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# Myth and Christian Reading Practice in English Teaching

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> There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth…I wish I had paid more attention to it. My list of regrets may seem unusual, but who can know that they are, really. This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it.
>
> —Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

## Introduction

In the passage above, the novelist Marilynne Robinson ponders how a particularly memorable experience might be understood as a moment from a myth, and in doing so she understands the experience as worth attending to. That is, she ascribes mythic qualities to experiences of special—and for the avowedly Calvinist Robinson, sacred—significance in the daily goings-on of our worlds. The poet Alison Rollins (2017), meanwhile, describes her work as that of "a finch weaving myth into a nested crown of logic", taking up myth in order to destabilize the certainties by which we operate on a day-to-day basis. In this chapter I identify myths which hold special significance in English classrooms, and, in doing so, weave them into the otherwise conventional, well-nested, even imperial logics of English as a school subject. As such, I'm interested in the questions: What are the myths—understood as narratives that have specific functions in our communities—that shape curricula and practices in English classrooms? Where might these myths come from, and more importantly, where do they take us? What do they do? What do they make possible (and not) in the daily work of teaching and learning English? I argue that a renewed interest in the myths of English as a school subject may help us

"not to inquire into the operations of nature" but instead to "draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community" (Frye, 1990, p. 55). In particular I identify two myths which I feel have come to shape the community of English teaching: one associated with language and its functions, and another with the teaching of grammar. Viewing these concepts as myths might be used as a rebuttal, I think, to a kind of textual fundamentalism or literalism championed by the Common Core standards and other current education reform efforts in the US, modes of reading that have their roots in particular Christian reading practices that need more attention. Thinking through and with myth may help educators respond to and resist the narrowing of English pedagogy and curriculum pushed by much current education reform.

## Framing Myth

In taking up notions of myth, I draw on the work of literary critic Northrup Frye (1990), who summarizes his view of myth as:

> primarily a mythos, a story, a narrative, a plot, or in general the sequential ordering of words…with a specific social function…myths grow out of a specific society and transmit a cultural heritage of shared allusion. We may call the myth a verbal *temenos*, a circle drawn around a sacred or numinous area. (p. 238)

Importantly, I (and Frye) do not invoke myth and ascribe it to certain contexts (i.e. English teaching) in order to falsify or delegitimize the work being done there (as in the colloquial usage, "Oh, that's just a myth"). Rather I understand really all contexts discursively, as made up of highly trafficked myths of varying social import. While these myths emerge from and overlap with many traditions, both religious and secular, Frye's theorizing is especially concerned with Biblical notions of myth. For him myths "are the stories that tell a society what is important for it

to knoy. They thus become sacred…and form part of what the Biblical tradition calls revelation." (p. 50-51). The myths I'm interested in with respect to English teaching, particularly in the U.S., reflect approaches to reading of a particular literalist Christian nature; I argue they need to be understood as such (as a part of that particular tradition) so that they can be best addressed. Seeking out, identifying, and critiquing English teaching as myth offers a conceptual intervention in the status quo: myths are narratives with histories that persist and continue into the present, and it's this continuation that makes them generative. Barthes (2013) explains as much, arguing that myths have a social history, and are in that sense unnatural, though they operate by naturalizing. Identifying and considering myth offers a form of critique that exposes the implicit, the assumed, the essential, the normal or the natural in the ways we've come to think of teaching English—myths I'll argue are part of the historic and ongoing Christian privilege (Burke & Segall, 2017) in U.S. schooling—as rather unnatural, socially conditioned, and historically produced.

What the term 'myth' importantly offers that is not accomplished by using words like 'assumption' or 'discourse', is that it frames English teaching in terms of larger narratives which hold especial importance to a community, as part of a broader cosmology that spans past, present, and future. Frye (2006) identifies two characteristics of myths which distinguish them from other narratives: (1) myths relate to one another and take place as part of a larger mythology; (2) they delineate and refer to a specific segment of culture, distinguishing it from others. (p. 52). In what follows, I'll make a case that the relation between the two myths I identify are reflective of a particular set of Christian reading practices; and further, that these myths outline major areas of the field of English teaching.

