

Negotiating Story Structures

Chapter Three, WITH RIGOR FOR ALL: TEACHING THE CLASSICS TO CONTEMPORARY STUDENTS by Carol Jago,
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In 1838 Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal (Dec. 31), "As the least drop of wine colors the whole goblet, so the least particle of truth colors our whole life. It is never isolated, or simply added as dollars to our stock. When any real progress is made, we unlearn and learn anew, what we thought we knew before." Every group of students I meet causes me to unlearn and learn anew. I keep hoping that one day I'll get it all figured out, but some new particle of truth always seems to be coloring the water.

A few things have remained constant. During these years I have been in the same classroom facing the same desks, gazing out over the heads of my students through the same dirty windows. On September 15th, I hand out copies of *The Odyssey*. Stop by in February, and you will find me reading *Julius Caesar*. But beneath these superficial constants, my teaching has shifted quite dramatically.

Like many other teachers in the early 1990s, I was an indefatigable optimist. I believed in a kind of literary field of dreams. Build the ideal classroom, and they will come. Offer them books, and they will read. Although teachers elsewhere have made such classrooms work, I was having trouble ignoring the fact that many of my thirty-six ethnically diverse urban scholars were not growing as readers the way I hoped they would. In my own English department, I saw teacher after teacher abandon *Great Expectations* and *Huckleberry Finn*, insisting that second-language learners simply didn't have the reading skills to comprehend these difficult texts. Honors students, of course, continued to be assigned both.

In her disturbing book, *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit raises the thorny issue of what happens to minority and underprivileged students when skills are devalued in the classroom:

A critical thinker who lacks the skills demanded by employers and institutions of higher learning can aspire to financial and social status only within the disenfranchised underworld.... If minority people are to effect the change which will allow them to truly progress we must insist on skills within the context of critical and creative thinking. ¹

Delpit suggests an alternative to child-centered and process methods for minority children. She explains:

I do not advocate a simplistic "basic skills" approach for children outside of the culture of power. It would be (and has been) tragic to operate as if these children were incapable of critical and high order thinking and reasoning. Rather, I suggest that schools must provide these children the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home. This does not mean separating children according to family background, but instead, ensuring that each classroom incorporates strategies appropriate for all the children in its confines. ²

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How a Story Works

Delpit got me thinking. Maybe the reason non-honors students didn't have the "reading skills" teachers declared necessary for negotiating the classics was that we hadn't taught them very well. I am not speaking here about teaching students how to read but rather about teaching students how stories work. In our urgency to abandon the lecture format, literature teachers have adopted too passive a role. Clearly we want to continue to make genuine student response the cornerstone of the classroom, but withholding information about how a story works may make it impossible for some students to have any response at all.

One has only to consider Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to see that truly "novel" texts continue to be written. But writers build stories with a common set of blocks, drawing from a stock of possibilities familiar to any experienced reader: A hero/heroine engages the reader's sympathy. A problem develops. A foil appears to allow the reader to see the hero/heroine more clearly. The problem gets worse. Help appears. More complications arise, but the hero/heroine prevails. All is resolved. Sometimes, in the words of the Prince at the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*, "All are punish'd."

While such story structures may be so familiar to an English teacher that they hardly bear commenting upon, this is not the case for many high school readers. Some of my students have touched only books that teachers put in their hands and have never, in fact, read a single one from cover to cover. One approach to solving this problem is to create a vibrant outside reading program for every English classroom. Another is to use the classics to teach students how stories work. I do not believe it is a matter of either/or. Students need both.

Let me use Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* as an example. Now I am quick to admit the weakness of the lecture format when used day after day with teenagers. But the first pages of Shelley's novel pose inexperienced readers a real problem. The story opens with a group of letters written by Robert Walton, an explorer adrift in the Arctic sea, to his sister in London. Without a few words from me about the epistolary format and about how Walton becomes, like us, the listener to Victor Frankenstein's strange tale, many students are lost before they have even begun. The simplest of clues and guiding questions seem to help:

1. What do you notice about the dates of these letters?
2. Why do you think Robert writes to his sister if there is no way to post the letters?
3. What does Robert reveal about himself here?
4. Where does Mary Shelley (through Robert) explain to the reader how the format of her story will now change?
5. Can you think of any other stories or movies that are structured like this?

