

## Teaching Laura Kipnis's "Love's Labors" in *Ways of Reading*

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Winthrop University's sophomore "Critical Reading, Thinking, Writing" course is dedicated to teaching students the vocabulary and techniques of critical thinking.<sup>1</sup> My colleagues and I use the fourth edition of Gerald M. Nosich's *Learning To Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*, which lays out in separate chapters the elements of critical thinking, the standards of critical thinking, and various critical thinking traits. The elements and the standards are tools whose use enhances the traits, which are intellectual qualities.<sup>2</sup> Although critical thinking is sometimes simplistically defined as "looking at something from more than one perspective," point of view is only one of 8+ elements in Nosich's system. It appears on a circle, along with seven other "elements": purpose, question at issue, assumptions, implications and consequences, conclusions and interpretations, information, and concepts. Alternatives lie in the center to indicate that multiple possibilities exist within those eight. The diagram's shortcoming is that context, the background that frames the circle, seems not to be subject to alternatives, though it certainly is. One may consider alternative contexts along with alternatives within the eight main elements. Like point of view, context is a lens that brings things into focus; if the lenses are changed, new alternatives appear within the other elements. Pursuing analysis from one point of view or within one context is thus not about "controlling" critical thinking.

Rather, point of view and context are heuristics that provide a framework for approaching the other elements.

My students practice the elements by analyzing some of the texts in David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, whose selections, being long, non-modal, difficult, and sometimes mysterious, set it apart from other texts used in writing and critical thinking courses. A familiar example is Michel Foucault's "Panopticism," which is the stuff of graduate reading lists and professional scholarship; yet in *Resources for Teaching*, the editors report hearing from community college instructors "who talked with great pleasure about the work of students in a technical curriculum who love to quote Foucault to each other in the shop or the hallway" (77). Such difficult texts provide excellent laboratories for reading, thinking, and writing, especially when the elements of critical thinking are part of the mix.

A more engaging but still very challenging anthology piece, "Love's Labors," the first chapter of Laura Kipnis's 2003 *Against Love: A Polemic*, is the topic of the present essay. Bartholomae and Petrosky observe that her subject, adultery, illuminates order, hierarchy, and power within the social context (*Resources* 90-91). In the following comment, Kipnis invites readers to think critically about such dynamics:

Might we entertain the possibility that posing philosophical questions isn't restricted to university campuses and learned tomes, that maybe it's something everyone does in the course of everyday life—if not always in an entirely knowing fashion? If adultery is more of a critical practice than a critical theory, well, acting out is what happens when knowledge or consciousness about something is foreclosed. (399)

The passage is the key statement in “Love’s Labors”: critical thinking is for all of life, and it must shine a light into the psyche’s dark places because misbehavior arises from repression. Such illumination is especially important because adultery is something we do, more than something we think through consciously and critically. The editors, however, pay no direct attention to the psychological context, though it underpins the social. To invoke two of Nosich’s standards, human beings’ errant social behavior is to breadth as its psychological drivers are to depth. Adultery is a wide-open surface such as one sees on a jet ski; its psychological mechanisms are for submarine exploration. To ratchet up the complication, Kipnis does not really favor adultery in an unequivocal way. As a result, the text, though entertaining to be sure, offers readers a challenging workout. This essay presents a guide to in-depth exploration. It supplements Bartholomae and Petrosky’s suggested sociological approach to “Love’s Labors” by using the 8+ elements to analyze its important psychological content. The elements structure what follows, and along the way discussion questions and activities are suggested. Some observations about critical thinking conclude the discussion.

It is helpful to begin by having students discuss the definitions of two main concepts: polemic and adultery. According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, a polemic is “a vigorously argumentative work, setting forth its author’s attitudes on a highly controversial subject,” and they cite Milton’s *Areopagitica* as “the best-known English example” (393). In other words, a polemic forcefully expresses the author’s own views. As Kipnis states more specifically, “Polemics exist to poke holes in cultural pieties and turn received wisdom on its head . . .” (390). “Love’s Labors,” however, is a very conflicted polemic, as the “Reader Advisory” suggests: “Polemics aren’t necessarily unconflicted . . . please read on in a conflicted

and contradictory spirit” (390). Besides, as she notes on the book’s final page, “against” means not only opposed to but also “next to” (*Against* 201). To be *against love* means to be *up against* love and in need of critical thinking about this mysterious and “all-controlling force,” this “vital plasma” (390). Though intentionally provocative, Kipnis does not really *oppose* love and does not actually advocate adultery over fidelity. Her conflicted approach makes “Love’s Labors” a pseudo- or anti-polemic insofar as it is open to alternatives rather than forcefully advocating a single view.