My work in this chapter, then, emerges from and contributes to a body of "resacralizing scholarship" (Davie, 2010; Wexler, 2013) that "grapples with the existence (reemergence if you like) of the religious in supposedly secular spaces" (Burke & Segall, 2015, p. 87). Their work points to the founding Protestant myth of English as a subject in U.S. schools: that literacy, and its teaching, is necessary for children's salvation, as they need to be able to personally encounter Jesus in the Bible through reading (Brass, 2011) . This myth serves as a starting point for a larger consideration of the ways Christianity broadly and Protestantism in particular has historically shaped and continues to shape American public schooling. I'll argue, then, that, following Burke and Segall (2017), the myths of English teaching are of a piece with reading practices of a particularly Christian nature—they treat language and grammar in fundamentally Christian ways[1]. I argue these myths engender what Burke and Segall have identified as Christian reading practices that might be thought otherwise.

Yet English teaching and the research which undergirds it has historically sought to demystify (and demythify) the field, positioning its relation to myth antagonistically. The work of Goody & Watt (1963) provides an example here. Their anthropological study looking at the history of the development of literacy sought to assert what's "intrinsic in human

[1] I do this bearing in mind that this will inevitably require a conflation of the plurality of Christian traditions, and in that sense opens my argument to critique along those lines. Point taken. Following Appiah (2018), it may be that my target here should be less Christianity writ large and more specifically fundamentalism. He argues that fundamentalism—or alternatively, attending to the particular reading practices of sacred texts, literalism—constitutes the outlier rather than the center of the Christian tradition. By centering critique on fundamentalism particularly, it becomes possible to untether the argument from Christianity singularly, as fundamentalism cuts across traditions (e.g., fundamentalist Islam, Judaism, Hinduism etc.)

I do not want to do this. To my mind, it makes more sense here to center Christianity and Christian reading practice in my discussion of myth, given the historical and contemporary privilege (Burke & Segall, 2017) of Christianity in U.S. Schools; in that sense this might be read in part as a critique of the dominant myths trafficked there. But more specifically, I hew close to the Christian following my understanding of the Christian history of subject area English in the U.S., where Protestant notions of reading shaped the purposes of the content from the start. I do attempt, at this chapter's conclusion, to nuance my understanding of myth and particularly Christian myths in these contexts in ways that move beyond critique; doubtless other chapters in this volume also present alternative visions for ways we might complicate our understandings of Christianities in schooling.

communication" (p. 306). That purpose extends an older project, dating as early as Hinsdale's (1897) seminal study, whose purpose was to ground the teaching of reading and writing in the fundamental facts of human nature. Goody & Watt (1963) describe their own work as "the replacement of myth with history; …*historia* in the Greek sense, meaning "inquiry," can be viewed much more broadly as an attempt to determine reality in every area of human concern." (p. 326) The scope and nature of their framing of what reading, writing, and the teaching of both can do, then, problematizes the uncertainty of myth as a way of thinking about literacy[2].

In this vein, I embrace theoretical considerations of myth in English teaching research. Additionally, I draw from Burke and Segall's (2017) notions of Christian reading practices as undergirding standardized approaches to English curriculum in order to situate these myths within the present moment in U.S. schools.

It's probably useful then to quickly delineate what I'm interested in when I think about myths in the context of the field of English teaching today, bearing in mind that any such cordoning off is undoubtedly fraught with problematic limitations and conspicuous exclusions. My analysis focuses on myths of linguistic and grammatical instruction, which cut across the traditional domains of English teaching (reading, writing, speaking) as well as recent curricular expansions towards media literacy, and new and multi-literacies (New London Group, 1996). While there are doubtless other myths we might consider, I believe these particular areas have done much to occupy conversation in English teaching and scholarship, and thus are worth working through, through the lens of myth, for how they might help us understand where the field has been and where it may yet go.

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[2] One way of looking at Goody & Watt's work, ironically, is that in undermining some kind of mythic understanding of literacy, they're also perpetuating their own kind of myth (one rooted in Christianity): the Great Divide myth (though in this case they're dressing up the myth in new clothes, using "literate/illiterate" instead of "civilized/uncivilized). See the work of Graff (1991) for a further consideration of this.

