through Metacognition, the reader will be able to learn about themselves through this connection and understand the meaning. Finally, the reader will take “action” based on the meaning they found, either a gentle shift in perspective or character, or a life altering

realization. Method theory emphasizes all four aspects coming together to create a better understanding of a text. Anybody can use this in a style that is unique to them, for as long as they understand that they are responsible for it all, from analyzing the text, to creating a way to connect to it, to understanding why, and taking the meaning into reality. Everyone can use it in a different way. It is all up to the reader.

Now, what you may have heard me say is that Literary Theory doesn't work. Of course, it works. It's a perfectly fine way to fill in gaps when it comes to finding meaning and interpreting a text. But literary theory on its own, is incomplete. It opens the door to connecting to a text, but does not allow the reader to follow through on a text, or to create a connection when a connection is not there. It is an important concept to think about and to begin the process of method theory. Method theory involves a more personal style of reading, one that requires the reader to have experienced the text before reading or rereading the text once relatable experiences have occurred. If neither of these are possible, an advanced process of "substitution" will be implemented. Furthermore, method theory encourages the reader to know why they were able to make the connection, what we could call "literary metacognition." Finally, method theory encourages the reader to "act upon the text," meaning, to find a way to implement the text into their life. All of these occurred during my experience with "On the Road." I was unable to connect with it because I had never experienced it. Everything changed though when I started to live out the themes and moments of the text. I knew why I was seeing the meaning I was seeing. From there, I was able to implement this meaning in my life, for all the better.

Method theory also encourages finding "unreliable meaning." This includes meaning that is not universally found in the text but unique only to you, meaning that may not even have anything to do with the text. I want to encourage you to know that it is ok to read a text and find most of the meaning elsewhere. Maybe it makes you think of someone or something, or makes you remember a smell or a dog.

Often, the meaning we connect with a story has little to do with the story itself but that is ok with Method theory. You are encouraged to make a connection that is unique to you, a connection between life and text that represents a fine line, a connection that you don't have to explain to anyone but yourself. Making such a connection is not easy, and can sometimes require a life changing experience for it to happen.

Finding the Connection, Finding Meaning, Finding Method Theory

It took my seven years to understand "Winter Dreams" by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The story is simple, ordinary, and less than 20 pages. I understood the writing. I had read "The Great Gatsby" and like most 18-year old's, it was my favorite novel (though I have since been informed by "members of the literary community" that admitting that "The Great Gatsby" is your favorite novel is admitting you haven't read anything else since High School). But I just didn't "get" "Winter Dreams." I acknowledge its significance, I understand that what I was a reading was a sort of "rough draft" to "The Great Gatsby" but I would think and hope that the point of reading as a college freshman, or an adult for that matter, is more than just identifying themes. I wanted something more. I was entitled to it. I was paying for this course. I wanted that connection but at that point in my life, I didn't know how to find it.

It was one week into college when I was introduced to "Winter Dreams" after being assigned by Professor Phillip Lamb. He looked like the kind of guy who washed his face with bourbon and what white hair he had left was brushed back with "Crisco vegetable oil." He looked like Charles Bukowski's accountant or the kind of guy who made a living smuggling in exotic animals from foreign countries. Clean but dirty, and a great professor. He taught us how to swear in writing.

"Never lead with a "fuck." Build up to it. You start off with a "fuck" and now you've got to other way to shock the reader. Open with "shit."

I can't think about "Winter Dreams" without thinking about Professor Lamb. But I also think about Jake who sat next to me in that class. He would be my friend for the next four years. He introduced me to my other friend, Angus. Angus taught me how to play guitar. They were the only two people I wanted to say goodbye to when I graduated.

I remember the classroom too. Kennedy Building. The building was separate from the other academic buildings. IT was used mostly from science classes like nursing and computers. To get there from the North side of campus where the freshmen lived you had to walk about 10 minutes up several large hills. By the time you got to class the blisters in your foot were already bursting. I still have scars on the bottom of my feet from some of the terrible blisters I got there while walking up hills and in the rain.

The edition of "Winter Dreams" that I got from the bookstore was this small anthology with some other stories and the cover was a very dark yellow. "A Soldier's Home" by Ernest Hemingway was the only other story in it that I can remember. After Professor Lamb introduced the story we had a few weeks to read it. Since this was the first week of college and we were all freshmen and the course was just an introductory course there was nothing more we had to do but simply read it. I first read it in my bed while my roommate flushed out his sinus with one of those funnels into a garbage bin. I read it a second time in the basement of Levin Library where a few months later I read Dante's "Inferno" and heard a window shutter close and then found myself outside less than 15 seconds later.

