

On the Echoes of Henry James's *The Reverberator*: Reflections on Teaching Argumentative Research Papers in Undergraduate Classes on Literature

Dr. Nevena Stojanovic

Lecturer at West Virginia University, USA

Abstract

*In this essay, I reflect on the teaching experiment that I did several years ago in my class on transatlantic short stories and novels of the nineteenth century. As instructors of literature in a university setting, we often face the question of how to teach undergraduate students what a researched argument is and how to help them come up with effective thesis statements. The number of students, their different educational backgrounds, skills, and motivations can all be a challenge for instructors who need to make sure that everyone enrolled in the class understands the complex processes of research and argumentative writing before starting the draft. Our major concern, however, is how to keep students fully engaged in the processes of exploration, research, and drafting. Here I share my experience of teaching these processes in two 75-minute sessions. I include the methods of teaching and the homework and in-class prompts assigned to the class. I used the model similar to the one that Ashley M. Walter proposed in her thesis, which consists of discussion, providing students with a frame/stance, and transmediation. To this model, I added a mini-session on the in-class exploration of our library's databases and brainstorming thesis statements. I chose Henry James's brief and witty novel *The Reverberator* (1888) for the purposes of this process, mainly because this text has been neglected in the criticism on James's late work, and I wanted to see what kinds of arguments my students would come up with to recover it.*

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As instructors of literature in a university setting, we often face the question of how to teach undergraduate students what an argumentative research paper is and how to help them come up with thesis statements that promise something new and provocative to the reader. Since I teach in a public research university, where there are up to 40 students in classes on literature, my challenge has been how to help every student in class—both literature and non-literature majors—understand the process of moving from the mere close reading to combining it with various theoretical and critical frameworks, with the purpose of shedding new light on the author's rendering of the themes. The number of students, their different educational backgrounds, skills, and motivations can all be a challenge for instructors who need to make sure that everyone enrolled in the class understands the complex processes of research and argumentative writing before starting the draft. Moreover, classes that last for either 50 or 75 minutes, depending on the assigned three-day or two-day weekly schedules, do not leave much space for experimentation, so we must ensure that the activities done in class really help students understand and practice new concepts so that they can apply them effectively in their essays.

Several years ago, I was in such a situation. I was assigned to teach a class on short story and novel, and since transatlanticism is one of my areas of interest, I themed the course "Short Story and Novel in Nineteenth-Century Great Britain and USA." This is a 100-level course, which means that it is introductory and that students should finish it with a sense that they have grasped the concepts of these two literary genres as well as methods for analyzing them and arguing about them. Throughout the semester, we were exploring transatlantic themes through discussions, comment cards, short responses to weekly questions, in-class exams, but the climax of our work was the final researched argument on a literary text in the syllabus. My challenge was how to effectively explain using the context in which the text was published, close reading of the text, literary criticism on it, and theoretical frameworks that we could apply in our analyses, with the purpose of making fresh arguments about the text. My crucial concern, however, was how to keep students fully engaged in all these important steps of the process. I taught the class twice a week, and each session lasted for 75 minutes, so I needed to cover all the segments of the process in one week in order to ensure that students can reflect on everything over the weekend and start experimenting with the texts that they have selected for the essay, which was due three and a half weeks later.

I was thinking for a while about what text to choose for explanation, illustration, and engagement in class, and I decided upon Henry James's brief novel *The Reverberator* (1888). Characterized as a *jeu d'esprit* by the author himself, this 142-page novel, which could easily be accessed and read via *The SUNY New Paltz Henry James Scholars' Guide*, seemed appropriate for the task at hand since it is not too long and since it is comic, so the students could finish reading it in one afternoon and fully engage in the tasks that I intended to assign. Moreover, this novel had been largely neglected in the criticism on James's late work, so I wanted to see what kinds of ideas my students would generate in order to recover the piece. For the pedagogical methods for teaching undergraduate students how to make arguments on literary texts, I used a model similar to the one that Ashley M. Walter proposed in her M.A. thesis. According to

Walter:

Critical reading is dependent on student ability to think metacognitively and comprehend a text. Metacognition and comprehension are best supported by specific strategy instruction and through questioning. Once students can think and read critically they need to be supported in developing an interpretation of text. Three key categories surface when examining the best ways to support students toward an interpretation. These areas are discussion, using a frame or stance, and transmediation. (Abstract)

Since we met on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on Thursday of the week before we started the discussion of *The Reverberator*, I provided my students with the information about the cultural climate in which James published the novel and explained the frame/stance that they should bear in mind while reading it. Afterwards, I divided the class in six groups, assigning each one a task that they would have to complete prior to coming to the following session. My students knew what group they were members of, but they were supposed to work on the tasks individually over the weekend and share their ideas with their peers at the beginning of Tuesday's session. As a group, they were supposed to compile a list of answers and when asked, share it with the whole class. Each group was aware of the prompts assigned to the other groups, which helped them think about the themes of the novel while reading it. They all knew what our in-class activities would focus on, and if they had any fresh observations regarding the prompts assigned to the other groups, they could share them with us during the discussion.