## Identifying and Weaving Myths into English Teaching

In the sections that follow I turn to two specific myths I identify in prominent understandings of English teaching; in doing so I weave them into these understandings of English teaching as myths, reading them mythically as narratives that serve social functions in the communities of English teaching and scholarship. Such narratives, understood as myths, come to be rendered uncertain, and thus might yet be thought or interpreted differently. I do this work so that I might eventually consider in the section that follows how both myths are reflective of particular fundamentalist Christian reading practices, which operate to narrow engagement with reading and which, again, might be thought helpfully otherwise.

### The Language Myth

The first myth I'll consider is a language myth: that *language functions as a conduit for meaning, transmitting a message from A to B intact*. Understanding this notion through a lensing of myth provides a conceptual frame which may help scholars in English Education engage and reckon with what is by now a very old problem in English. The problem of the instability of language, which prompted the linguistic turn in philosophy, literary criticism and theory, engages the notion that "there is nothing outside text" (Derrida, 2016, p. 158) and thus that we must work with/in language despite its fundamental shortcomings. Poststructural scholars like Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, and Foucault took seriously the idea that language may never be depended upon as a fixed, stable, and certain medium for transmitting meaning. For them, rather, "it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say" (Foucault, 1994, p. 9); there is no "pure signified" (Derrida, 1997, p. 159) that lies "behind" or "beyond" words.

Language after this turn is understood as inherently suspect and uncertain. Yet we don't necessarily need myth here in order to talk about the problem of language. What I understand myth offering to this conversation, that is different from, say, "discourse", is a way of thinking about how the narrative that language *works* has been naturalized, has become a narrative of peculiar (I'll argue, religious) significance to the community of English teaching writ large. That is, language acquires a sacred quality which can make it difficult to doubt—words being, well, the Word. This offers an explanation for why this language myth persists despite the linguistic turn which undermines it: (1) it itself undergirds the foundation of English teaching which makes the work as we understand it possible; (2) it is also part of a larger mythology that constitutes the subject. Thus we might extrapolate from that language myth other myths: for example, the myth that a literary text has a single meaning that students should get out of it, one implicit in much of the framing of, and emphasis on, particular kinds of close reading in the Common Core standards. Pointing out that language operates as a myth in this way is hardly novel, I know; what may be novel are the implications of seeing the language myth *as myth*: namely, that the myth persists in order to serve the interests of a certain community (English teachers, scholars, and teacher educators, i.e., all of us) who necessarily depend on language to do our work. Understood as mythical narrative, this language myth might yet be thought otherwise.

The alternative is to decouple language from this myth, understanding it as something other than working to transmit meaning intact and with certainty. For Toni Morrison (1993), the impulse that language can be mastered is the heart of the problem:

> Sexist language, racist language, *theistic* [emphasis added] language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas…Language can never "pin down" slavery,

genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.

In other words, for Morrison a critical approach to language embraces its radical uncertainty, this less an intellectual move than an ethical one. Bingham (2011) helps here, suggesting a move towards the poetic as a way of responding to the problem of language. He notes in envisioning two educational ideas for the the future (new myths, perhaps) that it is generally assumed in schools that language works on the 'sender-receiver model', conveying meaning from one student to another. Following from this, the educator's job is to deliver curriculum to the student through language. This reflects a "deep belief in the organization  and delivery of knowledge—in the form of curriculum, through the medium of language." (p. 515). It is to that organization and delivery of knowledge through language that I turn next, considering how this language myth inheres within grammar myth as part of a larger mythology of English teaching.

**The Grammar Myth**

I found it surprisingly hard to identify one particular myth with respect to grammar, which has been so thoroughly worked over in its controversy over the years at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in the US and elsewhere. As Doniger (2003) describes, controversy over the harm of grammar has raged for more than five decades now; he notes the persistent influence of the 1985 NCTE resolution *against* the teaching of grammar in particular as emblematic of the grammar stance "in control" (p. 101). Much has been said, for example, about racist myths surrounding the treatment of Black language in ELA curricula and instruction (e.g., Smitherman, 1993; Baker-Bell, 2013). For my purposes here, I'll use Dunn & Lindblom's (2003) framework to elucidate a larger myth about grammar, whichs consists of a series of

statements that I understand as comprising that larger myth.[3] Their list of grammar myths in English teaching is as follows:

1. Students who make grammar errors are lazy (p. 44)
2. Students need to know grammar rules before they can break them (p. 44)
3. Teachers tell student writers what they're doing wrong so that the students will write better in the future (p. 45)
4. If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing will be clearer (p. 45)
5. If students are taught to write according to the rules, their writing may come across as more educated (p. 45)
6. Effective writers follow the rules (p. 46)
7. Students need grammar rules to learn standard English. (p. 46)

I understand these statements as part of a larger myth about grammar: that it is essential to English teaching, foundational, and, in-and-of itself, harmless. Yet many have argued in the vein of Crowley and Hawhee (1999) that grammatical "usage rules are the conventions of written English that allow Americans to discriminate against one another" (283). While an important distinction needs to be made between descriptive and prescriptive grammar, the fact remains that there is power and consequence in the descriptions we choose to give (and not), and of course in who gives them, and to whom. It's easy to see, then, following Crowley and Hawhee and those critics how, if the statements above are considered part of such a myth, that grammar and its instruction might function to circumscribe a community, excluding those who don't conform and justifying discrimination against them, all the while naturalizing the rules in such a way as to

[3] Dunn & Lindblom nicely rebut each of these statements in their piece.

make them seem apolitical, natural, etc.—sacred, even.[4] Seeing grammar as myth allows us to understand it as invested in guiding, producing and maintaining a particular community, and as yielding an uncertain narrative that might be critiqued and (re)written differently. In other words, we might take up myth in responding to Smitherman's (1997) question of the continued prejudices of grammar instruction: "At this late stage in history, how is it that people are still missing the beat on Black Language?" (p. 28). Frye's (2006) lensing of myth helps to understand how grammatical myth, "because of its sacrosanct nature, is likely to persist in a society in inorganic ways, and so come to make assertions or assumptions about the order of nature that conflict with what the actual observation of that order suggests" (Frye, 2006, p. 56). That is, looking at grammar-as-myth in the particular way I'm doing here offers one way of explaining the persistence of problematic grammatical instruction despite decades of scholarship arguing otherwise. It helps to see how, in spite of so much conflicting actual observation in the daily work of teaching, teachers might cling to and perpetuate the notion that students must first, for example, "learn the rules of grammar before they can break them."[5]

**English Myths as Christian Reading Practice**

Following from Frye's (1964) assertion that the Bible is "the most complete form of the myth that underlies Western culture" (p. 110), Burke & Segall (2017) argue that "the very essence of standardized testing requires a curriculum based on [Biblical] testament (and vice versa), and both necessitate a form of reading that accepts rather than challenges and that

[4] Intriguingly, Lysicott (2014), in a popular TED talk, offers a rebuke of racism in grammar instruction and particularly how it comes to problematically shape discourses around the notion of "being articulate". In speaking back to language prejudice, Lysicott appeals to Biblical myths as the one true arbiter of linguistic correctness: "'Cause the only God of language is the one recorded in the Genesis of this world saying 'It is good'". This insight points to the ways myth, even Christian myths of the type I critique here, might operate affirmatively to humanize English instruction towards equity and justice. More on the affirmative promise of myth at the conclusion of this chapter.

[5] A line I heard over and over again in my own experience as a student in English classrooms, and later from my colleagues as a teacher in secondary English departments.

requires students to memorize rather than think, interpret, and question." (p. 59) This particular notion of Christian, Biblical reading, and its attendant requirement of literalism—which opposes the multiplicity and ambiguity of interpretation—is very much made possible by the two myths I've outlined. That is, to read the Bible literally in this vein requires a belief that language transmits meaning intact through stable grammatical structures that can (and should) be taught, so that that meaning can be received. Thus these myths position readers as particular types of readers; they encourage uncritical reading practices. They do not encourage critical readings of texts, sacred or otherwise. When we approach sacred texts as critical readers, Gopnik (2018) argues:

> rather than as worshippers, we gain much, but we lose much, too. We gain the freedom freedom to read and roam for pleasure. But we forget at our peril that, through most of their history, these have been not books, to be appreciated, but truths, to be obeyed.

