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2 Teaching about Homelessness

On an October evening, while walking on the wooded hill behind my house, I was startled and a bit frightened to come across a large, bearded man about my age living under a plastic tarp. Perhaps because I was frightened—or maybe just because I am an English teacher—I started talking rapidly to him, telling him about myself and asking questions. John explained that he preferred to camp by himself, away from the dangers of being "rolled" either under the freeway bridge or near the railway tracks. He didn't want to be around the "winos" downtown, the "proselytizing" of the mission, or the unfriendly looks and remarks of passersby. As a single man he didn't qualify for the family shelters. He told me he could make more money at odd jobs than he could by spending the same time chasing welfare or food stamps. Even though he was healthy, a high school graduate, experienced in mechanical work, it was hard to get work without an address, car, phone number, driver's license, ID, or good clothes.

Under his tarp John had a small battery-operated television set. When he learned I lived just down below him he wondered if he could charge his batteries on our porch socket. Over the next few months I saw John and spoke with him often. I began to notice him trudging back and forth to town. In the midst of Oregon's December rains, I noticed his soaking tennis shoes and I bought him an inexpensive pair of work boots, an "early Christmas present." When a couple of odd jobs fell through one week, he borrowed ten dollars to buy food. Over the next month he paid me back, quarter by quarter.

Before I met John I knew we had a "homeless problem" in the United States. After I got to know John, it was as if my antennae were better attuned. I zeroed in on newspaper articles on the subject: homeless parents and children turned away from overcrowded shelters, bulldozed shanties in New York, marches in Washington, D.C. I started to *see* more people on the streets, older people, panhandlers, so-called "crazies," young people, even high school students like the ones I had been teaching for the last seven years. I read Jonathan Kozol's book *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America*. I saw a film called *Streetwise* about homeless teenagers in Seattle. As I thought of the international scope of the

problem, images came to me of the enormous shantytowns I had seen a year earlier in Mexico City.

Through my reading, I learned that there were multiple and complex reasons for the homelessness increasingly affecting a variety of populations. Changes over the past twenty years have included: decreased federal spending on low-income housing; conversion and loss of existing subsidized and low-income housing; destruction and "gentrification" of single-room occupancy hotels; export and elimination of manufacturing jobs, along with increases in low-paying service jobs; rapidly rising rent and utility costs; cutbacks in drug and alcohol treatment; loss of institutional services for persons with mental illness; and, an insufficient and ineffective government "safety net." In short, the most basic cause of homelessness was not an increase in laziness, poor education, or promiscuity, but a loss of jobs and services, and, above all, a shortage of affordable housing.

As my awareness grew I began to realize that I needed to tie the issue of homelessness into my teaching. Inspired by what I was learning in my high school classes, I had taken a year's leave from my high school classroom to start a graduate degree focusing on world literature, and my fellowship called for teaching an introductory college English course in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction. Building on the approaches I had started with in Contemporary World Literature and on what I was beginning to learn more formally about cultural studies, I decided to focus the whole literature class on the topic of homelessness and bring in some of the contemporary world literature I was now, finally, reading. This meant not using the literature anthology that was standard fare for the class, but, instead, creating my own reading list.

We began our cultural studies–based investigation of the problem of homelessness by reading Jonathan Kozol's social essay *Rachel and Her Children*, viewing the documentary film *Streetwise*, and having the director of our town's emergency housing program speak to the class. Although this was probably not the way that students had expected their class in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature to spend its first two weeks, most seemed to go along, becoming involved right away in discussion about the homelessness problem.

The easy part was to sympathize with the plight of the families in the homeless shelters in New York City or the teenagers on the street in Seattle. It was actually harder to come to terms with the issue when it was closer to us. A street about two blocks from our classroom was frequently populated by disheveled people asking for spare change. Many students walked down this street on their way to my class. When the topic of "Thirteenth

Street" came up, a heated discussion ensued. Sean wanted to know if the students should give these people money. Jared doubted that they really even were "homeless." Ray argued that panhandlers and homeless people were not the same. Anessa thought that the people she saw were "lazy." Heather and Lisa didn't feel safe walking down the street when they were there. Jordan said that he was going to school to get an education; why weren't those guys?

It was evident from our discussion that the problem of homelessness was not only close at hand, but also something students had strong feelings about. I sensed that exploring the issues the students were raising would take us deeper, engaging us in new kinds of critical thinking about the world and our places in it.