Step One: Establishing the Context

For the context in which James published the novel, I provided the information from James's letters since they are the most reliable sources for an analysis of his motives for writing and are usually cited by scholars as valuable material in the discussion of his oeuvre. I explained that in a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson, dated on July 31, 1888, just over a month after the *Macmillan Magazine* finished the serial publication of his comic novel *The Reverberator*, James criticized the popular press, particularly the *Daily News*, since it displayed "the lowest levels of Philistine twaddle" (3:240). This 1888 diatribe against the profanity of the well-known newspaper was largely motivated by the 1886 and 1887 press scandals that involved serious violations of different contemporary figures' privacies, even James's own. In the summer of 1887, Mrs. Sherman, James's acquaintance who once invited him for supper, sent a trivial account of their meal to American periodicals and even forwarded the published piece to James "as if [he] should be delighted to see it" (*Henry James Letters* 3:189). Such ugly episodes elicited James's aforementioned critique of the popular press, which gradually grew into his reflection on the overall state of Anglo-America, the cultural entity that he defined as a union of England and the United States as well as on his own role in that entity's reformation (*Henry James Letters* 3:244). In a letter to his brother William, dated on October 29, 1888, James explained that he "can't look at the English and American worlds, or feel about them, any more, save as a big Anglo-Saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together . . . and that that melting together will come faster the more one takes it for granted" (3:244). The author believed that "Literature, fiction in particular, affords a magnificent arm for such taking for granted, and

one may so do an excellent work with it” (3:244). I pointed out that departing from his earlier writing agenda, focused on the issues of national descent and belonging, James decided to experiment with fluent and hybrid national identities and the elevation of public taste in his late works.

I also explained that this *jeu d’esprit* had been overseen by specialists on late James, very likely because of its brevity and the themes that he explored fully in his seminal works, and I pointed out that it deserved some critical attention.¹ For the readers of the journal who are not familiar with *The Reverberator*, this comic novel explores the relationships between Whitney, Delia, and Francie Dosson, the Bostonian family that resides in the mediocre urban Hotel de l’Univers et de Cheltenham, and their three Parisian friends: George Flack, a reporter for the American tabloid *The Reverberator*, Charles Waterlow, an American painter residing in Paris, and Gaston Probert, a descendant of the Gallicized American expatriates. Since the Dossons enjoy popular American tabloids, they quickly befriend George Flack, whose job is to collect and reveal gossips about the rich and the famous. When Flack takes the Dossons to Waterlow’s studio so that the aspiring impressionist painter could see Francie and decide whether she would be a proper model for a portrait, the family meets Probert, Waterlow’s close friend, who gradually falls in love with Francie even though he knows that his Gallicized family, keen on titles, formal etiquette, and traditions will not approve of the liberal, informal, and constantly moving Dossons. The crucial problem arises when Flack, whose love for Francie is unrequited since she will marry Probert, publishes the rumors about Probert’s family that Francie has naively conveyed to him. Even though Probert’s family is devastated, his love for Francie and for the Dossons’ flexibility and hybridity prevails.

Step Two: Establishing the Frame/Stance

After informing the class about the cultural climate in which the novel was published and influential criticism on James’s late works, I announced that the frame or stance that the class should bear in mind while reading the novel would be its recovery in a way that would provide future readers with an idea on how James promoted national fluidity and hybridity in the novel and to what extent he succeeded in criticizing profanity in Anglo-American popular culture. I explained that when trying to recover any literary text or make a fresh argument on it, we would have to answer some of the significant cultural questions that connected that text with the author’s larger oeuvre or culture of the day. Therefore, I assigned the following tasks to the groups, expecting that they would concentrate on them while and upon reading the novel: the first two teams were expected to examine James’s portrayal of the Dossons and the hotel, the next two were supposed to focus on James’s rendering of the Proberts and their residences, and the last two were asked to think about the ending of the novel and the ideological closure

¹For instance, in her book *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation*, Sara Blair cogently argues that James’s late engagement with the theater, drama, and theatrical novel, primarily through the publications of *The Tragic Muse* (1888,1891) and *Guy Domville* (1895), testifies to his culture-regenerating efforts, but she does not mention *The Reverberator* in her impressive study.

proposed in it. Of course, all the teams were welcome to discuss Flack and Waterlow in connection with the assigned prompts since these two characters permeate both communities with the intention to regroup them. What I wanted them to do was mark the passages that deal with these prompts, think about how those passages relate to the frame, and eventually share their observations with the other members of their teams.

