Gary Baughn

Avoid the Edifice Complex and Enjoy Teaching Chaucer

High school students can see reading *The Canterbury Tales* as daunting. To meet this challenge, Gary Baughn shares lessons "combining the literary and the vulgar" that fully engage the students with the text.

The last time I was in Chicago I chose to kill some time by walking around downtown. I decided that I might go up to the top of the Sears Tower, the tallest building in a city of skyscrapers. This plan failed because I walked right past it. How could I walk right past the second- or third-tallest building in the world? Easily. Its height was not apparent from the sidewalk. When I doubled back, the only reason I finally found the Sears Tower was that I noticed the name on the parking structure across the street. I eventually did look up, but the top was so far away that instead of feeling awe or respect, I just felt small. I think I had an Edifice Complex.

The Prologue

With certain masterpieces of literature we English teachers suffer the same neurosis. When we (and others) want our students to appreciate the greatness of a particular work, we impose a distance between the words and the reader that, added to the gulf created by time and subject matter, can make it nearly impossible for a high school student to feel any emotional connection. The added implication that only "genius" could produce "greatness" is sure to keep all but the most egotistical of students from believing that they could learn anything having to do with their own use of language from a masterpiece. While conveying the importance of a work or author may fulfill our duty as de facto guardians of culture, it probably runs counter to any hope we may have of our students' connecting it with their lives or their own writing.

I am about as far from being a deconstructionist as I am from being Chaucer, but I do believe that with a masterpiece like *The Canterbury Tales,* our students are better served when we take it apart and let them play with the pieces. The Sears Tower is monumental, but it had to be built—and it is best appreciated—one story at a time.

The first unit of the second semester of my eleventh-grade honors survey of British literature class always ends with a lot of students telling a lot of stories, but it begins with a lot of insults. In between, and the reason for it all, is Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* the perfect work to teach students about the richness of living in an oral culture. The characters he created, the stories he has them tell, and the framework that holds it all together make the work a masterpiece of literary architecture, best appreciated one aspect at a time.

The "Shovvet"

I start out by reviewing the basics of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhythm. I then tell the students to take out a piece of paper and answer the following questions as honestly as possible:

1. What is the name of someone you should tell off?
2. About what?
3. What is a name you could call that person that would express your anger?
4. What is a name you could call that person that would express your cleverness?

Copyright © 2003 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.

5. What is a specific thing that person does that annoys you?
6. What is a specific thing that person says that annoys you?
7. What is a past situation where you should have told off someone?
8. Name someone you know who should tell off someone else.
9. Name someone who should tell you off.

Many of the students enjoy writing down these answers in class, and sometimes I have to remind them to be quiet and to keep their answers private. When we are done with those questions, I ask them to use the rest of the page to play around. I tell them to take the name they are calling the person they should tell off and write down three negative adjectives that are also alliterative. Then I tell them to take the person's fault and write down three words that rhyme with it. I continue doing this with all the answers until they have a lot of musically related word groups on their page.

Then I tell them that poetry is "fewer words used in memorable ways," that poetry is also the difference between the answer to number three and number four, and that some of their word groups may be memorable enough for a poem. Before I ask them to write one, I hand out some lyric sheets that have the words to what I describe as "some music your grandparents thought your parents played too loud." We listen to "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Positively 4th Street" by Bob Dylan, "Big Shot" by Billy Joel, and "You're So Vain" by Carly Simon as examples of telling off someone poetically. There are some interesting stories about these songs, including the speculation Carly Simon has fueled regarding which famous lover's ego she is deflating, the near certainty that in "Positively 4th Street" Dylan is electronically replying to folk purists who objected to his switch to rock, and the possibility that Dylan is actually criticizing himself in parts of "Like a Rolling Stone."

I have been doing variations of this activity for more than twenty years, and students are interested because they can see people using language in a powerful way. The songs could obviously be updated, but I have resisted doing so because I am old, so my songs should be old, too. Recently, though, I have included the Spin Doctors' "Little Miss Can't Be Wrong" as one of my examples.