I understood the story, though I did not find meaning in it. There is a drastic difference between understanding and meaning. One occurs on the surface; the other requires going beneath. One is simply, yet the other is much more worthwhile. During class, I was able to recall the plot much like everyone can. Dexter Green caddies at a golf course where he meets the Judy Jones who makes him carry her clubs but he can't so she throws a tantrum and he quits. Years later, he becomes a successful

businessman and returns to the golf club and meets Judy again where she abandons her date to be with Dexter and the next day they kiss and he falls for her. But later, she leaves with another man and toys with others throughout the summer all while Dexter continues to desire her. Dexter moves on and becomes engaged but leaves her when Judy comes calling once again. Of course, Judy's affection cools off and World War I calls Dexter away. We find out that Dexter becomes even more successful and Judy is married to an awful man and has lost her looks, shattering the illusion she represents for Dexter, who will never be able to capture the past.

But is that really the point of reading? To recall. To summarize? Is the point of reading to prove that you actually read the story? I don't think so. I think the point of reading is to find something meaningful in it. But finding meaning can only occur when there is meaning to be found. Meaning can not be made up or fictionalized. It can not be faked. It can not be found when it is not there. For me, the meaning in "Winter Dreams" was not there. I felt bad for Dexter. To want something that is so important and so close but is so far from reach must be... something. "Something" was all I could think of to describe what Dexter went through. Or, what Judy went through. I had not experienced the "something." I had nothing to long after. I had no one that made me want to be anything. I felt the same disconnection I felt when I read all the other books from my past, books where I could not connect with anything.

My book of short stories was placed in a plastic storage box under my bed in my dorm room. After that year, that box went down in my basement for summer break. But I did not seek the connection like I had in "On the Road." Remember, with Method theory, you either seek the connection or the connection comes to you. My connection to "Winter Dreams" appeared to me my sophomore year.

The plastic bin was under my bed again. Our professor had us go around and answer a few questions. One was to tell the class about our future plans. My answer was to write the Great American novel. I wanted to be the greatest writer of fiction of all time. There was a girl in the class. Two seats behind me. "The lost girl from the fall," we will call her. Her answer was also to write the great American novel. I didn't think anything of it other than that I had competition. But after class, I made the worst decision of my life. I waited for the elevator. I was too lazy to take the stairs. I always take the stairs now because of that. The lost girl from the fall approached me. We started talking. We talked about books and about school. I got her number. I didn't tell her about my girlfriend. I saw her later that night, and the night after, and the night after. I found out that she was the "heir" to take over a magazine that her mother ran. My girlfriend did not approve. This was the source of many arguments in the year we dated. But something about the lost girl from the fall ignited "something" in me. I spent many sleepless nights wondering about her. All the while, "Winter Dreams" lay dormant, misunderstood under my bed. But it wasn't until I lost her that I began to see. I began to understand that story. I was becoming Dexter Green. She was my Judy. I now had a connection and meaning to the book.

I broke up with my girlfriend to be with her but she already left school. She stayed in the area. It was now my junior year. The apartments she lived in was a converted chocolate factory. The air smelled like vanilla. We grew closer that year. I slept over a few times. As she slept I stared outside her window at the intersection below watching the traffic signals turn colors. I'd watch it go from green to yellow to red, all while she slept beside me. Something so close yet so far, realizing our story was becoming "Winter Dreams."

After my junior year I saw her less and less. She made a few appearances in my life. Just enough to keep me in love with her but not enough to make me think she was mine. Just like Judy. After I graduated, she was living in the city. I got my first real job as a news reporter. I didn't like it.

Something about interviewing people on the worst day of their life often made me feel out of place. All the while, she remained in my life. The constant in a life of confusion. Several girlfriends intervened in my life and I regretful chose her every time. She made promises that she never kept but this is not her fault. This was my fault for believing her. Over and over again, just like Dexter always believed Judy and always returned to her.

After a few years I gave up my own winter dreams. My autumn dreams. She has married and has a son now. That allusion of her being next to her on sleepless nights will never return. I went down to the basement in my parent's house a little while after to see if I could find that old copy from Professor Lamb's class. The book is lost much like my past but my connection to it is different, so vivid, and so meaningful. I consider my reading of "Winter Dreams" complete.

