

Reading Journal for “One, Two, Three,” by Richard A. Lanham

The title of Lanham’s article refers to three questions he poses: (1) What is the relationship between teaching literature and teaching composition? (2) Should English departments take an interest in teaching composition? (3) How does question one relate to question two? To define Lanham’s approach, Lanham suggests the only practical way to save literature studies is to incorporate composition education. First, Lanham presents the problem: the American system of public education has broken down. Instead of pursuing education, people watch 50 hours of television per week. He writes, “College students read and write like high-school sophomores” (25). This article was from 1983, but I doubt he views the situation any more positively today. From an educator’s perspective, he explains why English departments want to teach literature but not composition. Teaching literature is self-renewing. Teaching composition is repetitive and causes burnout. Teaching composition also leads to administration, as composition requires liaison and planning, as opposed to teaching literature. If English departments do not embrace teaching composition, however, they risk becoming irrelevant to the modern humanist curriculum. Lanham suggest by incorporating composition into the English department, they will be able to put literary studies back into its place at the heart of the humanist curriculum. With that in mind, I considered composition assignments from my literature classes that I have been taking recently. I think the composition assignment that is most fitting to share with Lanham’s approach for integrating composition into literary studies would be the final I completed in my Irish Literature I class with Dr. Bucheldt. The assignment required writing a 4-6 page paper explaining authentic Irishness from three of the works we read. This composition assignment allowed me to argue that authentic Irishness is measured by the hospitality one shows to their guests. An assignment like this one allows the renewing nature of literature to shine through but it is still a practical exercise of working on effective communication.