Drawing on a cultural studies "main idea" like homelessness, a vital dialogue was beginning to emerge between issues in the world and the experiences and knowledge that my students were bringing to class. The reading, film, speaker, and discussion on the topic of homelessness at the beginning of the course created a context for the literature and other materials that we looked at through the rest of the semester. It was within this context that we began reading *Oliver Twist; Down and Out in Paris and London; Cry, the Beloved Country; Nectar in a Sieve,* from India; *Joys of Motherhood,* from Nigeria; and *One Day of Life,* from El Salvador (see the list at the end of the chapter for additional reading suggestions on the topic of homelessness). Our focus on poverty and homelessness gave us something specific to watch for as we read the literary works, and what we learned from one text we could bring to the reading of the next. Using "homelessness" very self-consciously as the guiding principle for this class helped me to recognize that the way I introduce, order, connect, thematize, and conclude my teaching establishes some kind of framework that will inevitably direct what and how students learn. This was equally true, I realized, in the courses I had taught that were organized by literary genres, where we focused on literary structures and terms, or in courses organized along national traditions, where we focused on the relations between authors and periods and how works defined a supposed "national character."

In this class the first literary work we read was the novel *Oliver Twist,* about an orphan in a nineteenth-century English poorhouse who runs away to London and ends up part of a gang of street hoodlums thieving for an evil old man named Fagin. This classic work by Charles Dickens provided us an opportunity to consider the problem of homelessness in a historical context. While Dickens clearly criticizes the hypocrisy of the poorhouse and its failure to meet even minimal standards in helping the

poor, the sentimental ending of the novel—where Oliver is rescued by the wealthy and good-hearted Mr. Brownlow—seemed to my students to romanticize solutions to the problem of poverty and homelessness.

As we read the book, I brought another problem to my students' attention: the novel's anti-Semitism. I shared with the students some anti-Semitic political cartoons from Dickens's day that displayed racial stereotypes clearly repeated in *Oliver Twist.* We also looked at letters written to Dickens by his Jewish contemporaries who were highly critical of the Fagin character. Dickens promised his critics he would create a more favorable Jewish character; his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* was the result. Nonetheless, anti-Semitic portraits exist elsewhere in Dickens and in British literature.

Textbook editors have censored the anti-Semitic scenes from *Great Expectations*—a novel included in all ninth-grade textbooks. (Note Dickens's stereotypical portrayal of "Habraham Latharuth" in the full version of the text.) While understandable, perhaps this censorship is unfortunate. If examining anti-Semitism helps students think about the Holocaust, it is also, unfortunately, relevant in our own day to ongoing anti-Semitism and its subtle variations such as the global conspiracy theories of the far-right militia movement. When I taught *Great Expectations* to ninth graders, they found it enlightening to do close reading of the anti-Semitic scenes. Awareness of the Jewish stereotype led one student in the class to ask us, weeks later, if the obviously humorous "Aged Parent" at the end of the novel might not also be a stereotyped depiction of older people. (Students could also examine other problematic anti-Semitic works or works with anti-Semitic characters from British literature, including, for example, Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale," Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda,* and selected poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.)

In my class focused on homelessness, students not only were enabled to think critically about the stereotyping of Fagin, but also they began to see how Jewish stereotypes connected to our study of the homelessness problem. Through discussion, we began to see how the stereotypical treatment of Fagan not only misrepresents Jews but also casts the evil of the social situation onto a particular, flawed individual. Reading Dickens and discussing his novel through a cultural studies perspective removed the halo that can place great writers beyond criticism and helped my students become more sophisticated readers and thinkers.

The next book we read was Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets,* a novel frequently taught in high school and college courses not to focus on issues of poverty but to illustrate the literary style of naturalism or realism. Crane was also a journalist, and along with *Maggie* we read several

of his "New York City Sketches", in which he described spending alternating days with poor and rich New Yorkers. Contrasting the Dickens and Crane novels allowed my students to make some of the traditional comparisons between sentimentality and realism, and, with the cultural studies approach we were using, this difference had real significance to the questions that students had asked at the outset of the course. Realism suggested that environmental factors needed to be accounted for in explaining human behavior. It was easier in reading Dickens to "blame" the poor for their condition, whereas with Crane there seemed to be an indictment of the social order itself. Several students wrote papers comparing Dickens's portrayal of the prostitute Nancy with Stephen Crane's presentation of Maggie. This comparison allowed the students to consider the effect that differential standards of morality can have on women. Even traditional distinctions between literary periods, such as that between romanticism and naturalism, made more sense to students when they were grounded in the kind of real-world issues that a cultural studies approach was making possible.

We also read George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, a work that is part reportage, part autobiography, and part testimony (see Chapter 7 for more discussion of "testimonials"). Like Dickens and Crane, Orwell challenged the middle-class view of the poor as "lazy" or "undeserving" and turned our attention to broader social causes. As we read books by multiple authors, all exploring a common theme, the works shed light on each other. Comparing *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* with *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Rachel and Her Children* raised questions about the realism of Crane's naturalism, the filtering of Orwell's reporting, and the selections and organization of the testimony gathered by Kozol. In short, regardless of the genre, we were not hearing the unmediated voice or voices of homeless people themselves; rather, each text was, in its own way, a representation. Putting these texts next to one another undercut any one text's claim to truth, and all the texts, in differing ways, needed to be read as "fiction."