Well, almost. I mentioned that a key aspect of Method theory is to take action on this meaning and to not let this unique experience rot in a basement. When I think now about that story and her, I think about what she was able to do for my understand of a piece of literature and how she helped ignite this idea of Method theory and about how I came to understand "Winter Dreams." It was only after I experienced the kind of longing, the kind of decaying hope that Dexter felt towards someone so similar to the lost girl from the fall that I found the meaning I was searching for. Reading that story while meeting her changed my perception of love. It created something inside of me that became an allusion. For Dexter, his winter dream stayed with him and altered his life, but I allowed mine to fade after a few years. Like Dexter, it was the allusion of love rather than actual love that I had. I knew how to approach love now, I knew how to see it. It was not as monumental as the action I took in "On the Road" but being able to find meaning in "Winter Dreams" through those experiences has changed my life.

Our Role in Method Theory

Method theory is about using your life, before or after being introduced to a text, to better understand it. It is all about the system itself, the theories, method, metacognition, and action, in which you define, create, change, and format to your needs, including how you apply it and to what degree. Ask yourself what do I need method theory for? To make a connection with something I am unfamiliar with, like "On the Road?" Or to take my connection to the next level, like "Winter Dreams?" Method theory does not exist in a linear fashion, but constantly evolving and changing with the reader. But finding a connection is a little more difficult than it seems and might require a physical and emotion awareness of needing to find a connection.

This brings us to the second phase of method theory. After finding a literary theory to explore a text, it is necessary to find a way to connect to it.

At the same time I was struggling to find a way to use literary theory at Curry College, I was thriving in acting class. I started out in college as a theatre major, before the much more lucrative career in English grabbed my attention. I was good too. I landed the much-coveted role as the Third Watch in "Romeo and Juliet," who is in charge of bringing in Friar Lawrence in Act V and says, "Here is a friar who's trembling, sighing and weeping." My only line. Nailed it. I stole a piece from the set. A small piece of wood and I still have it.

I was introduced to the concepts of Method Acting, a form of acting whose principals transition to become a vital aspect to Method theory. Method Acting, developed by Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski, advanced by Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner, and popularized and demonstrated by Marlon Brando, Robert DeNiro, and Daniel Day-Lewis, focuses on an emotion connection between actor and their role. Connection does not come artificially, but purely. It is a

system that enables conscious thought on behalf of the actor to active emotions and experiences, to draw from memory, to connect one moment in a life to get closer to a character, or even to substitute memories and moments to create a fictional character. There are also concepts in Method acting that will call upon an actor to intentionally become the character, either through living that life, speaking or being like them, prior to performing the role.

Prior to filming "Taxi Driver" (1976), Robert DeNiro worked 12-hour shifts driving a cab. Before walking on stage in which he played a murderer who had just appeared from an icy lake, Marlon Brando had a bucket of ice water dumped on him. In preparation for "Last of the Mohicans" (1992), Daniel Day-Lewis spent six months living in the wild and killed and ate his own animals. Perhaps, most controversial, was Heath Ledger's role as "The Joker" in "The Dark Knight" (2008), which began with the actor locking himself in his apartments months at a time, sleeping only two hours a night, writing a character diary, going to a place that the actor had difficulty coming out from.

Method acting is not just a physical connection, but a system to connect to a role. It's a transformation that is often controversial, with the label of "going to far" often applied to it. Despite this, the passion of the performances cannot be overlooked. It was because of "Method acting" that I started to see as important as the text. I was drawn to this method over literary theory. I saw them as similar, both a system of connecting; yet both different. Literary theory draws on other tools to analyze text, such as the historical context, ethical and gender themes, and the form of the text, while method acting draws on personal connection in a way to not only better understand a character but transform the role into something different. Literary theory is using a system to seek an answer, Method acting is creating your own system.

Knowing What You Know

Once we have our understanding of a text using theory, a way to connect to it using ideas of method action, we need to know why we were able to make a connection.

Metacognition, a term coined by John H. Flavell (1976), is thinking about your own thinking, or “knowing about knowing.” It is employing conscious strategies and awareness’s of what your brain is doing. After my exposure to literary theory and method acting, metacognition seemed to fit right in. If method acting is being consciously aware of one’s own experiences and emotions to connect to a role, and metacognition is being consciously aware of one’s mental processing, the two seem to come together for Method theory.

Using Metacognition to understand literature is an important relationship between the two . Lisa Shade in her dissertation at Western Michigan University, “How Does It Mean? Literary Theory as Metacognitive Reading Strategy in the High School English Classroom” (2002), was among the first to connect the two, as “a strategy to develop students engaged reading of literary texts, their interpretive strategies, and metacognitive awareness of the reading and interpretive process.”