My questions aim to tease out from students an understanding of how Shelley's story is structured. I think it unrealistic to assume that most of them can be assigned these pages to read and that they will figure out the structure for themselves. Victor Frankenstein doesn't start telling the story students thought they were going to hear until page 30. If I don't offer some guidance—a kind of reader's map—through the first 29, too many give up.

It also doesn't seem fair to teach novels like *Frankenstein* only to students who instinctively understand how a series of one-sided letters like Robert Walton's works. When my colleagues in the English department urge that we simplify the curriculum for struggling students and replace the classics with shorter, more accessible novels, I know they are motivated by kindness. But the real kindness would be to give all students the tools to handle challenging texts. We aren't being paid simply to assist students who hardly need us. We're being paid to find a way for all students to develop as readers.

So I tell my students about how stories work. I remind them to pay close attention to who is narrating the story and to whom. Where appropriate, I point out foreshadowing. I don't monopolize the classroom conversations, but neither do I hold back when I feel that students are lost.

Connections Beyond the Story

Students had read about half of *Frankenstein*, but they were restless. I can always tell when their reading of a piece of literature is losing momentum by the snippets of conversation floating up to my desk. "Nothing happens." "I fell asleep and missed the part where the monster came to life." "Victor Frankenstein just rambles." And the most ominous of all, "Boring."

I love this book and thought I had been doing a pretty good job of teaching the Gothic tale of pride and prejudice (my own interpretation, which I love talking about to anyone who will listen), but something was missing. The students weren't hooked. I knew they were doing the reading because our discussion the day before about Victor Frankenstein's passion for his research had gone very well. Their eyes were dutifully passing over the pages, but their hearts just weren't in it.

The lesson I had planned was going to be a close look at Mary Shelley's uses of language, explaining how syntax and diction created the story's tone. But experience told me that I had better think fast if I didn't want to spend the hour asking questions nobody except me cared much about. Rummaging through my *Frankenstein* files, I found a magazine article about cloning that raised the question, "Are there some scientific experiments that should never be conducted?" Handing out copies of this essay to the class, I asked students what they thought. Are there some scientific advances that the human race is not and never will be able to handle?

Hands flew into the air. Students saw at once the connection between the moral dilemma of cloning and Victor Frankenstein's creation. They argued that even the obvious medical advantage of being able to clone new hearts or livers would soon be outweighed by the cloning of super-soldiers. The science fiction buffs in the room had a field day telling tales of genetically engineered races destroying the world. Many students had recently read *Brave New World* and used Aldous Huxley's dystopia as an example of what can happen when scientists rather than humanists run the show.

My role as teacher shifted from grand inquisitor to traffic controller. "First Allen, then Melinda, then Andrew. We'll get to you, Joe. Hold on." The hardest part was making sure students were listening to one another rather than simply waiting their turn to expound. I complimented those who began their comments with a reference to something someone else had said. This helped. When the conversation turned to the question of whether science might someday make religion obsolete, I thought the windows might explode from the passionate intensity of my students' arguments. They had so much to say.

At the bell, the room erupted into a dozen conversations. A handful of students bolted to the bookshelf where I had copies of *Brave New World*. I shouted over the din that they needed to read Chapters 12 through 14 of *Frankenstein* by Monday. Spent, I collapsed at my desk, reasonably certain that the big ideas in Mary Shelley's novel had finally come alive for these readers. The rest of *Frankenstein* should make better sense now. And to think that some people consider teaching literature genteel, scholarly work.

I resolved that tomorrow we would review our rules of classroom discussion:

- Students must talk to one another, not just to me or to the air.
- Students must listen to one another. To ensure this happens, they must either address the previous speaker or offer a reason for changing the subject.
- Students must all be prepared to participate. If I call on someone and he or she has nothing to say, the appropriate response is, "I'm not sure what I think about that, but please come back to me."