Step Three: Discussion of Observations

During the following class period, we discussed the work done over the weekend. The first two groups noticed that James's fluid and hybrid community anchors and develops in the Hotel de l'Univers et de Cheltenham and initially consists of the Dossons only. These teams observed that the Dossons are portrayed as suitable occupants of the urban hotel of mediocre quality. As a backup, they used the narrator's voice:

The reading-room of the Hotel de l'Univers et de Cheltenham was none too ample, and had seemed to Mr. Dosson from the first to consist principally of a highly-polished floor. . . . It was composed further, to his perception, of a table with a green velvet cloth, of a fireplace with a great deal of fringe and no fire, of a window with a great deal of curtain and no light, and of the *Figaro*, which he couldn't read, and the New York *Herald*, which he had already read. (1)

They noted that the quoted passage portrays the reading room as clean and shiny but not luxurious, and as a common space that attends to the domestic and the foreign visitors alike through the magazines in French and English.

They further reflected on how the space and the Dossons mirror each other. Just like hotels are transitory spaces, Mr. Dosson gives the impression that he is an individual in a constant state of moving, passing by, and going to: "he had an impermanent transitory air, an aspect of weary yet patient non-arrival, even when he sat" (5). They observed that even though the Dossons enjoy traveling, they prefer hotels to private apartments since the former host a great number of people and provide opportunities for socialization. Again, they relied on the narrator's voice for the backup: "they expected to finish the winter in Paris, but had not taken independent apartments, for they had an idea that when you lived that way it was grand but lonely—you didn't meet people on the staircase" (84). They noted that though private rentals would be cozier than hotels, they would not offer the American family the opportunities to enlarge their cosmopolitan community.

These two groups agreed that the description of Delia Dosson reflects certain aspects of the urban hotel as well. They underlined the passage that depicts Delia's clothing style and posture as follows: "Elegance indeed had not been her natural portion, and the Bon Marche and other establishments had to make up for that. . . . She always looked the same; all the contrivances of Paris couldn't fill out that blank, and she held them, for herself, in no manner of esteem" (12). They observed that just like the hotel in which she currently resides, Delia is not elegant and has to use accessories to make herself more appealing. Similar to the standardized

hotel rooms, Delia gives the impression that her appearance is always the same. They noticed that the narrator's portrayal of Delia's countenance evokes the image of hotel conference salons: "It was a plain clean round pattern face, marked for recognition among so many only perhaps by a small figure, the sprig on a china plate, that might have denoted deep obstinacy; and yet, with its settled smoothness, it was neither stupid nor hard. It was as calm as a room kept dusted and aired for candid earnest occasions, the meeting of unanimous committees and the discussion of flourishing businesses" (12). Just like conference rooms, Delia's face was of mediocre beauty, but it provided a sense of warmth and tranquility. However, they noted that unlike her sister, Francie is very conspicuous. In the narrator's words, "The girl was exceedingly, extraordinarily pretty, all exempt from traceable likeness to her sister; and there was a brightness in her—a still and scattered radiance—which was quite distinct from what is called animation" (16-17). They concluded that reminiscent of the hotel chandeliers, Francie irradiates a special beauty and light, giving a unique touch to the hotel hallways and banquet rooms.

The two teams assigned to focus on the Proberts and their habitations came up with the following observations. Unlike the Dossons, who try to make a home in every single hotel in which they reside for a season or even longer, the Proberts have lived in their residences in Paris for a long time. While Mr. Dosson does not like collecting objects, Gaston's father is particularly keen on collecting books, periodicals, and antiques that deal with, discuss, or reflect a sense of the past and tradition. The reader realizes that Gaston's "family however had been so completely Gallicized that the affairs of each member of it were the affairs of all the rest, and his father, his sisters and his brothers-in-law had not yet begun sufficiently to regard this scheme as their own for him to feel it substantially his. It was a family in which there was no individual but only a collective property" (41). Gaston's family members are tightly connected with each other, bound by common sacred traditions and possessions, and almost tribal in their lack of permeability. Gaston is always aware of his dual identity—his American ancestry and his French destiny. In order to back this up, the members of these two teams referred to the narrator: "The young man therefore, between two stools, had no clear sitting-place: he wanted to be as American as he could and yet not less French than he was; he was afraid to give up the little that he was and find that what he might be was less. . . . At the same time he thought himself sure that the only way to know how it feels to be an American is to try it, *and he had had many a purpose of making the pious pilgrimage*" (41, my italics). I interferred here and underlined that James's language indicates that Gaston's forthcoming decision to propose to Francie, make his family accept the Dossons or at least tolerate their presence, and finally forgive Francie her "transgression" and marry her despite his family's anger, is a unique rite of passage: Gaston begins a pilgrimage through the world of the fluid Americans in order to build his own fluid identity, liberating himself from the Proberts' restrictive Gallicism.

