

To: Professor Peterfreund and Members of the Reappointments Committee

From: Guy Rotella, Professor of English



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I visited the 11:45 session of Kevin Cassell's ENG1111, Freshman English II, on Wednesday, March 4, 1998. The class was well planned, lively, often provocative, sometimes elegant.

It was obvious from good-natured pre-class banter that Kevin has established rapport with his students (20 or so attended). After preliminaries (comments on a recent quiz, reminders about office hours and assignments, attendance, and so on), Kevin began the class by telling the students that nervousness about my visit had led him to make elaborate plans for structuring the day's meeting; he had, however, abandoned those, recognizing that they were out of keeping with the spirit of the course text and teaching method. Instead, they would tell him about the story, he said, asking, "Are you excited about that?" They more or less chorused a nicely mixed "yeah," indicating both irony and encouragement. Thus Kevin performed the vulnerable instructor, an approach he used to very good effect.

A seemingly inauspicious opening gambit--did you like the story?--actually initiated things rather nicely. It went like this: Did you? Yes. How does it rank with others you've read? One of the best. Why? The way it was written. How? It uses a weird first-person narrator. This set off both an informed discussion of narrative point of view and a consideration of the aptness of the modifier. It yielded results. When one student suggested that the narrator seems almost to be interviewing himself, Kevin asked what that implied about the narrator's audience. This led to the notion that the story is written as if to offer advice to would-be writers, which led in turn to consideration of the contradictions in O'Brien's rules of rulelessness; that moved the conversation toward matters at the story's center (and margins): what Pynchon called the shift from binary to heterodont configurations, a phrase dictionally but not conceptually far from what I heard here.

More important, as this process went on, two things emerged: one, Kevin knows his students (their names, their majors, their interests, the angles from which they are likely to respond) and makes use of that knowledge in keeping nearly the entire class attentively engaged and participating; two, he has trained his students to support their assertions with examined textual evidence (students made points; then they turned repeatedly and naturally to the text, citing packet pages and paragraph numbers to locate material for their audience, read the passage, and explained its relevance to their claims).

Further discussion led to a number of important revelations: O'Brien plays at the border of reality and artifice, he makes us think about conventions and the way we naturalize them, he violates rules while following or at least evoking them, the story's "confusion" of narrative methods and kinds (war story, ghost story, love story) mimics the confusion of war, binary categories (beautiful and ugly, true and false, right and wrong) sometimes collapse. And so it went, as

insights tumbled out, prompted by Kevin's responsive and provocative questions and comments.

There were some opportunities missed: students too often took perspectivism to equal a kind of absolutist relativizing; more could have been done to expose them to the workings of literary conventions in all stories; O'Brien's intricate layering of "immoral acts," "amoral aesthetics," and "moral phrasing" might have been noted more precisely; and so on. But far more typically Kevin seized on the class's teachable moments and made them work. When someone questioned the story's violations of chronology, Kevin reminded the class of similar strategies in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and helped the students to see that where Faulkner's time-shiftings nonetheless led to a conventional climax, O'Brien's didn't (this point could have been expanded: Faulkner's broken surface can be reorganized by appeal to underlying depth: a modernist experiment; O'Brien's crazed surface suggests there may be nothing under it: a postmodern stratagem). Here's another instance of seizing the moment: when a student wisecracked, "You can listen to Jimmy, but you can't hear Jimmy" (a reference to the film "White Men Can't Jump" and to Jimmy Henrix and what might be called racial or cultural determinism), Kevin improved the occasion by showing how closely related words (listen, hear) can mean very different things; he segued from that remark to a discussion of the meaning and moral of O'Brien's story, two more terms closely related but differing in significance. This neatly executed maneuver led to an extended discussion of whether O'Brien's story has a moral or "only" a meaning--as nice a sidelong approach to some central issues of postmodernism as I've seen, and without the jargon.

I would like to have seen more tying up of loose ends at the close of class; perhaps Kevin was imitating O'Brien's refusal of closure. That aside (where it belongs), Kevin's students definitely discovered, developed, expressed, and supported a nicely nuanced sense of O'Brien's and literature's operations; this was very fine teaching.