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Yvonne Hutchison, a master teacher at one of the most challenging middle schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, helped me create this set of coherent guidelines for classroom discussion. She asserts that we must assume that all students have important things to say but that many of them are unfamiliar with the rules of scholarly discourse. A few students seem to know these rules instinctively. But if we want all students to participate in civil classroom discussion, we need to teach them how.

Student-Run Discussions and Projects

One method that has worked for me has been to put student desks into a circle and call the day's lesson a "seminar." The word itself seems to lend an air of importance to the discussion. I then do the following:

1. Tell students that everyone must participate at least once during the seminar.
2. Explain to students that no one needs to raise a hand to be called on, but all students should be sensitive to each other, noticing when someone seems to have something to say but may be too shy to jump into the conversation. I give them the words they might use: "Luke, you look as though you disagree. What are you thinking?" If a quiet student can't be heard, I tell other students that they must ask him or her to speak up. This shows they really want to know what this person has to say.
3. Teach students how to deal with the compulsive talkers in their midst. Pointing out how even motor-mouthed Diana must at some point inhale, I tell them that this is the moment when others can politely interrupt. (I say this lovingly, and the Dianas in the class always laugh. They know that others stop listening when they rattle on for too long.)
4. Tell students that silence is a part of the seminar, too. It means people are thinking. If the silence goes on for too long, they might want to open up *Frankenstein* and see if there is a particular passage they would like to ask one another about. They might want to read the passage aloud.
5. Let students know that I will be sitting outside their circle and that I must remain silent until the last five minutes of class. I will be taking notes of things I observe during the seminar and will be sharing these with them. My comments will not be about the content of their discussion but rather about how students have conducted themselves. I focus on the positive behaviors, the subtle ways in which students help one another join in the discussion.

In my experience such seminars work best with 20 or fewer students. With my larger classes I have tried dividing the students into two groups, but it never seems to work quite as well. My presence—my silent, note-taking self, sitting outside the circle—is a key piece of what makes students take the seminar seriously. I have yet to figure out how to clone myself so I can watch two groups at once.

Last fall after students had finished reading both *Beowulf* and John Gardner's *Grendel* (the *Beowulf* story told from the point of view of the monster), I told students that instead of taking a test or writing a comparison/contrast essay about the two books, we would hold a seminar. Since this was to take the place of a formal assessment, everyone would have to speak up and participate. Students readily agreed. As I wasn't going to be asking questions or calling upon them, it was up to the group to generate the discussion and, in doing so, to demonstrate to me their understanding of the two books.

Melinda began: "The last line in *Grendel* made me think again about how I felt about the monster. I mean the whole book sets you up to sympathize with him, but look how he finishes: 'Poor Grendel's had an accident. *So may you all.*' That's really mean and malicious."

"I agree. It's blood lust," remarked Joe. "This is an evil monster who deserved to be killed." But Nicole saw it differently. "Wait, look at how he was treated in his life, no mother he could talk to, *Beowulf* out to get him, no friends, no one to teach him how to behave."

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Jorge interrupted, "Grendel was just something in the hero's way, something for the hero to slay so he could win fame and have lots of people sing about him."

"That's how it was in *Beowulf*," Nicole continued, "but in Gardner's book you could see how the monster felt. You knew what he was thinking. In a way, I think Grendel was trapped in a role. I feel sorry for him."

The conversation continued in this vein for the next 40 minutes. To anyone who delights in watching teenagers learn, the interval was breathtaking. Students listened to one another, probed each other's observations, pointed to the text. When it was over I could have hugged every one of them. Instead, I let them know that this was as good as the study of literature gets. All the other activities and exercises we complete along the way are simply preparation for just this kind of conversation among readers about texts.

After class Melinda came up to let me know that they really should have had more time for the discussion. I often wonder if students are as blunt with all their teachers. No one ever seems to hesitate to tell me what I should do better. Of course, she was right.