In this class we were still studying Dickens, Crane, and Orwell, but we were thinking about them in historical, social, and political contexts, developing thematic connections that put the classic authors and works into dialogue with popular culture and common experience. I was discovering that a cultural studies approach could be inclusive of authors from the traditional "canon" and that terms like "fiction" could be explored in an English class as not merely a generic category; instead, we were looking at various social "fictions" woven into the literature and shaping our own way of seeing and understanding the world. Students were also

becoming better critical readers, more aware of the ways in which texts were socially and historically located and how these works influenced their own views.

Recently I learned about an exercise that Bruce Pirie does with his students to help them gain further perspective on themselves and their social positions as readers:

> When my senior students read a set of essays about social conventions (articles about homelessness and menial labor), I ask them to write "personal" responses, but *not* as themselves. Rather, they react in assigned roles as labor leaders, business owners, homeless people, ultraconservative politicians, feminists, and so on. They then gather in mixed groups to discuss, still in role, these responses. After reflecting on this process, students are in better positions to understand their own participation as an audience—their readings and uses of texts. (Pirie 30)

In my class on homelessness the three "Third World" novels we read allowed the students to draw parallels and make connections with societies we usually mischaracterize as "exotic" or "other" and to think about the problem of homelessness from a more global point of view. The vision in the Indian and African novels of industrial development displacing rural communities, aggregating large impoverished populations in the cities, and assaulting family and community ties was, looking back, familiar from Dickens, Crane, and Orwell. A film like *Roger and Me* (detailing the effects of the movement of automobile plants from Michigan to Mexico) allowed students to draw direct connections between First and Third World homelessness. Some students gained a sense of personal relationship with people very different from themselves. One young woman wrote a moving paper showing similarities between the experience of her own mother and Nnu Ego, the overworked, impoverished Ibo heroine of the ironic Nigerian novel *Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta.

The Third World literature we read also suggested differences between homelessness in U.S. cities and in other parts of the world, thus adding to our understanding of the experiences of homeless people. The hardships imposed by colonial and neocolonial relationships were unprecedented in the earlier reading in the course. Manlio Argueta's *One Day of Life,* treating the brutal experience of peasants at the beginning of the revolution in El Salvador, raised tough questions about U.S. foreign policy in the region, about what we might even describe as an active policy of creating homelessness. *One Day of Life* focuses on a systematic repression, a culture of violence and terror that differs both in kind and degree from the other texts we read. Yet, in depicting a resistant and revolutionary

consciousness, it raises questions about the factors that inhibit such a consciousness in North America. In order to understand homelessness in Africa and Latin America, a critique of industrial development was not enough; rather, a complex understanding of race and gender relations, international politics, and differing cultural contexts evolved out of our reading. And didn't we need this more complex understanding to think critically about homelessness in America as well?

The thematic cultural studies orientation and the seriousness of the homelessness problem in our immediate community prompted students to attempt a wide variety of forms of research, writing, and direct involvement. Students interviewed community members, including shelter operators, ministers, homeless people, government officials, and even school principals: *How does the problem of homeless children affect your school? How could homeless children be better served by school systems?* A number of students attended community meetings and volunteered in homeless shelters. They talked about their experiences in the class and urged other class members to become more involved. Understanding the various causes of homelessness in Eugene, Oregon, suggested activities that could be undertaken to address our local problem.

When I have taught about serious, difficult, or potentially overwhelming issues like the Holocaust, apartheid, or homelessness, I know that my students stand to gain vital cultural knowledge and significant academic benefit, but I find that I worry about how such heavy topics will affect them emotionally. I have wondered whether or not examining such topics will support or undermine their interest in participating in the world. When such units are over I usually feel positive about the result, and discover yet again that careful reading, discussion, and writing about powerful subjects increases rather than numbs my students' human sensitivity. And I know that they can't wisely participate in the world unless they clearly understand it.

What this course demonstrated to me, then, was that when students recognized the possibility of affecting the homeless crisis in our own community, they were able to become involved and, most important, develop hope for the future. As our class discussions followed the news, students became aware of concerned citizens, political activists, homeless advocates, and homeless people themselves taking various actions across the country; they could see their own activity as not only local but also part of an inclusive social movement involving people of all political parties and from different walks of life. Making these connections, I realized, is a significant part of what reader response and cultural studies teaching is all about.

Reading and discussing the portrayal of homelessness in literary works provided students with critical tools for their cultural studies analysis of real-world people and institutions. Students not only developed sensitivity to others, they also questioned a perfunctory charity. They understood more clearly Hoch and Slayton's point that "a politics of compassion that identifies the vulnerability of the homeless as the cause of their predicament too easily overlooks the social and economic history of the urban working poor and their struggle for affordable shelter" (7–8). If involvement with real-world issues and events developed consciousness, it also led to better written projects, extended and deepened reading, and provided a basis for passionate oral reports and intense class discussion. The course was not a complete break with the conventions of literature study. Students did write "literary analysis" papers, looked in interesting ways at an author's treatment of themes and language, and compared two or more works; yet, as students had a more precise historical and social understanding of the texts, these traditional papers were sharper than usual.