The last two groups, which were supposed to think about the closing pages of the novel, came up with the following observations. The end of the novel celebrates freedom of choice, hybridity, and movement. The groups observed that the catalyst of Gaston's decision to go back to Francie is Waterlow, who encourages Gaston as follows: "Don't you see that she's really of the softest finest material that breathes, that she's a perfect flower of plasticity, that everything

you may have an apprehension about will drop away from her like the dead leaves from a rose and that you may make of her any perfect and enchanting thing you yourself have the wit to conceive?" (206). I interfered here and explained that James's language in the passage highlights Francie's beauty and chameleonic flexibility, her openness to growth and development, her recycling (of the found Tauchnitz editions in hotel lobbies) and passing (them) on, and her spreading of the mesmerizing light wherever she goes. The groups further noted that after Gaston joins the Dossons, they decide to move on together, although even at the moment of their departure, "they were even yet not at all clear as to where they were going" (212). The reader can presume that the travelers will temporarily settle in a different place and in a new hotel. Even though the Dossons are not sophisticated intellectuals and have the habit of reading the popular press, they are the winners in the social game portrayed in the novel because their warmth, sincerity, openness to different cultures, and acceptance of others, including the Proberts and Flack, make them appealing to both the author and the readers.

Step Four: Transmediation

After we finished the discussion, I wanted them to pause for several minutes, think about the transmediation of the novel, and discuss it briefly within the groups. What media of expression would be appropriate for adapting this novel and presenting it to the audience? I hoped that considering other genres for the conveyance of the same messages would help them think beyond the box and come up with working hypotheses that would play with the themes of the novel and visual or theatrical techniques that James used. Their ideas were amazing. Some groups suggested that we should create comics based on the novel since James's language is humorous, his observations about human behavior witty, and his casting of characters reminiscent of caricatures. I suggested here that the characters' ways of dressing, facial features, and mannerisms should be emphasized in the comics since that would elicit laughter from the readers and help them get James's messages about the state of popular culture. Some groups opined that this text could be rewritten as a graphic novel since the images of the spaces and even descriptions of cross-cultural encounters could be easily illustrated in shapes and colors and thus help the reader visualize different interiors and the characters' interactions. The other groups suggested that we should experiment with rewriting the novel as a script and casting it as a play, with the narrator who would insert James's metacommentary in the scenes from time to time.

By the time we finished discussing different options for transmediation, the class period had almost drawn to a close. I used the last couple of minutes to advise them to review their notes at home and bring electronic devices to the class on Thursday so that we could look for critical studies of the novel in the library databases and eventually generate potential thesis statements.

Step Five: Research and Brainstorming Thesis Statements

During the following class period, we looked for the scholarly works on this novel through the databases available on the university libraries' *EBSCOhost* list, and we found very few articles. We carefully read and discussed the abstracts, realizing that scholars had mostly written about James's criticism of people's willingness to share their privacy with journalists (Rubery) and about the hotel as a "disposable space" (Moore). We had to determine what claims

we could make that would open new windows of understanding this under-researched novel to prospective readers. Since envisioning the novel as comics in our transmediation activity helped us think about humor in new ways, a few groups opined that we could argue that James's humorous style, brevity, and presentation of characters as caricatures help him dispatch cultural criticism effectively to a wide audience, mocking the unscrupulous practice of tabloids to quickly disseminate offensive articles about people's private lives. Bearing in mind James's transatlantic mission and the possibility of dramatic adaptation of the novel, a few groups suggested that we argue that through the multicultural community residing in the hotel and through the hotel as a transient space, James promotes the dissemination of fluidity and hybridity and criticizes national isolationism. I suggested that they should look for Victor Turner's book *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, in which he defines the concept of "ideological communitas," or a formation that exists within a social structure but provides "the optimal conditions" for the cherishing and practicing of certain ideals and habits (169). So, together we were able to generate a few tentative thesis statements in class, and I was happy to offer the students some suggestions for further research.

My overall impression is that this model of interactive teaching helped students break down the scary process of writing an argumentative research paper into smaller segments and made it easier for them to complete the assignment. Through the combination of individual and collaborative work, homework and in-class activities, researching and analyzing some of the research in class, and brainstorming potential thesis statements within groups, students were able to engage more fully in every step of the process, with more enjoyment and less anxiety. Providing them with the frame/stance helped them think about the larger implications of the issues depicted in the novel and connect their close reading of the text with the author's motives and intentions. The transmediation activity stimulated provocative arguments on Jamesian aesthetics. By the time we finished work that week, they had been better equipped with the critical reading and research methods and more confident about making arguments that have the potential to open new doors of understanding the novel to its future audiences.

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