The author takes a similar revisionist approach to the concept of adultery, which here means any violation of any claim to monogamy, regardless of sexual orientation. One does not have to be married to be guilty of it. On the surface, Kipnis opposes any societal force that saps coupledness of desire and turns a relationship into work. These forces constitute the kind of pattern that David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen call a “strand.” Here is an alphabetical list: codes, constrictions, conventions, expectations, institutions, instructions, norms, requirements, roles, structures, and underpinnings. All are directly relevant to the editors’ interest in order, hierarchy, and power. Asking students to identify the forces allied against monogamy and encouraging them to unpack these important sub-concepts inject depth into the discussion. An instructor could even take an example of just one item from the list and have students apply the entire circle of elements to it. Students could also write papers about focused topics related to any of the listed items.

*Against Love*’s immediate context, of course, includes the infamous adulterers of the 1990s. Chapters 2 through 4 include somewhat dated references to such persons as Bill Clinton and Dick Morris, but even more contemporary figures like Tiger Woods and David Petraeus

would soon seem out-of-date as well. Chapter 1 is not for one decade but for the ages because its context is a broad strand of allusions, assumptions, and implications that instructors will need to point out and discuss. One specific assumption—“Puritan underpinnings,” meaning both prudery and work ethic—can be a starting point for the discussion (391). In chapter 4, Kipnis refers to “that founding Puritanism still lodged deep at the core of the national sensibility and still periodically burping to the surface in gassy fits of censoriousness and prohibition” (*Against* 146). Puritanism’s work ethic is part of a toxic strand that includes “[t]he rhetoric of the factory” and “the language of the salt mine” (*Against* 151, 153). As the rhetoric becomes more overtly Marxist, the author’s condemnation of relationship-as-work intensifies. Desire leads to play, and play works, but work really does not. “*Fuck work*,” says chapter 3 (*Against* 109). “Love’s Labors” states: “As Marx should have said, if he didn’t: ‘Why work when you can play? Or play around?’” (396). The unstated assumption of the Marxist *leit-motif* is that partners are subject to alienation from each other, from themselves, and from the institution of marriage that binds them together. In other words, relational hard work strains the filaments of fun and desire that draw people together in the first place. A preliminary implication—that adultery is a positive solution to commitment’s downside—may arise at this point but will have to be evaluated later in the discussion.

Besides opposing Puritanism and sounding a Marxist note against alienation-in-monogamy, the contextual strand continues with a delightful array of subtler allusions. Indeed, the context of “Love’s Labors” is literary tradition. Kipnis’s comments about “the triumph of freedom and individuality over the shackling social conventions of the past” and their “distinctly regulatory aspect” playfully invert Thomas Hobbes’s point by implying that the transition from

single life to marriage is unlike moving from the state of nature to the state (398). That is, in monogamy, the freedom from emotional chaos is *not* greater than the freedom in adultery to have fun and get pleasure; therefore, the implication goes, one should fool around. There are allusions to George Orwell's *Brave New World*: love is like soma; monogamy fosters suspicion and turns one's partner "into a one-person citizen-surveillance unit" (407). She transforms Dwight D. Eisenhower's memorable comment about the "military-industrial complex" into "the wedding-industrial complex" and invokes Alexander Solzhenitsyn by referencing "domestic gulags" (410). Instead of providing information on the intellectual background, instructors might assign each allusion to a student or a small group of students, who can report their discoveries the next day. Again, the elements could easily be part of the assignment. How to proceed—and the degree of depth and precision to strive for—depends on the time available.

Ultimately, a discussion of context must include William Shakespeare, for overshadowing all of the allusions just mentioned is the Shakespearean sense that love's labors have been lost, though whether that loss obtains in marriage, in adultery, or in both remains unclear. Nothing in "Love's Labors" suggests that Kipnis ever read *Love's Labors Lost*, but the clear allusion invites a possible parallel assignment: having students watch the play and speculate on what her text on adultery has to do with his text on romantic pursuit. As an alternative, here is a brief summary. King Ferdinand of Navarre and his three attendant lords (Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine), who vow in the first scene to abjure the company of women while immersing themselves in study for three years, quickly fall in love with the Princess of France and her three attendant ladies. The king and his men, disguised as Russians, present themselves to the Princess and her ladies who have swapped identities. Each man enacts

the superficiality of his love by pretending to be someone else while courting and falling more deeply in love with a simulacrum of his love interest. “The ladies,” as Berowne later realizes, “did change favors, and then we, / Following the signs, wooed but the sign of she” (5.2.469-70). With the beloved having become a floating signifier, the play reflects the superficiality that results when passion destabilizes reason. In the end, the King and his men wind up back where they started, this time forced by their respective women to spend a year in quiet contemplation and service. As Rosaline says to Berowne, the purpose of the delay is “To weed this wormwood [romantic idiocy] from your fruitful brain” (5.2.837). Although the four men’s labors have been lost in a comic false start, love itself has merely been deferred, as long as their year’s retreat from high society results in greater individuation. They vow to bide their time, having already begun to understand, as David Bevington nicely articulates, that “human happiness and self-understanding are complex and perishable” (33).