Many students were somewhat surprised by a literature course that focused on homelessness, and the appropriateness of the topic was something that, at times, I debated in my own mind. Teaching the course as a graduate student, I was not sure what the regular faculty would think of my focus on homelessness, how it might affect my future teaching opportunities in the department or my letters of recommendation. I was a bit worried at the end of the second week when one student (I had a class of fifty) told me he was going to drop the class because it was not what he had expected. After I raised the issue in discussion, several others indicated that they felt a literature class should focus on "characters and plot." As the term went on and we read more literature, the students found our initial reading and discussion of the homelessness problem more and more useful to their analyses of the texts. By the middle of the semester I noticed a real enthusiasm, not so much for solving the problem of homelessness—I saw this from the beginning—but for thinking about the social, historical, and thematic content of the literature we were reading. The end-of-term evaluations of the course were almost unanimously positive about focusing on homelessness.

The process of designing and teaching the class raised questions for me about priorities in teaching literature, and it was invigorating to see students begin to ask questions about the purpose and content of what they were studying, even when those questions challenged my own long-held assumptions. For years I had taught in the same way I was trained, emphasizing discussion of plot, character development, and literary language. The historical context of literary works, the political manipula-

tion of language, and the relevance of social issues in the present day were there, but in the back seat. Now, as a graduate student, I was learning about the influence of New Criticism, with its emphasis on the closed and the literary quality of texts as works of art, and thus I was coming to understand more clearly the training I had received in literary study.

New Criticism

Arising in the 1930s and 1940s, New Criticism emphasized the artistic or "aesthetic" aspect of literature, where metaphor, irony, and poetic devices are interpreted so as to come together to create an "organic unity" of form and meaning. Attracted to the beauty of poetic language, New Critics celebrated the complexities of individual literary works. Reacting against historical and political approaches, the New Critics argued that literary works were best understood separately from the lives of their authors or the historical period in which they were written. They returned to the text to justify their interpretations and fostered "close readings" that could escape what they saw as stifling and pedantic academic traditions.

Yet as New Criticism itself became an institutionalized tradition during the conservative 1950s, it was structured into standardized textbooks and reduced to a safe, mechanical method for teaching literature. Just as grammar books (such as Warriners) became the way to teach writing, so literary terms and skills textbooks organized by literary genre became—and still are—the way to teach literature, especially at the secondary level. Controversial issues need not enter literature textbooks—the texts could focus on literary artistry and be adopted without objection in large states like Texas or California. One textbook I used (and it is still one of the sales leaders) emphasized, among others, terms like: alexandrine, apostrophe, caesura, consonance, dénouement, epode, iambic pentameter, kenning, metonymy, ottava rima, Spenserian stanza, sprung rhythm, terza rima, trochee, and villanelle. While such terms may be more definable and "testable" than the varied interpretations made possible by literature, they are difficult to retain or make relevant. For how many of our students do these terms help make literature more beautiful or enjoyable—or relevant?

A cultural studies approach recognizes that there is complexity in all forms of cultural expression; however, the particular kind of complexity that the New Critics were interested in biased them in favor of certain literary works from the high Western canonical tradition, for instance Metaphysical poetry. It was hard for the New Critics to appreciate other kinds of complexity found in various genres or traditions, and as a result the supposedly unbiased technical approach of New Criticism often ends up fostering a rigidly

> conservative orientation to the literary canon. Moreover, the subject that a work of literature addresses, what its significance might be to the reader, or what it could tell us either historically or for our own time—none of these vital considerations for good teaching are given much weight in New Criticism.
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> The contribution of the New Critics was to focus on close reading, on rigorous attention to the words on the page. Teaching students to read carefully is one of the most important things we do. Yet a meaningful approach to close reading needs to build on the strengths of the New Critics and go beyond their narrow literary values. Meaningful English teaching needs to be historically involved, better connected to the real world, and it needs to foster students' appreciation of and critical thinking about the whole range of cultural expression.

As I have moved between different levels in the educational system, I have seen a New Critical emphasis on literary artistry get reduced in junior high, high school, and college classrooms to lectures and quizzes on literary terms, genres, the structure of sonnets, and so on. Well-meaning English teachers, year after year, blame teachers at "lower" levels for failing to teach literary vocabulary—vocabulary that I know for a fact the teachers have, indeed, made strenuous efforts to teach. Memorizing complex and technical vocabulary, however, is not the same thing as mastering a skill or a subject—a truth that most of us have learned about teaching grammar but that we seem less willing to understand about teaching literature.

Over time I have also learned about the alternatives to a New Critical approach, many of which can be understood under the cultural studies umbrella. Teaching a class on homelessness and literature, I began to see more clearly how theoretical views about the nature and function of literature really do influence our everyday teaching, whether or not we recognize it.