I remember another group of students who had finished reading *Frankenstein*. It was the year when trials were all the rage in Los Angeles: the Menendez brothers, Heidi Fleiss, O. J. Simpson. My students were experts in courtroom drama and procedures. Sophomore Mike Regalbuto had the idea that we should put Victor Frankenstein on trial for the murders his monster committed. The class loved the idea. Within a few days roles were assigned, teams of attorneys had been to the library for research, robes were found for the judge, and court was in session. Students had the protocols down pat.

My favorite moment occurred when the defense put Dr. Alfred Nobel on the stand. Rebecca Rainoff asked the eminent scientist if he felt he should be held responsible for the destructive uses dynamite has been put to in the world. He said, "Of course not." To which Rebecca responded, "If Dr. Nobel is not culpable for the destruction his creation, dynamite, has wrought, then how can you, the jury, convict Victor Frankenstein for what his creation has done? I rest my case."

Scaffolding for Diction and Syntax

These students were caught up in the lesson. I can't remember anyone asking me for a grade on the project. The quality of their production was recompense enough. They saw their work and knew it was good. But I don't believe most of these students would have been able to move beyond the text with such confidence without considerable instructional scaffolding along the way. Young readers are unused to negotiating sentences like this:

I was hurried away by fury; revenge alone endowed me with strength and composure; it mounded my feelings and allowed me to be calculating and calm at periods when otherwise delirium or death would have been my portion.³

The help students needed was simple enough to provide: "See all those semicolons? For a minute, pretend they are periods. Does the passage make sense to you now? Why do you think Shelley chose to string those ideas together? What effect does the longer sentence have on you as a reader? How is this different from the effect created by a series of shorter ones?" I drew students' attention to the way in which punctuation is often a guide to negotiating complex syntax. We needed to unpack only a few sentences like this before students found they could manage Shelley's syntax on their own.

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Diction was another challenge. Borrowing the idea and the butcher paper from a first-grade teacher, I posted a word wall. As we read through novel, students posted words whose meaning they did not know. As I wanted to make this a lesson in building meaning from context clues, I asked students to indicate the page number in the text where the words could be found. From a single night's reading, they collected the following:

sullen
epoch
precipices
pallid
immutable
pinnacle
mutability
dissipated
odious
dormant
slaked

cabriolet
prognosticate
depravity
ignominious
wantonly
timorous
approbation
guile
obdurate
perdition
inexorable

My goal was to encourage students to explore the range of Mary Shelley's vocabulary. They shared the words they found and tried to figure out what each word meant based on how it was used in the sentence as well as on what they knew about what was going on in the story at that moment. Quite often their guesses were on target. We turned to the *Oxford English Dictionary* only to verify our estimations. Doing this kind of word study together teaches students strategies for negotiating a passage full of unfamiliar words. Making connections between unfamiliar words and familiar words—for example, *mutability* with *mutant* and *prognosticate* with *prognosis*—also demonstrates to students that they know more than they think they know. It helps build their confidence as readers of difficult prose.

I also hoped that students would begin to see how the more words an author has at her disposal, the more subtle her prose can be. Was I teaching "basic skills"? I suppose so, but it never felt as though I had distorted Shelley's text as I did so.

Teaching About Reading Theory

Another method for working with challenging texts is to teach students about theories of reading. Most students have no idea that reading is a much-studied act and the entire schools of thought have grown out of this primary skill. Few students have ever given much thought to their own reading beyond "I like to read" or "I don't like to read." In *You Gotta BE the Book*, Jeff Wilhelm describes research that he conducted in his middle school classroom examining the habits of teenage readers. I cannot do justice here to the complexity of Wilhelm's research, but his case studies of three engaged readers point the way to classroom instruction that can help all students become accomplished readers. Wilhelm found that

the response of engaged readers is intensely visual, empathic, and emotional. By focusing in class on the importance of these evocative responses, that is, entering the story world, visualizing people and places, and taking up relationships to characters, less engaged readers are given strategies for experiencing texts and were helped to rethink reading.⁴

Wilhelm challenges teachers to consider:

Why do some kids love reading? What is rewarding and engaging about reading for these students? What do these engaged readers "do" as they read that makes the experience fun, satisfying, and engaging for them?

