

Watkins, James Ray, Jr. *A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2009.

Reviewed by Andrew Bourelle

James Ray Watkins Jr. begins *A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies* with this statement: “This is a book about the American dream as it has become embodied in the university in general and in the English department in particular” (1). More specifically, the book situates the issue of class mobility as it relates to literacy studies; explores the epistemological rift between the two major subcategories of the field of English studies, literature and composition and rhetoric; and argues for bringing the two perspectives together for a more unified field of English studies. Such an action, Watkins argues, would improve the liberal education of students attending college and help them in their own struggles of upward class mobility.

As a frame for his argument, Watkins focuses specifically on the story of his father’s education. The book is not a biography, but rather a critical analysis of the state of English education that uses as its locus Watkins’ father’s literacy education. Watkins Sr. died long before his son wrote this book, but the author recreates his father’s literacy history by studying his transcripts, college textbooks, samples of writing, and other documents. Watkins explains that his father stopped attending school after the fourth grade but, after serving in the military in World War II, wanted to attend college using the GI Bill. Watkins Sr. first had to earn his high school equivalency before he was able to study accounting at Louisiana State University from 1947 to 1950. To do this, Watkins Sr. gave up a steady construction job working for his great uncle, even though his extended family saw a college education as an indulgence and “found his decision difficult to understand and maybe a little crazy” (46). However, Watkins Sr. apparently viewed a college education as a key toward a better life, allowing him to choose a professional career using his

intellectual abilities rather than leading a life of physical labor. “In one way,” Watkins says, “his life was uneventful and modest in its accomplishments; in another way, it was extraordinary. He began his life as the son of a tenant farmer and ended it as an established professional” (39). The meritocratic “American dream” quality of Watkins’ story does not end there. Because of the ascension of Watkins Sr. to a middle-class professional status, his children were given a role model for pursuing academic study that wasn’t focused on career goals. Watkins’ father taught his children that “education was an open-ended, potentially transformative search for knowledge” and that it could have an economic purpose, as it did for him, but could also have “social and personal implications well beyond the monetary” (41). “Given the poverty he knew as a child,” Watkins says, “it might seem unlikely that a man like my father so strongly encouraged me to read without restriction and later so fully endorsed my outwardly impractical choice of an undergraduate major in English” (41).

In making such an endorsement, however, Watkins and his father conclude a two-generation, collaborative achievement of the American dream. Watkins’ father benefited economically from education, since it provided a foundation so his children could benefit culturally and aesthetically (not just monetarily) from college. In other words, they could receive an education for the sake of learning. By showing this two-generation change in socioeconomic class, Watkins says that “class cannot be reduced to finances, and the class mobility traditionally sought through education is more than a struggle for a better job” (7).

In discussing class and class struggle, Watkins uses Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, adopting what Bourdieu calls “the popular ethos” and “the formalist aesthetic” as a new way of viewing English studies (5). The field of composition and rhetoric, he argues, has long been associated with the popular ethos that views “language as a transparent medium for thought, a means to the larger social good of effective and honest communications” (5). Literary studies, on the other hand, focuses on the formalist aesthetic, which “defines language as a translucent

medium for creative expression” (5). The popular ethos, in other words, focuses on clear writing, consideration of audience, and public discourse. The formalist aesthetic focuses on creativity and beauty in writing. The opposition of ethos versus aesthetics then is a binary of communicative efficacy versus art. Watkins argues that English studies “embraces two different traditions of writing . . . each with distinct, if not contradictory, intellectual and pedagogical pedigrees” (4).

In modern universities, aesthetics is privileged over ethos, demonstrated by the institutional hierarchy of English departments. First-year composition is frequently taught by non-tenure-track instructors, adjuncts, or graduate students, while literature classes are usually reserved for tenured and tenure-track faculty. This privileging seems counterintuitive, Watkins explains. Literary studies might have had a higher academic status during the twentieth century, but composition lay at the heart of the country’s educational goals, “particularly as they related to the personal and social transformations associated with widespread class mobility” (58-59).

The current system of higher education seems to represent an institutional decision that all students must take the practical, or vocational, composition classes and receive language education from the popular ethos perspective, but only English majors need to study language in terms of aesthetics. Watkins argues against this existing structure, explaining that he recognizes the importance of teaching ethos in composition courses, but not—or at least not completely—at the expense of aesthetics. He uses his father’s story to make this point: Watkins Sr. benefited greatly from an education in ethos. In his job as an accountant, he sometimes had to write memos or letters, and he did so with clarity and grammatical precision. Watkins says, “A popular ethos . . . rather than a formalist aesthetic anchored his sensibilities” (77). However, his undergraduate curriculum also included classes in fiction, poetry, and drama. Exposure to these more aesthetic forms of writing did not inspire any sort of love of the beauty of language; Watkins says he can’t recall seeing his

father read for pleasure. Still, the exposure must have had an impact, Watkins speculates, because of his father's view of education and literacy as being more important than simply means to an economic end. "[W]hile he saw his own educational goals as primarily vocational, he had broader aspirations for his children's education," Watkins says. "If he went to college to become middle-class by learning ways and means of a profession, his children would go for the transformative reasons associated with the liberal arts generally and with the study of literature specifically" (49-50). Therefore, even though the classes in formalist aesthetics that Watkins Sr. took seemingly had no direct impact on his own life or career, they planted a seed that bore fruit for his children. "My father understood that moving out of the working class could mean taking on a new way of understanding the world, a way of living that nonetheless remained just out of reach," Watkins says. "When he implored me to read, and later to go to college, in other words, he was asking me to do more than earn a degree; he was inviting me to take the next step in a transformation of life and self that he had begun many years earlier" (42). Watkins claims that a problem exists in modern universities, which don't allow for the types of transformation that Watkins and his father collaboratively experienced. With the divide between the popular ethos of composition and the formalist aesthetic of literary studies, students might not gain the same transformative power from an undergraduate degree as Watkins Sr. did.