When I began teaching, I thought that what went on in my classroom was unique. I used textbooks but usually supplemented and modified them. Yes, I reproduced with my college and high school students some of the same discussions that I had had when I was a student—but there were important differences. I tried to work within the scope and sequence set forward by my department, but there was always significant room for individual variation. In short, my teaching was, as I saw it, my own creation. It wasn't until I went back to graduate school and really began to study literary theory and the history of literature teaching

that I began to realize how, even without my knowing it, the values, norms, interests, texts, and purposes of particular schools of literary criticism—especially New Criticism and certain traditional historical approaches—were playing themselves out in my own classroom whether I willed it or not.

I had always told my students that sometimes one has to get out of the world one is living in before he or she can see it clearly, but it was surprising for me to discover that I was the fish that didn't know that it was living in the water—until I was hooked and hoisted into the air. Looking back at the water, so to speak, I came to recognize that traditional literary theory and approaches had created the lake I was swimming in. I had been repeating my own literary training without knowing there were other options. Now I was discovering new literary theories, especially those that fall under the heading "cultural studies," that advocated, supported, and extended the teaching I was experimenting with and finding so successful. Theory was helping me understand and justify doing more in my classroom than simply repeating the way I had been taught.

Historical Criticism

Before, during, and after the rise of New Criticism, at least three alternative historical approaches to literature have been influential: biographical criticism, literary tradition criticism, and political criticism. (Historical approaches evolved from a long tradition of literary study called "philology"; see Appendix C for a discussion of this tradition.)

In biographical criticism, literature is read by examining its relationship to the author's life. A knowledge of the life and struggles of an author gives students a clearer sense of the varied purposes of writing, allowing them to make connections between themselves and well-known artists. Biographical approaches are especially important for teaching some of the "new" literature by women and by minority and Third World authors. Unfortunately many textbook accounts of authors' lives are incomplete or boring—that which might generate the most discussion is absent. For instance, we would not likely learn from a textbook or anthology that Willa Cather was a lesbian, that James Baldwin was gay, that Helen Keller was a radical socialist, or that Forrest Carter was a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

In literary tradition criticism, what matters is not the life of the author, but the relation of his or her work to "great literature" both before and after. Awareness of a literary tradition can help students as they seek to understand the methods, forms, and concerns of writers, and effective teachers

> have been able to find connections between literary traditions, history, and students' lives. Yet reading within supposed "literary traditions" may isolate literature from the deeper and more interesting histories it can tell. Uncovering a relationship between, for example, Twain's irony in *Huckleberry Finn* and Crane's naturalism in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* may be of less value than comparing their treatment of ethical choices, poverty, public charity, family life, gender roles, and so on. Even the best English teachers face serious hurdles in exciting their students about rarefied "literary traditions." Among the experts, literary traditions, periods, and relationships are notoriously difficult to define; such esoteric disagreements may be difficult for secondary or college students to enter into.
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> Political criticism is an approach that has been influential in some university courses but less so in high school or middle school. Political criticism has a long history, often tied to social change and revolutionary movements—Leon Trotsky, for instance, wrote *Literature and Revolution* in 1924 while he was directing the Red army from a train car. Socialist criticism was especially popular in the United States during the 1930s. Political critics explore the relationship of literature to social classes and examine the dynamics of power and domination, poverty and racism, resistance and liberty—issues important to Americans from the Revolution to the present. Political critics consider the treatment of social classes in traditional literary works while including literature by and about working-class people, as well as those who are poor and disenfranchised. Yet working-class literature and even the "political" works of familiar authors—such as Stephen Crane's "New York City Sketches," John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle,* or Langston Hughes's radical poetry—are too often eliminated from the curriculum. A passion for social change inspired many authors we customarily teach, yet to avoid "controversy" we focus on their literary artistry. (I see my course on homelessness as being in the tradition of political criticism—precisely the tradition the New Critics worked against.)

The students' course evaluations for the class on homelessness encouraged me in the social justice and cultural studies approach we were exploring. In the anonymous final evaluations for the course, a first-year student wrote, "Although the course is a literature class, the instructor dealt more with the issues presented in the books that we read. I found this to be very interesting and very informative." A junior commented, "Most other [English] classes just talked about characters and irony, etc. This class made me think about the world, and how little/lot we've changed our attitudes, our thoughts, and what we've learned from our past history." Another first-year student said, "Theme of the class 'homelessness' a shock at first, but

wonderful! I learned more in this class in one term than any other writing or literature class I've ever taken." From a senior English major: "I have benefited tremendously from this class. I was delighted to have a teacher who approached what is generally a 'survey' type class as an intense study of a very important world situation. The reading list was excellent and well chosen."

