Anthony J. Scimone

Reading Poetry for Critical Reflection on Consumer Behavior

Scimone draws on poems by Piercy, Wilbur, and Nemerov to help young adults unpack social issues of consumption.

> [W]hen people viewed images associated with strong brands—the iPod, the Harley-Davidson, the Ferrari and others—their brains registered the exact same patterns of activity as they did when they viewed the religious images. Bottom line, there was no discernable difference between the way the subjects' brains reacted to powerful brands and the way they reacted to religious icons and figures.
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> —*Martin Lindstrom,* Buyology: Truth and Lies about Why We Buy

I learned long ago that any discussion of consumerism with high school students should begin with an admission of my complicity. I use a cell phone daily; drive to school in a late model, non-hybrid car; and watch my DVDs on a flat-screen television. Although adolescents may be a favorite target of modern marketers, the impulse to buy isn't an adolescent issue, and any reflection on their role as consumers isn't likely to go far if it begins with a guilt trip. We are all in this together both as victims and perpetrators. Like many other dimensions of everyday life, our need to satisfy ourselves with stuff derives from deep impulses and responds to both obvious and subtle images. Ultimately, it isn't the commodities we buy so much as the behaviors we exhibit that are worth critical examination. What better way, then, to understand this phenomenon than to look to poetry, where we find not only observations on culture and expressions of literary craft but also discoveries of self.

Barbie and the Consumption of Beauty

Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll" has long been a staple of American literature classes. In the poem, published in 1973, a young girl is given a Barbie doll and soon learns that as a real girl, she won't lead quite the carefree and charmed life that her doll helps her to expect. Barbie herself, that perennial icon of unattainable and artificial female glamour, becomes eligible for an AARP card this year, so it's a perfect occasion to have students consider how she still affects 21st-century girls. I begin our discussion with imagery of the first four lines of the poem, asking the class to think about the gifts to the "girlchild" of the poem,

> . . . born as usual
> and presented dolls that did pee-pee
> and miniature GE stoves and irons
> and wee lipstick the color of cherry candy. (1–4)

Although students usually have plenty to say about this poem, I have the class write in journals before asking for comments. My first questions are always about the bargain that gets struck early in

the poem with the initial introduction of consumer goods. What effect do those earliest purchases have on the doomed girl who is later made to feel apologetic for "a fat nose on thick legs" (11)? And at what real cost does she acquire the transformations achieved by learning to "exercise, diet, smile, and wheedle" (14)?

Students are quite adept at recognizing how the seeds of insecurity are sown early in life. That desire to alter who we are to better approximate some artificial notion of beauty or manliness, sensuality or virility, is something most of us experience at some point. However, students struggle a bit more when I ask them who is to blame: the parents who made those first purchases; the catty classmate who remarked about the girl's appearance; perhaps the "magic of puberty" (5) that makes us all so self-conscious and self-critical; or the society that mutters "Doesn't she look pretty?"(23) once the sacrifice of identity for perfection has been accomplished?

Piercy's final lines "Consummation at last, / To every woman a happy ending" (24–25) reiterate this question by using a word with so many possible meanings. I make sure my students consider all of them: completion, perfection, fulfillment, an ultimate end, the consummating of a marriage through sexual union, the consummation of a contract by mutual signature, death. And there are other connotations as well: the act of being devoured, the purchase of a consumer, the way in which we are consumed or self-obsessed with image. Discussions of "Barbie Doll" begin with metaphor, but they evolve into heated debates about societal expectations, sexist attitudes, and pervasive media influence. I enjoy the fact that those discussions almost never go in a predictable direction, and I do my best to unsettle students who arrive at too pat an answer.

One way to do this is to have them consider what marketers themselves think: "A brand is not a name or a logo or a color scheme or a design layout or a tag line or an advertising theme. A brand lives in the customer's perception. A brand is not what the marketer says it is; it's what the customer thinks it is. A brand begins and ends with the customer, and most important to the customer's perception is the customer experience" (Newell and Godin 112). Critical reading of the world around us works best when it's accompanied by a critical reading of self, and Piercy's poetry is especially effective at speaking directly to women to enroll them in the "we" of the poem (Moramaco and Sullivan 174). My real objective isn't simply to have students point an accusatory finger at an image-pedaling media, but to look inward with new questions. How vulnerable are we to the suggestions of others? To what degree are we unwitting conspirators with the brand makers? What slogans, jingles, and logos are at work in your consciousness? Is our standard of how we want to look our own conception or someone else's? How do we willingly comply with marketers' intentions?

Consuming "Perfection"

Richard Wilbur's "Playboy" is a perfect companion piece to Barbie. In the poem a stock boy on his lunch break is engrossed by a photograph of a naked woman in a magazine. It's a toss-up as to who is more comic, the boy who "studies like a sage / The subject matter of one glossy page" (lines 2–3) or the woman who kneels in a "supple pose" (13), seeming to offer herself up to the viewer's "inexorable will" (28). Once again, the false perfection of "Barbie Doll" has found its target market with "her floodlit skin, so sleek and warm / And yet so strangely uniform" (22–23). Reading Wilbur's poem immediately after Piercy's, students are well-primed for the theme of consumerism; they quickly point out the irony of having this boy consume both a sandwich and a distorted view of women simultaneously.