Here is some further interpretation. The forces driving the male characters to chase the female characters in the play are much like those that drive persons toward adultery in *Against Love*. The men underestimate the disconnection between reason (“philosophy” and “study”) and passion (“affects,” “flesh,” and “blood”) (1.1.32, 58, 214, 150; 4.3.92). Their actions thus enact imbalance, lack of self-understanding, the power of the imagination over attempted repression, and the consequent breaking of oaths. Like Kipnis’s adulterers, the young men attempt to take life-altering romantic action before they have achieved sufficient maturity to behave wisely and steadfastly. For them, romance is a critical practice rather than a critical theory. To adapt Armado’s words, the characters have merely “the varnish of a complete man” (1.2.43–44), not wholeness and well-being. For persons in such a nascent state of maturity, a commitment such as

a marriage—as Kipnis would agree—is likely to enact the pun in Armado’s letter to his beloved Jaquenetta: “The catastrophe is the nuptial” (4.1.76–77). Marriage is a desirable *conclusion* or *outcome*, but read ironically the statement also means that marriage may be a *disaster* if society’s codes and conventions substitute for inner work. Shakespeare and Kipnis are making the same point.

Returning to “Love’s Labors,” we note that assumptions engage with the previously mentioned contradictions. Although Kipnis appears to criticize monogamy and to advocate adultery (polemics “don’t tell ‘both sides of the story’” [390]), there is plenty of contrary information. “How does ‘Love’s Labors’ illustrate the contradictions that the ‘Reader Advisor’ anticipates?” one might ask students. The text is not a straightforward polemic in favor of adultery because the author actually praises “Good Relationships” and “long-term coupledom” as “a source of optimism and renewal,” along with the presence of desire and the absence of work (394-95). Similarly, she speaks of “adultery clowns,” admits that adultery hurts people, and states that finding out that one has been cheated on, in a bow to Dante’s *Inferno*, “is a special circle of hell” (406). In other words, adultery is good except when it is bad; and solid, long-term relationships can be good too. Given such a contradictory spirit, the question at issue is not “Why does Kipnis condemn monogamy and advocate adultery?” because she does not do either in a wholehearted way. “What may we learn about ourselves in the process of figuring out why marriages fail and adulterous affairs proliferate?” is a far better question at issue because Kipnis’s true purpose is not to advocate adultery but to call attention to it as an entry point for inner work. She assumes that adultery—or any misbehavior—points to a background story more fundamental and less conscious than itself. Bad behavior is like the tip of an iceberg: what



reaches consciousness connects to submerged material that needs to be brought to the surface. As I have been suggesting, adultery's relationship to social forces related to order, hierarchy, and power is more of a symptom than an end in itself. Kipnis wants the reader to delve into the depths. The breadth of the horizontal/social axis is only a starting point.

The text's mother load consists of a huge strand of psychological concepts and rhetoric. Careful attention should be paid to the psychological lore to which Kipnis keeps returning because it constitutes the background story of the codes and conventions that sully human social relations. Concepts are often the most important element of all, and the following approach illustrates what I tell my students: "If you can nail the concepts, you can nail the text." Two strategies are recommended here: students could construct the psychological strand on their own if time allows, or to save time the instructor could provide a prepared list. Here are the psychological concepts in alphabetical order: acts of compensation, alienation, ambivalence, autonomy, body wisdom, childhood deprivation and trauma, eros, intimacy, mass dissatisfaction, persona, projection, regression, repression, self-knowledge, superego vs. id, and the unconscious. One will have to discuss definitions before proceeding to higher-order activities such as having students write about how psychological mechanisms contribute to adultery. Bartholomae and Petrosky's suggestion about having students search the Internet for definitions is well taken (*Resources* 92).

"What story," an instructor might ask, "do the psychological concepts tell?" A possible narrative might develop three categories or stages: past influences, present dysfunction, and a more holistic alternative. Here is a suggested interpretation.