I realize that an entire course on homelessness and literature may not be feasible or even desirable, as valuable as such a course might be. There is the literature anthology, the textbook, the curriculum guide, the need to coordinate syllabi, shortages of time, and, in high school and middle school at least, the issue of money for purchasing materials. Yet a great deal can be accomplished on a small scale, using works, anthologies, or authors we already teach, and adding or augmenting with one or two new texts, packets, films, or speakers. I think we should recognize that homelessness and poverty have long been important themes in literature and that these themes are often ignored or put to the side in scholarship, textbooks, standardized tests, and teaching. Don't some of our most frequently taught stories—widely treasured works such as "A Modest Proposal," *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *Of Mice and Men*—address homelessness and the value of the perspectives of homeless people? I believe that taking seriously many of the writers we care about means paying attention to the social dimensions of their work, in relation to both their time and ours. A key to cultural studies teaching, then, is helping students make connections between the literature they read in the classroom and the life experience of people in their community and around the world.

Perhaps it is obvious that the topic of homelessness is only one approach that English teachers can take to help their students make such connections. From a cultural studies viewpoint, there are any number of relevant thematic approaches. Of course, literary texts are interesting to us precisely because they can be appreciated from a variety of perspectives. Meaningful cultural studies themes emerge out of social and historical realities and they challenge us to identify or forge authentic connections between the present and other time periods, and between our cultures and those of other people. As with the topics of homelessness and the Holocaust, cultural studies themes help young people explore their roles and responsibilities as community members and global citizens. The safe, superficial themes often foregrounded in anthologies and school textbooks do not usually lead us into authentic forms of cultural studies unless ways are found to engage the realities of the historical and cultural contexts in which we live. Potentially relevant topics such as family, friendship, and

love become more meaningful when their cultural diversity, socioeconomic aspects, and significance to present-day realities are addressed. As an English teacher, I found that this course on homelessness allowed me to self-consciously develop curriculum beyond New Critical and safe historical approaches.

Cultural studies does not confine English classes to merely sober or depressing subjects such as the Holocaust or poverty, as important as these issues are. Good teaching should also be joyful, optimistic, and hopeful. Cultural studies allows us to examine issues in the lives of our students and connect them with questions as deep as that of their own identity. Taken together, cultural studies and reader response approaches help students examine, understand, and creatively speak back to the social categories, images, and roles that tell us who we are. At least that is my ambition in the teaching described in the next chapter.

Resources for Teaching about Homelessness

Studies of Homelessness

- *American Refugees* by Jim Hubbard provides photographic documentation of homeless Americans often accompanied by description and personal testimony. An excellent classroom resource for reading, writing, and discussion.
- *The Faces of Homelessness* by Marjorie Hope and James Young is a readable and thorough overview of the homelessness problem with excellent chapters on the deinstitutionalization of mentally ill persons and approaches to working with homeless people.
- *Homeless Youth* by Jan van der Ploeg and Evert Scholte both examines the causes of homelessness among youth and suggests solutions in the form of prevention and intervention programs. A good complement to the film *Streetwise*.
- *London Labour and the London Poor* by Henry Mayhew includes extensive nineteenth-century interviews with poor people in London; the book was drawn on by Charles Dickens for many of his novels. Excerpts from this pioneering work are still fascinating and add to a reading of Dickens or any nineteenth-century literary works treating poverty or homelessness.
- *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* by Jonathan Kozol overviews the homeless crisis and challenges readers to rethink their attitudes toward homeless people. Very readable and compelling.
- *Songs from the Alley* by Kathleen Hirsch counterposes a history of homelessness and social policy with the story of contemporary homeless women and the women who work with them.

- *Street Lives: An Oral History of Homeless Americans* by Steven VanderStaay has a wide cross section of short oral histories, many with photographs, that could easily supplement classroom reading.
- *Twenty Years at Hull House* is Jane Addams's famous and inspiring account of her pioneering social work with immigrants in a settlement home in Chicago in the late nineteenth century.
- *What You Can Do To Help the Homeless,* a booklet by Thomas Kenyon and Justin Blau, will interest students with its thirty-two simple and direct strategies for individuals, families, and organizations.

Films Treating Homelessness

- *Down and Out in America* explores the processes that produce and perpetuate homelessness by gathering the testimony of homeless people in New York, Los Angeles, and rural Minnesota. Relevant to any discussion of homelessness, the film includes a segment on the family farm that would tie in well with *The Grapes of Wrath.* There is also footage of some of the locations and individuals mentioned in Kozol's *Rachel and Her Children.* Winner of an Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1986.
- *Home Less Home* is a documentary that contrasts interviews with homeless people with stereotypical images of the homeless as they are depicted in the mass media and in American culture as a whole. Director Bill Brand says, "We're so accustomed to homeless people as victims that when they speak, we no longer believe they are homeless."
- *Modern Times,* directed by Charlie Chaplin in 1936, is a classic silent comedy addressing the impact of industrialization. One can consider it also to be about homelessness.
- *Promises to Keep* was nominated for an academy award. Narrated by Martin Sheen, this film describes the life of Mitch Snyder, empowering homeless activist. The documentary contains footage from the making of the made-for-television film about Snyder, *The Samaritan.*
- *Roger and Me,* directed by Michael Moore, is a quirky documentary assembling testimony about the effects of the closing of General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan. A great discussion starter, it will allow students to hear a variety of perspectives.
- *Salaam Bombay!,* directed by Mira Nair, is a sensitive and insightful portrayal of the lives of homeless children in India, filmed on location and without professional actors.
- *Streetwise* is a documentary about street youth in Seattle in which high school students will recognize themselves and be highly motivated to discuss and write about homelessness.