Watkins' revisionist history of English studies through a cultural capital lens is certainly an interesting perspective, and I believe his argument has merit. Students often attend college so that they can get a good job. On the other hand, teachers, especially in English studies, often teach in order to help students become educated thinkers, intelligent citizens who are better served in life regardless of their careers. This disparity of interests does not have to mean one is right and the other is wrong. As Watkins says, educators cannot ignore the vocational needs of their students to learn, to be better communicators in order to

attain well-paying jobs. But there is more to education than simply receiving a piece of paper that might open up a career. Watkins argues—and I agree—that both teachers of popular ethos (composition instructors) and of the formalist aesthetic (literary studies teachers) should actively strive to teach from the other epistemology as well. “On the one hand,” Watkins says, “a college degree would get one a better paying, less physically dependant job and so a better life; on the other, it would transform one into a critical thinker, a refined, articulate, and independent citizen” (121). I agree with Watkins that such an achievement is an important goal for educators to strive for.

Some of Watkins’ suggestions would mean sweeping reforms for the reconstruction of English departments, while others are more practical activities teachers can attempt in the classroom. An example of a major reform is his argument that English departments need to equalize the “two-tiered system of a few well-paid and independent literary teachers and researchers working side-by-side with poorly compensated part-time composition teachers” (163). This is a reform that could be as important to the future of literature studies as to composition, Watkins argues. Given the growing field of composition—and the perceived benefit to the general population of ethos over aesthetics—literary studies could find its privileged role in English repositioned at the bottom of the hierarchy. As Watkins says, “There are no theoretical limits to the use of adjunct labor—indeed, we could as easily imagine specialists in ethos becoming the haves and aesthetics delegated to part-timers” (163).

On a more practical level, Watkins makes suggestions that teachers or departments can adopt in order to make smaller, but important, strides toward increasing the overlap between popular ethos and the formalist aesthetic, including assignments and proposed classes. One example is his suggestion that an advanced writing class be created where students would study the relationship between the popular ethos and formalist aesthetic.

I didn’t particularly find the suggestions for change as important to the book’s overall effect as the identification of the

problem. If Watkins is able to open teachers and administrators' eyes to the problems he identifies, that will be accomplishment enough—and educators can then find their own ways to overcome the problems created by the divide in English studies.

The largest weakness in *A Taste for Language* is in what I see as a reductive portrayal of the field of composition studies. Watkins admits that the two epistemologies can overlap, with first-year composition students sometimes “held to quite high formal and aesthetic standards” and students who are “asked to adhere to the strictest ethos of communication” in their literature assignments (5). However, I don't feel he paints a complete enough portrait of the field of composition to justify his emphasis on vocational writing. Composition today is a far more complex field than what the book leads us to believe, with varying and conflicting pedagogies. Today's instructors certainly focus on communication, clarity, and other aspects of Bourdieu's popular ethos. However, depending upon the school and the teacher, I believe instructors likely emphasize the formalist aesthetic at least to some degree. The two schools of thought are likely not given equal attention—nor should they be—but to say composition teachers only teach the popular ethos of language and literature teachers focus only on the formalist aesthetic seems overly simplistic. I, for one, teach both composition and literature courses, and I hope that the epistemologies overlap in my pedagogy.

This is not to say that Watkins' argument has no merit. I think it's particularly important for teachers to be aware of these divides between literature and composition and the epistemologies they are grounded in. Watkins' revisionist history of English studies provides an interesting new lens through which we can view our profession. However, Watkins seems to skim over an important part of this history: *his* story. He claims that he, as well as his father, was an important part of this two-generation, collaborative class ascension, but the focus of his analysis is almost exclusively about his father's education. He gives readers very little about his own. In failing to give readers details about his own education, he

effectively ignores what I wanted more of: an in-depth analysis of the field of composition *since* his father's undergraduate days. Therefore, the revisionist history of English studies seems incomplete, as does the biographical narrative of the book. Interestingly enough, a more detailed history would have helped fulfill my expectations of clear communication, i.e., the popular ethos aspect of the book, and a more complete biographical portrait of father *and* son would have better fulfilled my aesthetic expectations for the book.

Nevertheless, *A Taste for Language* remains an interesting and important book, one that could open the eyes of teachers of composition and literature alike. Readers might not agree with everything Watkins argues for, but the book could change some perceptions about the nature of teaching writing at the college level. It's certainly important for teachers to consider class mobility when teaching students about language's communicative value and its beauty.