- First, certain things in people’s past lead to dysfunction in adulthood. These include childhood deprivation, trauma, repression of the id, and growth of the superego—in other words, the imposition of the codes, like work ethic, that Kipnis criticizes.
- Second, by the time people reach adulthood, there remains much unaddressed, unresolved, and unrealized content in the unconscious. That content manifests as a sense of alienation or ambivalence, mass dissatisfaction, the persona, projection, and ruptures in the fabric of social codes, adultery being the foremost example of such acts of compensation. Adultery equals eros as an end in itself; lust shackles and alienates; it does not liberate or connect. As a result, cheaters, unconscious of their true motivations, are stuck in a vicious circle: inner fragmentation leads to misbehavior, which maintains and widens the inner cracks.
- Third, however, there is a more desirable state characterized by autonomy, intimacy, self-knowledge, and happy marriage.

The text implies that a key to moving from stage two to stage three is paying attention to body wisdom, which is how the unconscious talks to consciousness through physical manifestations like gut feelings. Kipnis does not actually use the term “body wisdom,” but that is what she means by “some unpleasant somatic form that eventually can’t be ignored. Insomnia. Migraines. Cold sores. Digestive ailments. Heart palpitations. Sexual difficulties” (409). As Gloria Anzaldúa puts it in a chapter from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which also appears in *Ways of Reading*, “the body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to ‘real’ events” (81). The point may come as a revelation: students who have assumed that the

mind is little more than conscious awareness may suddenly realize that the unconscious has been sending them messages.

Concepts are but one part of the psychological strand in “Love’s Labors.” The other is the implications of psychological rhetoric. As before, the relevant question concerns moving from stage two to stage three and escaping the vicious circle of stages one and two. Although the three stages seem to imply the need for psychological therapy, the reader runs headlong into a major contradiction. As the psychological concepts suggest, “Love’s Labors” is a text about an acknowledged need to know ourselves better, to listen to the unconscious, and to integrate its content. The text underscores the need for individuation, which means making the unconscious conscious and moving from persona and ego to what Carl Jung calls the Self, the archetype of wholeness. That requires hard work, but Kipnis mocks therapy sessions. She considers “therapy,” which she puts in quotation marks with a sly wink, to be the “enforcement wing” that “any social program” uses “to ply its dismal message” (401). Here are society’s codes and conventions once again. Even worse, by considering Freud to have been “long ago consigned to conformist therapy’s historical ash can, collectively pilloried for his crimes against decency and empiricism” (401), she fallaciously reduces the whole of therapy to its Freudian component and that component to its worst features. For Kipnis, although therapy may lead to self-knowledge through the working out of childhood traumas, it is mostly a cash cow for therapists. One can excavate, she says, “a deeply buried trove of childhood memories or injuries . . . in regular office visits and at no small cost . . . at fees far exceeding the median daily wage” (402). Kipnis adds that if therapy does not work, one can just take an anti-depressant. Of course, her point is that ruptures—instances of acting out—signal a need for psychological healing. But conventional

therapy is not necessarily the right or the only route to individuation. After all, how can therapy effectively address the ills of cultural coding when therapy, like the church, is an agent of normative socialization? There must be another way. What questions does Kipnis want us to ask, and what solutions does she imply in “Love’s Labors”? In other words, what questions at issue can help students unlock the interpretation that lurks beneath the text’s contradictions?

As Nosich tells us in *Learning To Think Things Through*, “Critical thinking lives in questions” (29). Instructors might ask students to construct a question at issue—the question that the text attempts to answer—before discussion begins; after a day’s work, they might be called on to repeat the exercise. They might initially ask, “Why does Kipnis think that adultery is good?” With greater depth of understanding from applying the elements, they might come up with alternatives such as these: *If you are in a marriage or other type of relationship, are you fulfilling a role that culture foisted upon you? What cultural programming might that be? What is the right truth for you? When we do something we know is wrong, what things below consciousness should we pay attention to? How can I have a good relationship?* Instructors should help students understand that Kipnis wants us to question our way to consciousness of, and balance between, cultural codes and unconscious desires. If we follow culture, which prescribes marriage, suburban living, procreation, and consumerism, then adultery can point the way to an area of the unconscious that needs to be brought up to the light in order to foster greater authenticity. Jung mentions a directly relevant example, “a highly esteemed professor in his seventies [who] abandons his family and runs off with a young red-headed actress” (*CW* 9i, par. 62, p. 30). Such a rupture is a heuristic. The professor needs to examine the tendrils

connecting role, persona, ego, and cultural code, on the one hand, and his relationship with the projected anima, on the other.