- *Sugar Cane Alley,* directed by Euzhan Palcy, tells the story of poor sugarcane workers in Martinique in the 1920s from the perspective of a young boy—an effective way to introduce Third World material into the classroom. In French with English subtitles.
- *Takeover* is a provocative documentary about a movement organizing homeless people to take over vacant homes in middle-class neighborhoods.

Literary Works Addressing Homelessness

- *One Day of Life* by Manlio Argueta was written during the El Salvadoran civil war in the 1980s and tells the story of peasants forced out of their homes and communities.
- Charles Baudelaire wrote two disturbing and interesting prose poems, "Beat Up the Poor" and "Eyes of the Poor," that stage encounters between street people and the wealthy in nineteenth-century Paris.
- William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* are sophisticated and subtle poems speaking of abandoned children, chimney sweeps, and London poverty in the late eighteenth century, as well as the threat this experience poses to an outlook that would attempt to remain innocent.
- Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* tells the story of a working-class girl who is taken advantage of and turned out by her family before she turns finally to the streets. Crane's "New York City" sketches explore his interest in the difference between wealth and poverty.
- *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens criticizes the Poor Law and explores the street life and underworld of London.
- In *Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta, Nnu Ego must leave her tribal life and find a way to support herself and her children in the slums of modernizing Lagos, Nigeria. Despite the pride Nigerian women are supposed to take in motherhood, Nnu Ego finds it a thankless experience.
- *The Beggars' Strike, Or, The Dregs of Society,* Aminata Sow Fall's ironic novel from Senegal, asks, "What would happen if street people went on strike?"
- *Life Among the Piutes* by Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins chronicles the displacement of her people and their struggle to find a new home after the arrival of the first White people in Nevada.
- *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya is a touching and deceptively simple novel that depicts the way a family of peasant farmers in rural India is forced from its land and ends up homeless in the city.

- *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane tells the story of a Black South African tennis star who documents Apartheid's assault on the homes and lives of black people.
- Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a powerful and highly readable testimonial of an Indian woman whose family is forced off their land and terrorized by the Guatemalan military. (See Chapter 7 for a fuller discussion of this book and of testimonials as a genre.)
- *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell gives an account of his experience in the 1930s washing dishes in Paris and tramping across England in an effort to learn about the lives of the poor.
- *Cry, the Beloved Country,* Alan Paton's classic novel of South Africa, is still effective in depicting the experience of poverty and homelessness in a South African township. Rather than no longer teaching it, I suggest continuing to use it along with contemporary and Black sources, such as *Kaffir Boy* (see separate entry in this list), and inviting students to explore conditions in South Africa in transition.
- *This Migrant Earth* (also titled *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*) by Tomás Rivera is a fascinating collection of short pieces addressing the experience of migrant Mexican American farm workers in the Midwest.
- Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle,* a classic study of the meatpacking industry, is also a look at homelessness among European immigrants in the nineteenth-century American city.

Web Sites for Teaching about Homelessness

- The Bay Area Homeless Program site offers information and links, as well as the "Homeless Education Kit," which looks like a good activity resource for teachers. Go to: http://thecity.sfsu.edu/~stewartd/.
- Communications for a Sustainable Future (CSF), located at the University of Colorado at Boulder, maintains the HOMELESS Web site, which contains links to over five hundred Internet sites (in several countries) that provide information on homelessness. From this page you can also access the discussion list about homelessness: http://csf.colorado.edu/homeless/.
- Habitat for Humanity invites people of all backgrounds to build houses in partnership with families in need. Their Web site can link students to events, affiliates, and housing projects across the country and around the world: http://www.habitat.org/.
- The Iowa Department of Education offers an online version of a pamphlet to help schools and teachers better respond to the edu-

cational needs of homeless children: http://www.wmpenn.edu/pennweb/LTP/DOEMat/LEHC1.html.

- The Web site of the National Alliance to End Homelessness includes profiles of homeless citizens, background and statistics, policy and legislation, and a list of practical ideas about how individuals can join in the effort to end homelessness. Includes fact sheets for students at different grade levels. The site is located at: http://www.naeh.org/.
- The National Coalition for the Homeless is an advocacy network committed to ending homelessness. Its Web site contains information, testimonials, legislative materials, links, and publications: http://nch.ari.net/.

