

Crash! The Currency Crisis in American Culture

A perspective from NCTE President-Elect Carol Jago

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Of all types of writing, writing about literature may seem the least practical. Who apart from scholars and English majors analyzes poetry after the age of 18? Even book reviewers don't write the kinds of essays commonly assigned in school. Why do teachers devote so much effort to developing an arcane skill? Because writing about literature disciplines the mind. It challenges students to look closely into what they read and express clearly and powerfully what they find there. Meeting this challenge entails more than identifying correct answers to teachers' questions. It requires deep reading and analytical thinking—skills that will serve students well whatever their futures may hold.

Too often instruction in English classes has been an occasion for teachers who know and love literature to showcase what they love and show off what they know. Students come away from such classes—and this is when they are done well—in awe of their teachers but with little confidence in their own ability to read and write about literature. Louise Rosenblatt asserts in *Literature as Exploration*, "The problem that a teacher faces first of all, then, is the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature. Unfortunately, many of the practices and much of the tone of literature teaching have precisely the opposite effect" (61). Classrooms from preschool through twelfth grade should be places where the vital experience of literature takes place every day.

Prepared to Make a Living, Make a Life, Make a Difference

Some argue that reading and writing about literature does little to prepare students for the real world. They see the study of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, as superfluous to helping students make a living. But making a living isn't enough. The young people entrusted to our care need to know how to make a life. And real life all too often poses moral dilemmas like the one Atticus Finch confronted when he stood up for his beliefs in court and in so doing put his own

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children at risk. Walking a mile in Atticus’s shoes, vicariously experiencing both his fear and his courage, can help to prepare students for the hard choices they will make in their own lives. Students need to be prepared to make a living, to make a life, and—even in defeat like Atticus Finch—to make a difference.

Literature reflects the human condition. Reading about heroes like Janie Crawford and Huck Finn who must fend for themselves helps put our own experiences into perspective and sometimes gives us the strength to carry on. When Huck decides to “light out for the Territory,” readers feel his discomfort with rules and manners and begin to reflect on the compromises we all make to live in “civilized” company.

From *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Mark Twain

Tom’s most well now, and got his bullet around his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so there ain’t nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I’d a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn’t a tackled it, and ain’t a-going to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.

Reflecting on Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy,” students discover that they are not alone—neither in their misery nor in their bliss. They begin to understand Maya Angelou’s allusion to the Dunbar poem in her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. They are reminded of Countee Cullen’s “Yet Do I Marvel” and see connections to Dunbar’s commentary on the plight of a caged bird as a metaphor for a circumscribed life.

Sympathy

Paul Laurence Dunbar

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
 When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
 And the river flows like a stream of glass;
 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
 And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
 I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
 For he must fly back to his perch and cling
 When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
 And they pulse again with a keener sting—
 I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
 When he beats his bars and he would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep
 core,
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
 I know why the caged bird sings!

In his collection of essays *A Voice from the Attic*, Robertson Davies describes the kind of readers I want my students to become: “those who read for pleasure, but not for idleness; who read for pastime but not to kill time; who love books, but do not live by books” (7). Davies defines a love of literature “not as a manifestation of fashion, not as a substitute for life, but as one of the greatest of the arts, existing for the delight of mankind.” I measure my success in the classroom by the intellectual delight my students take in their reading. I want their hearts to leap up both when they behold a rainbow in the sky and when they read William Wordsworth’s poem. I hope they find solace and surprise in the written word as students in my class and throughout their lives.

My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold

William Wordsworth

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began,
 So is it now I am a man,
 So be it when I shall grow old
 Or let me die!
 The Child is father of the Man:
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

But Why Do We Need to Write an Essay? Can't We Just Talk about the Book?

Robert Scholes explains in *Textual Power*, “Reading is the first step in all thought and all communication. It is essential; but it is incomplete in itself. It requires both interpretation and criticism for completion” (58). In my experience—32 years teaching middle and high school students—the best method for helping students learn how to interpret and criticize literature is through writing. Writing about literature invites them to construct personal interpretations and then support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Such writing requires students to pause and think hard about what they have read. While some teachers (and many students) feel that having to write an essay about a book ruins the reading experience, I think otherwise. Knowing that they will be writing an analytical essay about what they are reading often lends urgency and intensity to our classroom conversations. Writing becomes a vehicle for exploring students’ understanding of what they have read. If the product, a 700–1,000-word essay on Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, seems artificial and school-based, so be it. The intellectual process that students have employed to compose the paper is genuine.

I require students to write about literature because writing helps develop literary understanding. Composing an

analytical essay forces students to reread with a purpose and to scrutinize the text, as well as to analyze the author’s craft. It also demands that they do this work for themselves. No matter how hard I try to engage all my students in classroom discussions, I have never been able to ensure that everyone takes part. Writing demands individual performance. As a result, each student essay provides me with a window through which to view the particular student’s emerging competence as a reader and writer. I have ceased to be surprised when I discover a stunningly insightful essay from a student who hardly murmured a word in class. Many individuals can achieve on paper what they find difficult to demonstrate aloud in class.