After they have listened to and discussed the lyrics, I ask students to write a poem in which someone is telling off someone else as poetically as possible. This assignment can stand alone or be modified in many ways, but as an introduction to the many constraints a poet such as Chaucer must work within, I make the following rules:

1. The poems must be in iambic pentameter (or pretty close).
2. The poems must use the Shakespearean rhyme scheme *(abab cdcd efef gg).*
3. The rhymes should reinforce meaning and should not appear to be forced.
4. The poems should include as many other musical devices as possible.
5. The poems should include at least one figurative device.
6. The speaker of the poem should call the person a name that is more clever than angry.
7. The poem should build towards the most clever insult, one that really "gets" the subject, which then becomes a part of the rhyming couplet at the end.
8. The poem should include enough specific behaviors, descriptions, actions, and sayings of the subject so that the subject would be unable to reply, "What do you mean?"
9. The writing should draw from the emotion of an actual situation without restricting itself artistically to that situation. Feel free to use several people as inspirations even though the poem may seem to be addressed to only one. Do not use names from any actual situation, and do not tell anyone for whom your insults are intended. (Mr. Baughn wants good poetry, not bloodshed.)

I call this piece of writing a "Shovvet," a term which gets the students' attention by irreverently combining the literary and the vulgar (as Chaucer did). Any groaning about the difficulty of this assignment is met by pointing to their sheets of paper where the musical groups of words have already given students a head start. I also keep plenty of rhyming dictionaries in the room. The two most difficult tasks for students in this assignment are creating a consistent rhythm using the stresses in the words and coming up with clever names rather than colorful but

trite obscenities. In the week it takes to complete this assignment, the students learn to appreciate the work and craft involved in constructing verse.

The Canterbury Tales

I next ask students to take out their literature text because we are starting a unit on Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales.* I tell them the premise of the *Tales,* emphasizing its derivation from the oral culture of the time, when information and stories were passed from generation to generation in rhymes that made them pleasant to hear and easier to remember. I mention that it was easier to rhyme in Chaucer's day due to the language's many declensional endings, and I direct them to the facing pages in our text where the prologue is reproduced in Middle and Modern English. While they look, I do what any teacher would do in this moment, the English teacher equivalent of speaking in tongues: recite the first fourteen lines of "The Prologue" in Middle English from memory, just as I had to do in senior English (Mr. Johnson, Badger High School, 1969). This performance is usually greeted with the same astonishment accorded to horses that manage to count.

Chaucerian **has many meanings, but to me it connotes a knowing, yet kindly, view of the human race from the top of society to the bottom.**

I then assign each student one of the characters in "The Prologue." The next day each will read the description of a character to us, and then point out what the narrator has managed to convey about each character in those few lines. I ask students to be especially aware of how the character may seem to be a type but how Chaucer shows us something that is beyond, underneath, or contrary to the type.

It usually takes a day and a half to go through everyone's reading and analysis, with the rest of the class taking notes on key phrases of characterization for each character. This forms the basis of a test eventually, but it also gives each student practice in reading iambic pentameter (which helps them with their "Shovvet" assignments) and gives them a glimpse of Chaucer's view of fellow pilgrims, which is shrewd and loving, as he sees beneath the surface of the members of his society and finds their humanity. *Chaucerian* has many meanings, but to me it connotes a knowing, yet kindly, view of the human race from the top of society to the bottom.

When we get to the Host, we talk about the framework of the *Tales* and how Chaucer expected each of the characters ultimately to tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two stories on the way back. I then tell students that Chaucer never finished the *Tales,* and so we have an incomplete masterpiece. Some of the characters they met in "The Prologue" never got to tell a story, and none of them got to tell all four stories they were meant to tell. This is a powerful moment that I will mine later in the unit, but at the time I can see students wondering about what was meant to happen but never did.

We do have the first story, and I explain that the pilgrims drew lots. Fortunately for the decorum of the time, the highest-ranking person, the Knight, drew the shortest lot. I give a very brief synopsis of this story's chivalry and gallantry, emphasizing how moral, long, and boring it is.