That is, assuming langauge and grammar as mythical in the ways noted above is in keeping with a Christian literalist orientation toward reading, with obedience to the words—and their Truth—being very much the point. Such an orientation towards reading, in turn, perpetuates and give way to these language and grammar myths. It depends on an unwavering faith that language can hold up, that we know what its meaning is and can express it in and through words and the capital W-Word. Through this lens, reading in these ways may require, disciplinarily, an enculturation into the structures (grammars) that are the forms that W/word has taken and will take, accepting that "these are the rules, and they must be learned, before anything else can be done" rather than challenging them.

Understanding these myths as *myths*, then, can allow for other ways of reading and being in English classrooms, but only if we're willing to

> face the presence of religion [and myth]—wanted or not—in our educational thinking and practice and critically explore its roots, its ensuing curricular and pedagogical ramifications…finding ways to use that knowledge to engender an education that fosters autonomy and criticality among students rather than docility, acceptance, and compliance (Segall & Burke, 2013, p. 319).

Ironically, Segall & Burke note that the Bible's postmodern structure—as a collection of fragmented texts & voices across space & time, often in conflict, requiring hermeneutical intervention—actually resists the particular Christian notion of reading I've identified and mapped onto and with these myths. In that, it might, "([they] emphasize 'might') have a better chance at changing our reading habits in educational contexts more broadly, positioning students to engender more unruly, deconstructive, and imaginable readings that challenge the word and the world." (p. 327) And importantly, there are other reading traditions that might be drawn upon (e.g., the Midrashic tradition) or even Biblical forms (e.g. psalms, parables) which center interpretation, multiplicities of meanings, and the uncertainty of texts in ways lending themselves to more critical, less certain readings. Might it be, then, that considering these myths and the ways they map onto, for example, the CCSS (among other forms of standardization), could open up new and useful ways of reading and teaching English? Going forward, more useful work could illuminate in greater nuance the embedded narratives and historical/social development of curricula so that we might better make mythical sense of the narratives embedded in secondary English teaching as we know it today.

## Conclusions: Reading Myth Affirmatively

What I've offered throughout this chapter is a reading of myth as critique—as Christian narratives which in their power delimit possibility for reading and teaching English differently.

In that sense the work is part of a tradition of critical pedagogy which exposes the problematic nature of myths at work, perhaps best exemplified in Freire's assertion that a "pedagogy of domination mythologizes reality; the pedagogy of liberation demythologizes it" (p. 64). But it's also worth noting how myths are not inherently problematic, but rather powerful—dangerous (Foucault, 1983)—and how power also operates affirmatively, to make possible what otherwise might not be. While critical treatements of myth have proven popular (and valuable), some scholars have taken up myth in an affirmative sense (e.g., Doll, 2011; Grumet, 1988). For them, a myth is understood as "a disclosure of possible worlds" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 410) and serves the imagination, while simultaneously resisting certainty, as any mythic form of teaching deconstructs through the very language one uses to express the myth. Further work, then, might theorize the role myth, and particularly Christian myth, plays in affirmatively shaping teaching English teaching practice, in particular in the U.S. given the historical and continued privilege of Christianity (Burke & Segall, 2017).

As noted above, teacher-scholars like Lysicott draw upon Christian myths not to oppress or delude but rather to liberate. Such myths, no doubt, do much to delineate possibilities for contemporary critical English teaching towards justice, of the type Morrell (2015) understands as the work of developing powerful readers, critical writers, oral historians, and savvy consumers and producers of media. What would it mean, then, to expand our sense of myth, and Christian myth in particular, in considering reading practices in English classrooms? How might it help if we were to understand the Bible, drawing on the historical work of Beal (2011), as a "library of questions" instead of a "book of answers"? How might we avoid taking an "undesirable tone of moral certainty in critiquing the moral certainties" of particular Biblical literacy practices? (Juzwik, 2014, p. 346). Or, how could religious/Christian notions of justice disclose new

possibilities for envisioning more just English teaching? The trajectory of these questions makes clear that myth opens up new possibilities for teaching and writing—and living—in and through and with English. In the passage which opens this chapter, Robinson's myth provides language with which to see beauty in the ordinary work of life, that we better might attend to it. A consideration of the myths that shape English as a school subject, both critically and affirmatively, help us better see and render the beauty in our daily work. As I hope this chapter makes plain, such myths will "still be there whether there is…any 'truth' in [them] or not" (Frye, p. 50). They deserve all the attention we can give them.

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