Just as "Barbie Doll" is suited to a study of extended metaphor, "Playboy" is ideal for an examination of poetic diction or word choice. I ask students to sit in groups of three or four to examine the details of the photograph in the poem as if they were marketers. Most will point to the fact that she looks as if she has "stumbled" (11) onto the scene, suggesting an aura of innocent surprise, or that the pink wallpaper is intended to be as seductive as the "pink and white nightie" of "Barbie Doll" (22). They see the humor in the choice of props, the artificial red rose, for example, which would "shrivel up a moth" (19). However, the comedy is diminished a bit when they notice that by having the girl kneel in an alcove, the photographer has knowingly juxtaposed the erotic with our subconscious image of the Virgin Mary at prayer, a connection reinforced later in the poem by the reference to "her body's grace" (19).

I use "Playboy" knowing that it can cause some discomfort to the young men in class who may identify with the character of the poem, but they have to recognize that it isn't just Barbie aficionados who are image consumers. In spite of the disarming and lighthearted sarcasm that characterizes the poem (Scott 53), there are serious implications. The stockroom boy surreptitiously reading his *Playboy* may look "like a dunce" (1), but the objectification of women is more than a harmless reverie. Forty years since this poem was written, the invention of the Internet means the consumption of prurient fantasy is no longer confined to soft-core "skin mags" that many adolescents once regarded as a rite of passage.

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A More Complex Examination

After reading Piercy and Wilbur and reflecting on their roles as consumers, students are ready to be challenged a bit further the following day with Howard Nemerov's "Life Cycle of Common Man." The thematic connection is plain in the first half of the poem where this "average consumer of the middle class" (line 2) is described:

> Leaving behind him a lengthening trail
> Of empty bottles and bones, of broken shoes,
> Frayed collars and worn out or outgrown
> Diapers and dinnerjackets, silk ties and slickers
> (15–18)

Showing only the first 24 lines of the poem on an overhead screen, I ask students to tell me if the speaker's tone toward his subject seems critical, sympathetic, or objectively removed. They aren't usually satisfied with those choices and will also suggest sarcastic, disappointed, intellectually analytic, and more. The references to "eating, dreaming, drinking and begetting" (21) and the claim that this consumer was merely "working for the money, et cetera" (24) do little to engage their sympathy. However, at least some students seem to have "Barbie Doll" and "Playboy" still fresh in their memories and are cautious about being too hard on still another poetic character who might be a mirror of themselves.

After ten minutes or so of discussion, I'll reveal the rest of the poem and assign a journal entry asking students to reassess the consumer in light of the poem's final images. This is the hard part. Most of them struggle with the introduction of new information about the consumer, now depicted as someone who "advanced into the silence and made it verbal" (28). The poem asks "Who can tally the tale of his words?" (29), and readers attempting to do just that seem to be a bit humbled by any perspective that is too simplistic. The poem's structure suddenly takes on new importance as the revelations of the second half pull us in various directions. By drawing attention to this shift in tone, I can get students to rethink their initial impressions of the character. Despite a life of consumption and a legacy of waste, he appears more complex than the poem's opening suggests; he may even be worth our sympathy.

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When we share those journal entries, the most common debate is generally between readers who see him as a comic figure "with the ectoplastic / Cartoon's balloon of speech" (38–39) and those who are struck by the speaker's exhortation to "Consider the courage in all that" (37). Nemerov's consumer may

seem defined rather absurdly by his lifelong accumulation of commodities, but he is also words and spirit telling a "numberless tale" (42). On the one hand, he appears to be a satire of humanity's meaningless waste of the world's resources, and on the other, he seems perhaps not noble, but certainly more dignified and familiar because of "our recognizably common experiences" (Burris 196). The poem ends with this common man telling "his untold Word / Which makes the world his apple, and forces him to eat." It is an inconclusive ending to be sure, and a perfect way to bring this theme to a close. Like all of us, the subject of the poem is both producer and consumer, and for many students there is a moment of recognition. He is, in effect, us; his contradictions are ours.

From Opinion to Analysis/From Consumption to Reflection

My approach to individual poems often begins with provocative questions intended to engage students in an exchange of opinions. By beginning with verse that reflects common adolescent experiences, I can usually count on plenty of opinion. However, I'm equally pleased with the more formalist analysis that emerges during the course of those discussions. A closer examination of poetic elements certainly yields more insight, but too much emphasis can blunt the level of interest. So, for each work I target only one or two elements, shifting from imagery in "Barbie Doll" to diction or word choice in "Playboy" to speaker's tone and structure in Nemerov's work. I want students to see for themselves that these aspects of the poet's craft are a means to an end and interesting only because they operate in the service of individual perspectives and interpretations.

If there is any saving grace to the current recession, it is that it has caused many of us to look in the mirror a little more critically. We may rail against the marketing ethos, the arrogance of conspicuous consumption, and the mindless acquisition of disposable goods that eventually glut our landfills. But once the clichés have run their course, we should also recognize that it's a world in which many of us participate. That admission is as good a place as any to start the process of critical self-questioning.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION — **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

In "Varying Views of America," students analyze three poems: Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," Langston Hughes's "I, Too, Sing America," and Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of the Morning." Through this analysis, they determine the influence of perspective on individual's tone and point of view regarding the same or a similar experience. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=194