Students write poorly about literature when they don’t understand what they are writing about. In a familiar scenario, the teacher develops a series of lessons for guiding students through challenging literature such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Great Gatsby*. Once the final page of the book has been turned, the teacher assigns a paper, usually focusing on an aspect of the text that has been thoroughly presented and discussed. Why are we surprised when all the essays sound alike? Though I sometimes ask students to write to a prompt, students seem to write more authentically when the idea for the essay is their own. Requiring them to develop their own focus for a paper also places responsibility for content squarely on the writer. This freedom has greatly diminished complaints of “I hated the prompt” or “I didn’t understand the question.” My students seem to take more care with their essays when writing about something that intrigues them than when writing about a question that intrigues me. They have more reason for revision when the ideas being showcased aren’t borrowed but their own. Analytical responses to literature that emerge from their own interpretations of a work—even when imperfectly accomplished—always seem to have more heart.

In common with any other academic discipline, literary analysis employs a language all its own. While this specialized vocabulary may at first pose obstacles for students, literary terminology is a tool for readers to explain what they see. Terms such as *clarify*, *motif*, and *device* give writers words to describe how an author achieves an effect. Banishing them from our classroom to simplify the study of literature makes students less, not more, articulate. Without the words, without knowledge of this specialized

vocabulary of the discipline, students are hamstrung in their endeavors to analyze a text. This is not to suggest that reading literature should become an exercise in identification: spot the synecdoche, find the foil, highlight the hyperbole—a game of literary Trivial Pursuit. Instead we should make literary terminology the everyday language of our classroom. Once my students become comfortable using the specialized vocabulary, they revel in its use. They can see for themselves how it helps them explain their ideas, as well as sound like professionals.

Working in Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Given many teenagers' reluctance to read, handing out a Shakespeare play or a Homeric epic—let alone *Moby Dick* or *Crime and Punishment*—may seem like folly for both teacher and student. But to me it seems wrong that schools should reserve challenging literature for honors students or that only private school students should continue to study these works. Aside from the elitism that such curricular decisions betray, caring teachers defend the use of alternative, simplified reading selections for nonhonors students in the belief that their students don't have the vocabulary, background knowledge, or reading stamina to follow complex syntax. Besides, they argue, today's kids won't read anything that is old. I argue that the only way students will ever acquire academic vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading stamina is by reading complex works. Unless you grow up on a farm or take up horseback riding, it's unlikely that you will know that a farrier is an expert in equine hoof care. That is, unless you read books.

I worry that in our determination to provide students with literature they can relate to, we end up teaching works that students actually don't need much help with at the expense of teaching classics that they most certainly do need assistance negotiating. This is not to suggest that we stop putting contemporary literature into students' hands, but only to remind ourselves that we should be teaching in what Lev Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky explains, "the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it" (72). If students can read a book on their own, it probably isn't the best choice for classroom study. Classroom texts should

pose intellectual challenges to young readers and make students stronger readers, stronger people, for having studied them.

Apart from a rare few, the young people I teach do not pick up classics with much enthusiasm. At first they groan, "Three hundred pages of poetry!" and moan, "I can't do it. Not one word of what I read last night makes sense." They always hope that if they complain enough, I will abandon the book for something simpler. Instead I assure them that I will show them how to unlock this book for themselves. I tell students that the satisfaction they will feel at meeting this textual challenge is an intellectual reward that I refuse to deny them. Does every student experience this reward with every book? Of course not. But many who never expected to be able to read challenging literature find that with a little help from their teacher and classmates, the book isn't as daunting as they first thought. As a result, they make progress through Vygotsky's zone of proximal development toward independence.

Once teachers decide that a classic of literature is "too difficult" for students or that writing about literature is too difficult a task for any but honors or Advanced Placement students, we begin the devaluation of the currency that will ultimately render our own coin worthless. Once we disdain to teach works that need to be taught to be understood, we not only debase the coinage of literature but also bring into question our own function. It is precisely because literature needs to be taught that we need teachers of literature. Reading literature demands a discipline of students' thought; teaching literature demands a discipline of our own thought. It may be simpler to avoid the hurdles of understanding; indeed, all we need to do is to question the value of literature itself and, *abracadabra*, we have eliminated the need to teach it. To what end? So that our students can be better prepared for the real world? Preparation for the real world includes understanding that, along with Pip, we all have great expectations and that, like Odysseus, we are all on a journey of self-discovery.

To thrive in the real world, students need to be able to do more than Twitter. They need to be able to develop extended arguments that demonstrate a careful analysis of complex ideas. They need to be able to critique a brave new world in which reading is reduced to skimming and scanning websites, in which templates replace writing,

in which the arts are extracurricular, and in which culture is reserved for the few rather than the many. If we aren't careful, in a generation we will have made our students unprepared for almost everything that this great nation once used to value—independence, freethinking, and the pursuit of happiness. Part of our responsibility as teachers is to help students discover that the pursuit of happiness does not begin and end with the purchase of a new car. In his travels through nineteenth-century America, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "There is hardly a pioneer's hut which does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember reading the feudal drama of *Henry V* for the first time in a log cabin" (119). As we move through the twenty-first century, let's be careful not to lose in the name of progress and preparedness the texts and habits of mind that have brought us this far.

When student grumbling about the hard work of reading and writing about literature gets me down, I take heart from Emily Dickinson's poem "He ate and drank the precious Words." With the Belle of Amherst, I believe that literature loosens spirits and in so doing offers liberty to heart and mind. This is what I call preparedness for the real world.

He ate and drank the precious Words

Emily Dickinson

He ate and drank the precious Words
His Spirit grew robust
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust

He danced along the dingy Days
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book – What Liberty
A loosened spirit brings –

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