

# There are Many Lessons from the Old World to the New: Contemporary Teaching Strategies for Canonical Literature

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As a student teacher entering the teaching profession in 1988, I listened to a presenter at a National Council of Teachers of English National Convention emphatically state that high school students do not read the traditional canonical works that teachers assign. I was told that the canonical works do not relate to their experiences as modern teenagers; the language is too hard for them. When my colleagues raised their hands and voices in agreement, I was convinced that they were right.

No, they were not right. During my first year of teaching, I discovered that canonical works, or classics, were not too difficult for my students to read, understand, and appreciate. Indeed, once exposed to these works, my

students asked to read more of them and also enjoyed the latest version of Shakespeare or Jane Austen at the movies or on television.

I found that my students, regardless of ability level, experienced the joy and passion of canonical literature, with each discovering his or her own voice as understanding deepened. I was curious about why, despite the linguistic complexity and disparate culture characteristic of canonical works, students became engaged with canonical literature.

My personal success story lay within the reader response strategies, popularized by young adult literature instruction. Teaching strategies, which promote reader response, contributed to student engagement with literature

in my classroom. Fortunately, my colleagues, who shared a similar instructional philosophy, supported these teaching strategies.

Despite the battle cries of the critics of the literature canon, we successfully taught this literature at a large Midwestern urban high school where 85 percent of the enrollment was comprised of minority students.

The literature canon does belong in the high school curriculum and the success of teaching the literature canon lies within reader response strategies.

Contrary to what young adult literature advocates claim, students do not need this literature genre exclusively to develop an emotional and personal response to text.

If taught from a reader response perspective, the literature canon carries the potential to actively engage students. This body of literature contains stories that explore and explain our humanity and reader response strategies are essential for the successful instruction of these literary texts.

It is time that the advocates of canonical literature learn a very valuable lesson from the apparent successes of young adult literature. It is time that we no longer place the canon on a pedestal and teach it with an exclusive authority. My purpose in this article is to discuss

and illustrate “active methods” or reader response strategies that encourage students to become engaged with the classics.

Young adult literature instruction embraces reader response strategies and canonical literature can be accessed through similar approaches.

These methods are essential for the instruction of canonical literature if our purpose is to nurture a student’s personal and emotional response to literature, or engagement.

The use of active teaching methods knocks canonical literature off of its dusty pedestal and promotes student interest through their personal connections and empathy. Some of these strategies include reader response journals, prereading activities, and literature letters.

Reader response strategies actively invite students to explore canonical literature both personally and emotionally. In the following descriptions, actual classroom vignettes were chosen as to illustrate these teaching strategies.

The initial description emerges from my experience as a classroom teacher and the remaining teacher and student examples were taken from a large urban Midwestern high school that was part of a larger study that was recently conducted.

*Preparing Through Prereading:  
Not Just for Early Readers!*

Prereading activities can create a setting where the students can develop a preliminary understanding or connection to the text. Directing students to explain how they can potentially be connected to a work involves them in a text before they even read it.

Although prereading activities take many forms, two in particular effectively

promote a student’s initial connection to a literary work: journal writing and discussing the historical/biographical background (Karoilides, 1992).

Currently, journal writing is an established practice for generating ideas for writing, but it is also a means for teaching literature. Similar to writing, constructing meaning and developing a personal response to literature is a process. Journal writing permits responses that are not constrained and allows readers to nurture a primary connection to a text. For example, there are numerous occasions where teachers may ask students to respond to a thematic issue in order to tap the students’ personal knowledge or background as a means for drawing a student into a

text world. As a model for this strategy, I will discuss a journal topic that I often used when I taught Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment.”

The title character in this allegorical tale invites four failed friends to drink from the infamous Fountain of Youth. Hawthorne reveals in this story that the true experiment examines the four friends’ behavior once they have their youth restored.

Prior to our initial reading of this story, I invited the students to respond to the following prompt in their journal: If you were invited to drink from the Fountain of Youth and remain at the age that you are today for eternity, would you do it? Explain your reasons for your decision.

In the following student excerpts, the students reveal their individual decisions. Samantha writes: *I think that I would drink from the Fountain of Youth but I would wait a few years until I was 21. I mean 16 is messed up. I wouldn’t want to be 16 for my whole life. It is way too hard to be 16.*

Samantha’s classmate, Bob has a different view. He writes: *So, like, I don’t know. I mean it just goes against nature. I mean that that’s not how things are intended.*

***“My grandma knows a lot of stuff because she’s so much older. I think I need to get older so that I can learn something.”***

*My grandma knows a lot of stuff because she's so much older. I think I need to get older so that I can learn something. I mean, that's what I hear all of the time.*

Although their responses are different, the students are encouraged to explore their own responses to this short story instead of being told how to think about the story. The students would share their responses during a large group class discussion and we undoubtedly debated about growing old and facing the failures and struggles in a lifetime. Once the students explored the thematic issues of youth, aging, failure and wisdom, we would read the story. Through this activity, the students have already personalized the themes that Hawthorne develops in this frequently taught American short story.