Why do other kids hate reading? What in their experience has contributed to their negative view?

I realized that year after year, I had encountered students who obviously resisted reading. But they seemed to be a minority, and eventually—I'm ashamed to say—I'd really just given up on them as far as becoming readers was concerned. It was when I encountered a whole class of them that I could not blame them instead of myself, the materials, or the method. Eighth grade remedial reading produced a crisis that required a new way of thinking about and teaching the act of reading. If I wished to pursue my job of developing readers, then resistance and lack of engagement were compelling issues that had to be deeply considered.⁵

Pursuing answers to these questions, Wilhelm experimented with incorporating discussions about reading theory and literary conventions into his lessons. What he found was that as students became increasingly aware that they were actually going to have to "do" something to make a text comprehensible, their frustrations with reading decreased. Suddenly it wasn't that anything was wrong with them (or with the text) causing them to find a book incomprehensible, but that they simply weren't doing the things that good readers do when they read. As Umberto Eco explains, "Every text is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work."

Without diminishing importance of good early reading instruction or the difficulties children with disabilities face when reading, I would like to assert that many "poor readers" are actually lazy readers. This is not a reflection on their character. It's simply that no one ever told these children that reading was going to be work. Even when students dutifully eyeball the assigned pages, few think the homework assignment asked them for anything more. Students turn on their stereos, kick back on their beds, and expect the book to transfer information from its pages to their brains. While such a passive stance might work perfectly well for reading *Surfer* magazine, it is grossly inadequate for texts like *The Odyssey*.

An exchange between two of Wilhelm's students—one an engaged reader, the other a struggling reader—demonstrates how broad the chasm is between students who don't and students who do know what a text demands of the reader:

John: I can't believe you do all that stuff when you read! Holy crap, I'm not doing...like nothing...compared to you.

Ron: I can't believe you don't do something. If you don't you're not reading, man.... It's gotta be like wrestling or watching a movie or playing a video game...you've got to like...be there!⁶

Reading as a Creative Act

I want students to know that it is not enough simply to eyeball a page of print and expect the story to come alive or even make sense. A reader needs to act. Louise Rosenblatt explains:

The benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself. He responds to the little black marks on the page, or to the sounds of the words in his head, and he "makes something of them." The verbal symbols enable him to draw on his past experiences with what the words point to in life and literature. The text presents these words in a new and unique pattern. Out of these he is enabled actually to mold a new experience, the literary work.⁷

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The challenge for any literature teacher is to make these "creative activities" visible to students. Struggling readers often have no idea about the things that expert readers do inside their heads when they read. According to Rosenblatt, good readers conduct a transaction with the text. The reader creates meaning from the words on the page while the text causes the reader to reexamine what he or she knows. The text and the reader interact.

What is so powerful to me about Rosenblatt's work is how she situates the study of literature at the center of every child's life. It is not only the college-bound or future English teachers who need the nourishment that literature can provide, but all students. She explains that "literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers."⁸ For most students, for most readers of any age, what is most important is the human experience that literature presents. "The reader seeks to participate in another's vision—to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible."⁹

Last year I taught a class of extremely reluctant ninth-grade readers. In this small class of 20, there were seven special education students and five ESL students. The four girls in the class staked out their territory in the desks near the door. As I handed out copies of *Romeo and Juliet*, I told the class that this story was going to remind them a lot of people they know and situations they've experienced. We worked our way through the play—acting out scenes, discussing the characters, drawing parallels to teenage life as they knew it. In their journals, students wrote about arguments they had with their parents and fights they had witnessed. We studied the formal elements of Shakespeare's play, but only as they functioned in the total literary experience. Feeling and connection had to come first.

