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Can the study of English contribute to democracy? James Berlin’s book answers this question with an emphatic “yes.” Not only does Berlin attempt to redefine the discipline, breaking down the barriers between literary and rhetorical realms of study, he asserts that the college English department should completely reconfigure its social mission. According to Berlin, a college English curriculum should prepare students for their future careers, but also should enable students to “become active agents of social and political change,” by teaching them that the world can “be remade to serve more justly the interests of a democratic society” (112).

This pedagogical stance, of course, is a controversial one. The decade in which this book was published saw a number of prominent scholars come out *against* the very ideas that Berlin is advocating. Stanley Fish, in his much-publicized 1995 book *Professional Correctness: Literary Study and Political Change,* dismissed “the possibility of transforming literary study so that it is more immediately engaged with the political issues that are today so urgent” (1). Authors such as Maxine Hairston vociferously asserted that ideology has no place at all in the writing classroom (1992). Despite this very palpable current of resistance to his “radical” ideas, Berlin charges forth here, providing a cogent account of the way English studies has functioned in the past, and should function in the future.

Berlin initiates the discussion by mapping the recent emergence of what he calls “fragmented” postmodern economic and cultural conditions which have fundamentally changed the way students approach the post-university job market. Today this unstable world is simply a reality of globalization, but when this book was published the change had not fully sunk in. The pedagogical approach he outlines to confront these burgeoning conditions revolves around the idea that rhetorical analysis must be re-integrated into the English curriculum. This approach, which involves what he calls “social-epistemic rhetoric,” places strong emphasis on teaching students the way language functions as a signifying system that, in effect, “constructs reality” (58). Through a thorough study of this system, students begin to see how “reality” is actually a contested version of events which are shaped by the language used to describe them. For example, Berlin explains the way certain news events are put into “narrative frames” — one-sided versions of events which conceal the “complex interests that [are] actually at stake” (56). Reminiscent of Roland Barthes and Kenneth Burke among others, this approach to textual analysis shows students how certain signifying practices construct “a world that corresponds to an interested version of things-in-themselves” (68). Berlin makes a convincing case for the value of rhetoric in the classroom, asserting that it is a necessary and effective way to critique these narrative frames — to unmask the “interests” behind them.

The book is strongest when Berlin is explaining why English needs to be reformulated and how we should go about doing it. Questions arise, though, once he gets into the implementation. The third section of the book is largely devoted to this, describing two of Berlin’s courses which effectively translate theory into practice. His
“lower division” course, for example, studies a wide range of “cross-cultural texts,” taken from newspapers, television, radio, and film. The students first are provided with a “set of heuristics” (an introductory book on critical methods) and using these tools of interpretation are able to locate key ideas within the text. The students are then asked to “analyze, discuss, and write about the position of the key terms within these socially constructed narrative codes” (118). This all seems very advanced for a “lower division” course, and despite the alluded to success of the students in this course, Berlin never describes any specific classroom interactions. Doubtless this type of success occurs regularly in his classroom, but I feel this section would have been stronger if the reader were privilege to a sample of some of these discussions. I know I was curious as to how exactly Berlin evoked the high degree of critical thinking his classes seemed to require.

Other potential flaws in the book are dealt with more effectively. The general accusation of political indoctrination – prominent in Hairston’s article – is one which Berlin admittedly leaves himself open to. English teachers, he writes, create “a certain kind of reader,” and the subject positions the students assume as a result of his class carry “a great deal of ideological baggage” (178). Critics commonly point to the fact that this “ideological baggage” is surely weighted toward the Left. This is the kind of criticism that recurred throughout the 90s, and has never really gone away. Berlin himself seems unfazed by this potential objection, at times even embracing the task of creating students as he sees fit: “Protests against the political involvement of English studies,” he writes, are “futile” (xiii). To him, preparing students for life outside the university is inextricably bound up with the social consciousness that he aims to create. In a world of constructed realities and culturally-coded messages, English teachers are unavoidably situated in the realm of politics.

Though he admits that he was “haunted” by a Fish-like critic who asserted that English teachers are impotent in the lives of their students outside the English classroom, Berlin has in this book put forth a provocative statement about the utility of English studies in a world beset by vertiginous postmodern realities. To Berlin, the English teacher is a guide, illuminating for the students the world of language in which they live, and showing them how to negotiate their own realities without mindlessly succumbing to the rhetoric which constantly shapes their experiences. Berlin’s book is a great success in outlining the value the study of English can have in creating intelligent, critical participants in a modern democracy. This book is a valuable resource for English teachers in shaping, and perhaps most importantly, justifying their craft.
Works Cited