Readings in New Criticism

- *Practical Criticism* (1929) by I. A. Richards inspired a generation of American literature teachers to focus on the self-contained meaning of poetry and the way that the preconceptions of student readers distracted them from the words on the page. Richards's study was an important precursor to both New Criticism and American reader response.
- *Seven Types of Ambiguity* by William Empson is an early (1930s) and illuminating example of a brilliant critic making close readings of canonical English poets.
- *Understanding Poetry* (1938), co-authored by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, rapidly became the standard textbook for the teaching of literature. Addressing only poetry, and canonical White male British and American poetry at that—of more than 150 authors represented, 3 are women—Brooks and Warren argued that "literature should be studied as literature." Reissued in 1951 and 1960, *Understanding Poetry* institutionalized New Critical priorities in both university and high school teaching.
- *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) is Cleanth Brooks's collection of essays on paradox in Shakespeare, Pope, Gray, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, and Yeats. It captures the spirit of New Criticism where scholars were explicitly "not critical relativists, not cultural historians, not sociologists, but makers of normative judgment" (251).

Resources for Historical Criticism

Biographical

There are hundreds of fascinating literary biographies and autobiographies on almost any canonical writer of your choosing. Here are a few that I or my colleagues have found especially interesting.

- *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* by William Pritchard is a concise and sympathetic account of Frost's life. He is interested in drawing Frost's ideas out of his letters and poetry.
- *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* by Robert D. Richardson is a well-written volume that explores the evolution of the writer's thought in a social context. The same is true of Richardson's *Emerson: The Mind on Fire.*
- *James Joyce* by Richard Ellman is considered one of the best biographies of the twentieth century.
- *The Life of Charlotte Brontë,* Elizabeth Gaskell's classically Victorian biography, is full of Brontë's letters and offers a sympathetic account by another woman novelist of the same era. For a modern treatment, Lyndall Gordon's biography, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life,* sympathetically takes you inside the author's life and temperament.
- *Lives of the Poets,* written between 1777 and 1781 by Samuel Johnson and available in many editions, offers a picture of the literary life of the eighteenth century and includes biographical accounts of Milton, Swift, Addison, Pope, Gray, and many others.
- *Recollections of the English Lake Poets* by Thomas De Quincey focuses on Wordsworth's personal experiences and gossip, and is a charming nineteenth century biographical work.
- *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* by David Reynolds examines Whitman in the context of nineteenth-century American social and cultural development. Includes a frank and balanced account of Whitman's sexuality.
- *The Life of Langston Hughes* by Arnold Rampersad offers a rich portrait of the "Shakespeare of Harlem." Don't miss Hughes's own autobiographies; *The Big Sea* is a delight to teach.

Literary Tradition

- *The Cambridge History of American Literature,* edited by Sacvan Bercovitch, is a more recent and inspirational resource for American literature teachers. Several volumes include a series of extended essays by top scholars reading the literary tradition from a variety of historical and cultural perspectives.
- *Literary History of the United States,* edited by Robert Spiller et al., is an example of the kind of comprehensive reference compendium that examines writers within a literary tradition (in this case, Euro-American). The first volume is over 1500 pages.
- T. S. Eliot's *Selected Essays 1917–1932* includes essays on Marlowe, Shakespeare, Dante, and the Metaphysical Poets, along with the famous piece "Tradition and the Individual Talent."
- *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* by Andrew Sanders.

There are any number of literary histories of England spanning a broad range of perspectives and periods. This one caught my attention as apparently well done and self-reflective, though at 676 pages it is not exactly "short."

Socialist

- *The Communist Manifesto,* written by Marx and Engels in 1854, is as good a place as any to start with socialist thought.
- *Culture and Society 1780–1950* by Raymond Williams provides a good starting point for studying one of the most influential of the Marxist literary critics. Also appropriate would be Williams's *Marxism and Literature*.
- M. M. Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* is an intriguing example of a socialist approach to literature. Highly regarded in the current literary scholarship, this book examines the history of the novel form and its unique use of a diversity of language practices from different levels of society.
- Granville Hicks's *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* is a classic socialist study from the 1930s.
- Vernon L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from Beginnings to 1920* is a classic socialist study from the 1920s.
- *Marx for Beginners* by the Chilean Rius uses a cartoon format to make this difficult thinker more broadly comprehensible and would appeal to high school or college students.
- Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* is a short and clear introduction to Marxist criticism. Also useful is his book *Ideology,* which lucidly explores the meaning of this key term by synthesizing and building on a wide range of scholarship.
- Alfred Kazin's *On Native Ground: An Interpretation of American Prose Literature* is a classic socialist study from the 1940s.
- *The Profession of Authorship in America 1800–1870* by William Charvat may not be explicitly socialist in orientation, but it offers an illuminating historical approach to literature, examining the book as a market commodity as well as the effects of the publishing business on literature. This work addresses Cooper, Poe, Longfellow, Melville, and others.
- See also the list of recommended readings on post-Marxism at the end of Chapter 7.