Rosenblatt theorizes that literature is a form of personal experience and that as such it "has many potentialities that dynamic and informed teaching may sustain."¹⁰ I interpret her discoveries as follows:

1. Literature fosters the imagination that any healthy democracy needs—the ability to understand the needs and hopes of others and the ability to see how our actions affect other people's lives.
2. Literature offers readers images of behavior and attitudes other than their own.
3. Literature teaches teenagers about the many possible ways of life, including a variety of philosophies from which the reader is then free to choose.
4. Literature can help readers make sound choices through vicarious trial and error or experimentation—through experiencing in the text the consequences of characters' actions.
5. Literature can assist readers to view their own personalities and problems objectively and so to handle them better.
6. Literature, through which teenagers meet a wide range of temperaments and value systems, may free them from fears, guilt, and insecurity engendered by too-narrow a view of normality.
7. Literature can offer socially beneficial avenues for impulses that might otherwise find expression in antisocial behavior.

Many of the students in my ninth-grade class were adept at antisocial behavior. Getting them to sit still for more than 10 minutes and to participate in classroom discussion without putting one another down was a daily challenge. But as we made our way through *Romeo and Juliet*, I felt that what Rosenblatt describes was occurring before my eyes. The students' behavior was a result of their insecurity. As we talked and wrote about how the Montagues and Capulets as well as gangs on our campus behaved toward one another, students seemed to expand their sense of normalcy. Carlos, a bilingual student who has attended several different schools both in Los Angeles and in Puerto Rico over the course of his 14 years, compared the Prince's final speech with our school principal's rule that anyone involved in a fight will automatically be expelled. Here is the speech:

Capulet, Montague,
 See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
 That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love!
 And I, for winking at your discords too,
 Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punish'd.
 (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 5, scene 3)

And here is our dialogue:

Carlos: I don't think the principle's rule is fair because if someone disrespects me I'm not going to let it go, but I guess she doesn't want to be caught winking at our fights.

Me: Why do you think that is?

Carlos: Oh, she probably feels responsible when anybody on campus gets hurt, which I don't agree with either, but I think that's just the way she is.

Diana [the most excitable and outspoken of the four girls in the class, also bilingual]: You know Lettie who was in this class the first week? She got kicked out for fighting and sent to Uni (University High School). The principal didn't care who started it. She just expelled everybody.

Carlos: I think she wanted to make an example for other kids. If the principal says "community" one more time, I think I am going to hit somebody.

Me: Don't, Carlos. You know it would break her heart to lose a brace of students.

The Importance of Close Reading

Careless interpretations of Rosenblatt's theory of reader response have led some teachers to abandon the practice of close reading. What is unfortunate about this loss is that student responses, however heartfelt, which are based upon casual or inaccurate readings, often lead the reader into confusion rather than to understanding. Teachers need to take time in class to show students how to examine a text in minute detail, word by word, sentence by sentence. Anne E. Berthoff claims that the chief means of teaching critical reading and writing is to "offer students assisted invitations to look and look against words, sentences, paragraphs."¹¹ Only then will they develop the skills they need to be powerful readers. Berthoff goes on to explain:

The disappearance of close reading is not to be confronted with the calm resignation (or secret jubilation?) evinced by those redrawing the boundaries. Without it, as the chief instrument of Practical Criticism, "reader response" is merely personal, merely psychological, merely opinion. The chief value of Practical Criticism is that it is—practical: it is pragmatic. Close reading teaches that the transaction with the text is always tentative and subject to the pragmatic maxim: "If we take it—metaphor, syntax, word, line—this way, what difference would it make to the way we read the rest of the poem? The opus? The age?" Close reading is entailed in critical reading. It is not an elitist, nose-to-the-text, words-on-the-page pedantry but the way of attending to the interplay of saying and meaning.¹²

The kind of close reading that Berthoff describes does not come naturally to teenagers. When explaining what they think about what they have read, most prefer a broad brushstroke rather than a fine line of reasoning. The challenge for the teacher is to help students refine how they examine a piece of literature without destroying their confidence as readers. I start with students' responses but ask them prodding questions that encourage students to return to the text for answers:

- You say you hate the way Odysseus lies to everyone he meets when he returns to Ithaca. Let's look at that scene with Penelope again. What is Odysseus trying to find out with his lies?