When used with method theory, metacognition it’s not just a strategy for discovering meaning in a text, but tracing a connection between the yourself and the text; discovering how and why. “Introducing theory into the literature classroom encourages students to consciously use everything they know to construct meaning from a text Becoming a “critical reader” also means becoming aware of the ways in which one ‘judges’ a text,” Shade said. “This is possible when the reader is metacognitively aware of his/her schemas, the stance he/she assumes in approaching a text, and the underlying assumptions and values explicit to the text and in developing his/her reading of it.” There is value in Method theory as it provides a reader with resource in knowing how and why they know something.

That is the easy part. Knowing why a reader knows something is up to them. It's not that it's a case of "there are no wrong answers," but instead, that the answers are up for the reader to discover.

Taking the Leap

Metacognition is an important part of method theory because once a reader has been able to identify why they are able to make the connection they make, that's when action is possible. For method theory to be complete, we must move from theory to action, from meaning to acting, from putting the book on the shelf to getting yourself "out there," in some way and somehow. We don't merely want to interpret a text but see how it can help our present or even change the future. From making a connection, knowing what the connection means, and finding action, can lead to important discoveries in literature. They will help make meaning in something that seems to have no place in your life.

Taking action is entirely up to the reader. They are in control of how they decide to act on the meaning they find. If I haven't already said this, let me assure you that you do not need to move 3,000 miles away or have our heart ripped out of your chest to better connect with literature. You certainly can and you probably should because bus stations and heart break really build character. But when you take action, think of your mother's anxiety as a rule of thumb. If she wouldn't have wanted you to do it, maybe think about what you want out of this. But again, this part is up to you.

Action taken from the connection and meaning you find in a text could be changing your attitude about something if a certain piece of literature enlightens you about something, even developing a new outlook. Establishing healthier relationships was the action I developed from "Winter Dreams."

One way to use the text is to characters as a guide. We see their decisions. We have the benefit of seeing the outcome in a given situation. In this sense, a text can serve as a map. We can use them to help guide us if and when we have faced a similar dilemma.

When I was 12-years-old, I read George Orwell's "Animal Farm." I was young. I didn't pick up on the whole totalitarian themes so instead, I made my own connections. I connected with the animal rights aspects of it. Again, I was young. I thought to myself, "Animals are nice. We shouldn't harm them." The day I finished the book, I became a vegetarian. This was my experience. This was the meaning I took from the book and I defended that meaning through action, and that has made all the difference.

A lot of people when they read, even if they have a rewarding experience, will just put the book back on the shelf, maybe tell someone at a bar about it, but Method theory is asking for more. Making something out of all of this because there is a reason you found the meaning you found.

My Father the Wheelbarrow

When I was very young, before method theory, literary theory, and the lost girl from the fall, I stumbled up a poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams, and it would one day provide perhaps the most important model for taking action from literature. The poem is very simple, maybe too simple:

"so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.”

There is not much there, no real meaning to be found. But at the same time, everything is there. “So much depends upon” is an indicator that there is something important here. But for me, there was no connection and no meaning. The poem, like many pieces of literature, went unconnected and into my basement. What needed my attention was the weeds in my family’s garden. It wasn’t a big garden, but it did take up much of our back yard. We grew cucumbers, squash, and baby tomatoes. A lot of baby tomatoes. So many tomatoes that I often forced myself to eat them before they went rotten. There I was eating baby tomatoes by the mouth full at all hours of the night like some sort of junkie. That garden was important to us, especially for my dad and I. My brother was older and had moved out and my mother worked at a school, so she took her summer vacations to New Hampshire. My dad and I would spend most of the summer on our own, surviving on take-out, Red Sox broadcasts, and well, baby tomatoes. We spent most of the time in the garden and our relationship developed and strengthened. But that summer would end, and the gardening would too. We grew apart in the years that followed. We would sit in the same room together and not talk for hours. There were “disagreements” over most of my choices in life and I began to resent his simple, working-class views and lifestyle. I would have done anything to not end up like him.

After I went to college and began to develop method theory, I read “The Red Wheelbarrow” and began to develop meaning in it that I hadn’t been able to see. I started to see a connection that brought me back to those days in the garden. Using both my life experience and substitutions, I saw my dad as the wheelbarrow, a symbol for the working class, strength, and stability. I started to see myself as the chickens; innocent, chaotic, and naïve. But with method theory, this connection was just the beginning. I had to take action. I thought it was funny at first that I was connecting to the poem this way. There is obviously not much in this poem to think it could relate to or help rebuild a father/son relationship.