A final question for discussion, freewriting, or paper assignments augments the interpretation. “What, then, is the moral or conclusion of ‘Love’s Labors’? What solutions does Kipnis propose by implication, if not outright suggestion? What kind of lesson shines through the text’s contradictions?” If the text’s psychological point of view is held in mind, she is saying: *Do what you do as an act of the whole psyche and be aware of culture’s influence on your decisions. Recognize your inner and outer filters, barriers, and impediments; don’t be intellectually complacent. If you do get married, try to uncover as much unconscious content as you can ahead of time—do your critical thinking first—because unaddressed shadow leads to ruptures like projection, which leads to adultery, which is a dead end.*

In light of such an interpretation, Kipnis’s Marxist critique of marriage does not meet the standard of sufficiency. After all, inner work is work; and therapy can illuminate psyche’s dark places. She might reply that self-exploration is a nonstarter if eros, play, and fun are absent. But to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare’s Bottom, the benefits of work and the fun of play “keep little company together nowadays” (*Dream* 3.1.139). Therein lies the disconnection that Kipnis’s psychology of adultery does not sufficiently acknowledge. Positive things are sustainable with another person only when we are right with ourselves, and such wholeness may exist apart from adultery’s emotional and sexual scintillations. Relationships, like buildings, crumble if they are built on insufficient foundations. No polemic, especially one as conflicted as *Against Love*, can change that fact.

Analyzing “Love’s Labors” illustrates various principles of critical thinking that instructors may want to underscore with their students at the close of the discussion.

- Analysis must precede evaluation because critique rests on a foundation of understanding. Analysis is also recursive, as in my suggested exercise on question at issue: an element can yield new insight over time.
- Different elements may provide appropriate starting points depending on the nature of the text or the students’ interests. For example, in line with my dictum that to grasp the concepts is to comprehend the text, concepts may enable a suitable beginning.
- Exploring one element may require references to others. Context, we discovered, is not entirely separable from concepts, assumptions, points of view, and interpretations. But applying a vocabulary like Nosich’s elements helps bring fine distinctions into focus.
- A part of the literary context of “Love’s Labors”—Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labors Lost* is a prime example—can lead to a separate full-circle analysis. In particular, implications are the soul of allusion.
- The trajectory of the above analysis is from general to specific. We began with the broad cultural and literary context, journeyed through concepts, identified assumptions, and closed with specific interpretations: breadth to depth. It is equally possible, however, to proceed inductively on the assumption that a text has a holographic quality. Each part of a hologram contains a pattern of the whole, which means that to explore the part is to understand the entire image. The critical-thinking equivalent is what David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen call “passage-based focused freewriting,” which they consider “probably

the single best way to arrive at ideas about what you are reading” (87). The instructor asks students to copy a passage (for example, the one that includes Kipnis’s key statement about adultery as a critical practice) into their notebooks, annotate it, and then freewrite about it. Smaller details can also be viewed in a holographic way, depending on the desired degree of precision and depth.

Finally, *Ways of Reading* is an important and well-established reader, and “Love’s Labors” is one of many challenging and interesting texts within it. The purpose of this essay has been to share my approaches to teaching that lively and controversial text and to advance an interpretation of how Kipnis’s true purpose overrides the more superficial urgings of the chapter’s “thought experiment” (392). The above approaches to teaching “Love’s Labors” provide students with opportunities to do their own exploration of alternatives within the text. These suggestions should work well whether the vocabulary of a dedicated critical thinking class is applied or the instructor chooses to proceed without it. In either case, the goal is neither to control students’ critical thinking nor to obviate other approaches. As stated at the outset, a shift in context or point of view yields alternatives within the other elements. Bartholomae and Petrosky’s focus on the horizontal/social axis of interpretation may interest instructors more than an exploration of the vertical/psychological axis; however, both approaches lead to exciting possibilities that make “Love’s Labors” an excellent laboratory for critical thinking and an inspiration for readers to do inner work that bridges the gap between critical thinking and critical practice. As Nosich states in the third edition of *Learning To Think Things Through*, “All critical thinking involves doing something, but the other processes are things you do with your mind. The kind of action meant here is the kind that involves the whole person” (179).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have written about CRTW in two previous publications: “Thinking in a Discipline: An Assignment in Critical Thinking Class,” *CEA Forum* 36.2 (2007); and “A Jungian Interpretation of an Urban Myth in Critical Thinking Class,” *Peer English: The Journal of New Critical Thinking* 1.2 (2007): 124-31.

<sup>2</sup> The standards are clearness, accuracy, importance/relevance, sufficiency, depth, breadth, and precision. The traits are confidence in reason, intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectually empathy, intellectual integrity, fair-mindedness, intellectual engagement, intellectual perseverance, and intellectual autonomy (Nosich 133 and 175).



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