- The scene where Odysseus's dog dies of a broken heart upon seeing his master is one of my favorite scenes, too. What does this moment tell you about Odysseus? Read those lines again. What does the state the dog is in tell you about the state of Odysseus's kingdom?
- It is indeed "gross" when all the unfaithful serving maids are hanged. Look at the epic simile Homer uses to describe this scene: "As when either thrushes with their long wings or doves/ Rush into a net that has been set in a thicket/ As they come in to roost, and a dreadful bed takes them in/ So they held their heads in a row, and about the necks/ Of all there were nooses, that they might die most piteously/ They struggled a little with their feet, but not very long." Why do you think Homer compares the serving women to birds?

Teachers need to go beyond encouraging responses from student readers and push them to understand exactly what the author has done with words and sentences, syntax, and diction that elicited such a response in them as readers.

Berthoff concludes her essay, which is called "Reclaiming the Active Mind":

I have been suggesting that close reading and close observation soften and sharpen hard, dull wits (and bright, confident wits) because they offer occasions to enjoy a pleasure in the exercise of the mind. To practice Practical Criticism by rehabilitating looking and looking again and reading slowly—and again—would thus be to reclaim the Imagination, the agency of the active mind.¹³

When the bell rings, I want students to leave class tired, exhausted from how well they have exercised their minds, yet happy about all that they have accomplished.

As I reflect upon my own metamorphosis from non-judgmental facilitator to a more assertive readers' guide, I think that what prompted my changes as much as Lisa Delpit's research was the realization that most student readers are nothing like me. When I was growing up I did little else but read. It wasn't a matter of having an unhappy childhood; I simply preferred characters in books for playmates. I read indiscriminately, helter-skelter, with no thought for improving my mind. I believed everyone and everything me boring. Everything except for books.

I remember a Christmas day when I was 15. Trying to please a most difficult teenager, my godmother had given me a copy of Erich Segal's *Love Story*. I devoured the short novel in the interval between washing dishes and sit-around-the-tree-and-talk-about-old-times. I hated it. And I loved hating it. Arrogantly scornful, I remember descending the stairs full of myself and certain that the sentimentality of Segal's story demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt the patent intellectual inferiority of my entire family. I hasten to say that I have come to revise this point of view regarding my wonderful and most loving, indulgent family. I have penance done and like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* "penance more will do." But at 15 I defined myself against this book chosen by someone who thought she knew me.

When my teachers began assigning classics like *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *The Once and Future King*, I was in heaven. I loved the fact that the books were long and that these authors had lots of other books I could read next. I suppose if I had had more friends I might have discovered much earlier that most other teenagers didn't share my enthusiasms, but as it was I continued for years with my nose in a book.

When I became a teacher, I quickly realized that most students are unwilling to do the amount of reading that I had taken for granted. I adjusted. But what took me much longer to figure out was just how much help students needed in order to be able to negotiate classic texts. I had come to these books with considerable reading experience. I didn't know how much I knew and had no names to put to the things I knew, but in a very deep way I understood how stories worked.

The students I teach, for the most part, have no such background. They have enormous experience and vast knowledge about a range of things that I was totally ignorant about at their age and about many aspects of life I continue to find baffling. I also assure you that every year I teach at least a half dozen avid, addicted readers. But apart from making sure that these students always have a book to read, they are not the ones who need my help and expertise.

M. E. Kerr wrote a novel engagingly titled *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me*. Without meaning to, teachers often convey a similar message to students: "We'll teach you when you're more like us." Most teenagers will read exactly as much as is demanded of them. My own 16-year-old son would think nothing of stopping on page 43 if that was where the homework assignment ended—even if he knew that the mystery was solved, the gun went off, and the girl was saved on page 44. Discouraging? Yes. But as a teacher, I need to learn to work with this.

Having a more realistic sense of my students' attitudes toward reading and their need for scaffolding when reading challenging texts made me a better teacher. Does this make me a weakling for changing my mind about my methods? Not if, according to Thoreau, the "least particle of truth" can color our whole life. As long as I am a teacher, I intend to keep unlearning and learning anew what I thought before. It's my professional responsibility. It's also my passion.

"Negotiating Story Structures" (Chapter Three)

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