#### *Bridging the Literary Experience*

Another prereading activity that can be employed by high school English teachers is the selection of shorter literary works as a "bridge" to a larger core work. For example, Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy" can be explored as a prereading activity for Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Anne, an English teacher that I observed during the 1998-99

school year, introduced the themes that would emerge in Angelou's autobiography when her ninth grade students read "Sympathy" as a prereading activity. In Anne's class, a different student read each stanza of the poem "Sympathy." Once the students had read the poem, their teacher asked them to indicate words that they did not know. The students called out words like "stalked," "chalice," "keener" and "fain" as Anne wrote the students' responses on the chalkboard. Then they discussed the words and developed definitions using context clues.

Once the students understood the meaning of the words, Anne read the poem to the students again. The class was silent after the second reading, and Anne paused for a few moments before she instructed the students to take out their notebooks.

As Anne delivered a mini-lecture about Paul Laurence Dunbar that included biographical information that focused on his experiences as an African-American poet during the late 19th century, the students wrote the information in their notebooks.

Anne pointed out that during the 19th century, there were few opportunities for African-American writers and artists to express their creativity. Anne encouraged the class to hypothesize

about the poet's motivation for composing the poem, "Sympathy" and how Dunbar may have felt "trapped," like the central symbol of his poem, a caged bird, during the 19th century.

At this point, a student asked, "Weren't there any ways for him (Dunbar) to sell his poetry?" About five minutes passed as the students explored and discussed this question. The discussion concluded with another student comment, "It was different back then. Dunbar was Black, and it was right after slavery. They (African Americans) just didn't have the chances to do stuff like we do now."

As the students read the novel, these thematic issues and conflicts often emerged in class discussions and student writing.

#### *More Bridges to Cross*

Another example of using a shorter literary work as prereading for a larger literary work occurred in an eleventh grade class as the students and teacher prepared to read *Beowulf*. In the following example, the students read "The Man Who Came Too Early" by Paul Anderson, a contemporary science fiction story generally unfamiliar to

the high school literature curriculum. In this story, the narrator, a 20th century soldier who was transported to 10th century Iceland, observed a conflict of cultures.

The story examines the narrator's observations of the conflicts that can exist between cultures. The author contained vivid and detailed recreations of the customs and language of 10th century Iceland. Ultimately, the narrator-soldier soon realized the similarities of human behavior during these two time periods.

According to Sue, the teacher, she selected "The Man Who Came Too Early" as a prereading activity as a means to promote the students' connection to the Anglo-Saxon period and practice their literary analysis skills. As Sue suggested, "If I can give them some tools for reading something hard like *Beowulf* through an easier work, then they may have an easier time deciphering a harder text."

As these eleventh graders explored "The Man Who Came Too Early," they reviewed the literary elements, character and theme. In addition, their teacher reminded the students of the aspects of Anglo-

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Saxon culture in this text since she used this for building the students' background knowledge for Beowulf. As a class, they explored gender roles, fate, heroism and tradition.

All of these subjects were applicable to Beowulf. Consequently, this contemporary science fiction story played a key role in making Beowulf accessible to her students through this pre-reading activity. Sue laid the groundwork for her students to discuss and explore a very difficult text that is often characterized as inaccessible for teenager readers (Herz, 1996).

#### Literature Letters

Literature letters are a way of sharing feelings and ideas with another person. Typically, teachers ask students to write a letter from a character's point of view. In doing so, the students can feel the thoughts and feelings of a particular character.

As demonstrated in the following excerpts, these below grade level students revealed in their tenth grade American Literature class that they have developed an emotional response to some of the characters from *The Crucible*.

For Carol, a student who was diagnosed as having a visual

perception learning disability, the literature letter assignment offered her another opportunity to think and reflect about the text through one of the main characters, Elizabeth Proctor.

*Dear Elizabeth Proctor,*

*You had never told a lie. I think in court you should have told the truth even though that would have been hard for you. I don't know why you did not tell the truth. You know how Abigail Williams was and she wanted you to lie.*

*I am so disappointed. I am so mad that everyone is being hanged. I really don't like that Abigail.*

*Sincerely,*

*Carol*

*PS. God Bless You.*

Although Carol's visual perception learning disability made writing and reading difficult, she explored her personal response to the play.

Carol's literature letter reflected her growing frustration with the injustices in the play and she indicated that she felt personally disappointed that Elizabeth didn't tell the truth about Abigail and her husband. For Carol, extending her empathy to a character is exciting. As her teacher indicated, "Carol has a hard time just understanding the story. So, the

fact that she has some emotional reactions to the play tells me that she is getting something out of this experience."

Another student in this class also used her literature letter as a means to think more deeply about the play. Terry wrote her letter to Tituba, the slave who was the first character accused of witchcraft.

