JULIE CHARLIP

A Real Class Act: Searching for Identity in the Classless Society

Through her writing in this essay, Charlip muses on her trajectory from a working class family through graduate school and thereby into “category X” in order to challenge the boundaries by which such class distinctions are made. Thus, for example, she examines her family’s extended history from wealthy bootleggers to small business owners to question how accurately the label “working class” functions to define their complicated socioeconomic position. This becomes a great definitional essay because it is difficult to pinpoint any one simple meaning for the term “class,” yet by working through the essay students derive a complex understanding of the way class works not only as an economic structure but also as one that influences values, tastes, levels of entitlement, and so on. Because students often bring a wide range of background assumptions and experiences involving class status, this is a particularly useful demonstration of how a term in broad use can take on rich and eye-opening layers of meaning within the context of an essay. Leading brainstorming sessions before and after students read the essay can help them to organize and articulate what they already know about class and test that knowledge against Charlip’s claims.

When we teach the Charlip essay, we send students after the detailed examples that expose the nuanced working of class: the Charlip family’s comfort level in restaurants; the status-conscious but nearly unfurnished house they live in; the ways in which Charlip herself both embodies and challenges the American Dream of upward mobility through education and hard work. Although Charlip uses Marx and Engels briefly at the beginning and end of the essay, and draws on a more extended reading of Paul Fussell in order to challenge the finer class divisions he proposes, these reported theories of class structure don’t come through clearly or powerfully enough to provide useful tools for analysis (at least, we’ve had limited success asking students to work with Fussell’s nine tiers of class identity). Instead, we like to pair the essay with works by Dorothy Allison, bell hooks, and Barbara Mellix that bring into play factors such as race and language and provide material for lively debates and stronger papers about the issue of agency, self-determination, and choice in the formation and maintenance of class boundaries—or the function of race, class, and gender in identity formation for that matter. However, the Fussell discussion is useful in modeling the inclusion of counterargument and debate within an essay; students see that the quotation, summary, and extended analysis of a source in order to disagree with it can be a powerful position-defining move. This is particularly useful for students who believe they can quote only supportive sources or who simply bend their arguments to agree with opposing sources.

The Charlip essay is also a useful model for using personal experience within the framework of an academic essay. Just as Charlip draws on her personal narrative in order to take a thoughtful position within a scholarly debate about class, students are capable of achieving a similar balance between theory and narrative, between personal anecdotes and use of outside sources.

Key terms: class, family heritage, American Dream, entitlement, work as a means of production

SCOTT DEVEAUX

Progress and the Bean

DeVeaux’s contribution to Making Sense comes from his remarkable study of midcentury jazz music, The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History. In that book, DeVeaux argues against a simple “great man” theory of jazz, suggesting instead that the innovations of jazz are the product of a complex social network of musicians working together to foster experiment and change. DeVeaux very consciously applies Thomas Kuhn’s concept of the “paradigm” to the music business, forcing us to consider the affinities of musicians and scientists. The primary example of this confluence of practices is the