There are no suggestions or steps on how to use this to move forward. William Carlos Williams perhaps had no intention of having this kind of meaning come from his poem, nor would many other people see this kind of meaning. But again, with method theory those are all non-factors. It is up to me to interpret the poem and even further, find out what action to take and how to proceed. In this sense, literature may not even be like a map, as I have called it before, but simply the keys to the vehicle. It can start you on a journey. How and where you arrive is then up to you.

So, knowing what I knew now about “The Red Wheelbarrow,” I felt then it was up to me to arrive to the point where I had a better relationship with my dad. First, because I connected the poem to the working class, I knew I had to come to terms with my own background. Being a working-class employee myself, I have constantly struggled with that identity, which was in-part forced upon me by my dad. But through much reflection and through creating new ways to cope with this lifestyle, I see the positive sides of it rather than the negative, all of which was a result of working with my dad and gaining respect for what he always did. Second, because I connected my dad with the dependable wheelbarrow, I started to reflect on moments that he was that dependable parent, and that regardless of our falling out, his loyalty to me has never wavered. Moving forward, I see him now as the strength to our family that he once was. Third, as I saw myself as the chaotic chicken, I started to see how much of this was of my own doing, through much inaction, sensitivity, and unwillingness to compromise with him, all of which are ways to try and rebuild what we once had. I see now what I have to do to continue to change and work on this relationship. It was important to me that once I found meaning in “The Red Wheelbarrow” that I took action on it rather than just ignoring that unique connection that I found, because as it says in the poem, “so much depends” on it.

A Theory for All

Method theory may not work for everyone, but it is for everyone. Its theories and processes are intended to create an opportunity for an individual to use it as they want it and as they need it. Method theory can teach young adults to seek meaning in text, both why and how, in a way that I never had. It is intended to light that spark that I once had but that faded over time, only to return once I started to see what this was all about. I envision this as a course, as a book, and as a conversation. It will be a course built around the student. Method theory will work to encourage a student to themselves to be connect with a text and create deeper meaning on an individual level. They will have the opportunity to be honest with themselves, to reflect on their past, and create their own method to understand literature. I can anticipate younger students having some apathy towards this, such as not needing to find this sort of meaning, or that maybe even that not everyone wants this kind of a connection, or not being honest with their emotions, or being open to reflecting or the idea of the method and making a physical change or action. But that's what the process of method theory is for, it helps generate a connection, and it works for the individual. They can use it as they want and in that way the theory is about them.

As a book, Method theory can explore even deeper thoughts on what this is all about, and in more detail, the process. In what I think of as a "Pocket Version" of the process to use Method theory, each of the four steps has questions to consider:

- Theory
 - What Literary Theories could help analyze the poem?
- Method
 - How will I make a connection?

- Have I experienced this?
 - Should I intentionally experience this?
 - Substitutions?
- Metacognition
 - How do I know this?
- Action
 - Knowing what I know, what should I do?

Each of these can be expanded in a full-length book, along with various exercises to try and flesh out the process and method. This theory also can work for other art forms; films, music, television, and art. Literature is important to me. That is why I chose it. As a book, or even a course, other art forms are certainly capable of being examined using method theory. In many senses, they may work even better. Using method theory to find meaning in the songs of Bob Dylan, the paintings of Pablo Picasso, the films of Stanley Kubrick, there are individual meanings to be found in all of these, and now, a method to do it.

Perhaps though, Method theory is not academic at all. It is a conversation, between complete strangers, close friends, and between text and ourselves. It is simple. It is supposed to be. What we're doing, analyzing text, finding a connection, understanding why, and making it into something is intended to be a process that we can all do, once we have the process and know its parts. I know this because it has worked for me. I've never read anything by James Joyce. His prose is complex, and plots seem out of touch with what I am looking for. This inability though has caused problems as a lover of the written word. Most wouldn't consider me a book worm or worthy of discussing ways to find meaning in literature without knowing anything about one of the more respected authors. But I can read his text now, because I have method theory. Perhaps his most famous novel is "Ulysses," a tale on typical encounters inspired by Homer's "Odyssey." This has never interested me. It's too ordinary, a simple

tale about average people. I wonder if I could ever be able to appreciate a story for what it is, if I could ever be able to appreciate the beauty that a single day can actually bring you, the way it happens in the book. I'll have to throw myself into his novel to understand it and to take something back. I'll have to have an odyssey.

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