*Dear Tituba,  
I am writing this letter because I am concerned about your well being.*

*First of all, I would like to know why you would agree to conjure spirits. It was very foolish of you to do it even though it 'were only pretense.' Second I would like to say, lying to protect Abigail was also stupid because as soon as she felt like she was being found out, she blamed you. I understand you all were in it together but pretending witchcraft was nothing to get whipped for.*

*Sincerely,*

*Terry*

In her letter, Terry worked to develop her understanding of Tituba's motives and this student judged the character's actions. In both of these literature letters, the students explored their personal reactions to the actions of these characters.

#### Ongoing Discussion: Reader Response Journals

In addition to journal prompts as prereading activities, reader response journals allow students to reflect and question their reading as they explore literary texts. This kind of journal writing can play a key role as readers explore literature.

Reading and interpreting a literary text is a process. Therefore, initial exploration may be tentative, but as a student explores a text more deeply, his or her response, in turn, can potentially evolve into more meaningful interpretations (Atwell, 1987; Beach & Marshall; 1990 Fulwiler, 1987). In the following examples, two twelfth grade students, Nancy and Valerie were assigned by their teacher to write a response to every assigned reading selection. The students summarized the selection and wrote an unstructured response to the literature.

Nancy told of the historical lessons of the Holocaust, which she discovered while writing in reader response journal as she discussed Elie Wiesel's, *Night*.

*The excerpt I read from Night was a good portrayal of someone witnessing the Holocaust.*

***"It made me think about how I would feel if I was in the witness's place."***

*It made me think about how I would feel if I was in the witness's place. I mean the narrator's place who was also a witness.*

*It was a very important time in our history and that's why I think that Wiesel said, 'If we forget (the Holocaust), we are guilty, we are accomplices.' He probably means that since the Holocaust was such an important event because it was so horrible it is so important that we can't just let it go.*

*We must remember it and not ever justify its actions. If we forget it then something like that could happen again and it would be like we were saying that that's OK.*

Nancy responded to Wiesel's history lesson and his plea for his readers to "never forget" with emotion and compassion. She apparently "thought through" Wiesel's message, but she did so in a personal and individual way.

Nancy's classmate, Valerie, also discussed the selection from *Night*. However, Valerie's journal writing did not primarily focus on the historical lessons of the Holocaust. Instead, Valerie explored the emotion and inhumanity of the Holocaust. In her journal she wrote:

*I enjoyed the passage from the story, *Night*. Not that it was*

*entertaining, but it was very moving. The story made you feel for the people. I could picture in my mind the women going crazy on the train. I could feel the thumping of the terrified hearts as time was nearing their end.*

*When Wiesel said, "If we forget the Holocaust, we are guilty, we are accomplices" I believe he meant that if we forget then we're just as bad as the Nazis.*

*It's hard for me to believe that the Nazis cared so little about humanity and that they didn't have any feelings toward the people (who) were killed. The story really made you think about your own values and beliefs. It made me think about what I might do or think about if I was ever in a situation like that. What would I be thinking about if I was in the line awaiting my death?*

Valerie's response was chilling. During a large group discussion of *Night*, Valerie admitted that she cried when she read the excerpt at home. Obviously moved by her compassion for the victims of the Holocaust, Valerie became involved in this text world when she asked, "What would I be thinking about if I was in the line awaiting my death?" Her reader response journal was the catalyst for this personal epiphany.

### *A New Outlook*

Including active methods for the instruction of traditional literature will further our move toward a student centered classroom where the language arts are taught from a holistic philosophy. Playing the educational games of "What's on the Teacher's Mind" or "What's the Right Answer?" does not promote engagement with traditional literature and even young adult literature.

With young adult literature as a model rather than as an antagonist, teachers can adapt reader response strategies for the engaging instruction of the literature canon. Our high school students can relate to traditional literature.

If we conscribe to the young adult argument that certain texts are deemed to be more appropriate to the teenage audience, we are guilty of the same acts of exclusivity as Western Canon advocates, E.D. Hirsch and Alan Bloom.

Literature from all cultures and time periods belongs in the high

school English curriculum. All literature expresses our humanity and should be explored without the academic pressures of devising a "correct" interpretation. Judith Baxter is right. Reader response strategies are a means to "fire up" the canon for our students.

***All literature expresses our humanity and should be explored . . .***

We often pick apart the classics in our high school English classes until they no longer resemble a text. As one of my students in my

methods of teaching English course once declared, "I hated *The Scarlet Letter* because my teacher forced us to read it for ten weeks." Is our goal as high school English teachers more closely aligned with Judith Baxter's, that the students need "to have some ownership in generating meanings and understanding?" If so, reader response teaching methods that promote student engagement with literature are the answer. It is time to explore the methods of teaching canonical literature rather than dismiss this rich literary tradition on the premise that our students are incapable of developing an engaged relationship with this kind of text.

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