Now we come to a magical moment in the building of this masterpiece because the order of the storytellers and the solemnity of the subject matter has been established by that perfect, gentle knight; and yet Chaucer, having made his characters do the expected, decided instead to allow them to do what they want. The drunken Miller, out of sorts and out of order, interrupts the proceedings and demands to go next. He begins to tell a story about a carpenter who was a cuckold, taking the proceedings directly from chivalry to ribaldry. This causes the Reeve, a former carpenter, to protest the defamation, which causes the Miller to wonder out loud if the Reeve has been cuckolded, else why would he object? The Host quiets them and allows the drunken Miller to go out of turn but assures the Reeve equal time afterwards.

Chaucer has now created a structure appropriate to his time and ours, which is both flexible and inclusive. The stories can be told in any order. Not only are the stories important, but the storyteller's motive and the audience's reaction to the story also matter. The range of subject matter can fall anywhere between the exemplary and the embarrassing. The motives for telling stories can range from the noble to the nasty. What other work of literature can house this variety of humanity?

I then retell the Miller's story, quoting at key points and treating certain anatomical references as accurately yet politely as I can without destroying the humor. This can be challenging, but with juniors in high school I believe it is preferable for the

teacher in the classroom to decide what can be said, rather than abdicate that power to a translator who is years, miles, and many communities away. I go to this trouble because the third choice, not to teach "The Miller's Tale" at all, is ridiculous. That is not Chaucer. When I tell the students that a character "sticks his buttocks out the window and speaks with this part of the body in the only way that this part of the body is capable of utterance," the laugh I get is as big or bigger than if I had said the four-letter, Anglo-Saxon equivalent, and yet the students are laughing at exactly what Chaucer intended. When I finish the summary of "The Miller's Tale," the angry Reeve speaks up to defend carpenters and their wives by impugning millers and their wives, and I then retell "The Reeve's Tale," once again quoting and using euphemisms where appropriate.

When the laughter subsides, I say that it is clear that Chaucer has now established with these first three stories that anything goes. The stories can range from lofty to lowly, beautiful to libelous, uplifting to degrading. I then assign students "The Pardoner's Tale" for the next day.

The Pardoner, one of Chaucer's slimiest creations, actually tells a story intended to make his audience feel guilty about their wealth so they will then donate their possessions to him, a scam he openly admits he plays quite often. This affronts the Host, who roundly criticizes him for this breach of pilgrim decorum: the stories were meant to enrich the audience, not the storyteller. The Pardoner's story of greed is morally persuasive, however, leaving us to wonder how so pious a tale can spring from such a cesspool, one of the many character puzzles Chaucer offers us.

Students then read the story told by my favorite woman in all of literature, the Wife of Bath, whose prologue is longer than her story, and who silences an interrupting Friar by improvising an introduction that ridicules friars. She then proceeds to tell a nearly all-male audience a story whose moral is that men should submit unconditionally to being ruled by their wives. It is a great story and an in-your-face performance, and it would surely have provoked a reply. The only problem is that Chaucer did not get around to writing that reply. Which of those men would have said something to the Wife of Bath after her story, and which pilgrim would have had the courage to answer this outspoken, sexy woman, and with what story?

About this time the "Shovvet" poems are due, and we finish our whirlwind tour of *The Canterbury Tales* with "The Nun's Priest's Tale," which I include as an example of a fable so that the students can see that "anything goes" includes a talking rooster named Chaunticleer.

Not only are the stories important, but the storyteller's motive and the audience's reaction to the story also matter. The range of subject matter can fall anywhere between the exemplary and the embarrassing.

The Interlude: Canterburied in Snow

But what are we going to do for the big grade in this crazy unit? We pretend to have a snow day, not like we usually have in Wisconsin, where the students cannot get to school, but a twilight-zone snow day where the unthinkable occurs: we cannot go home. I tell the students: "Seventy-six inches (my height) of snow has fallen in three minutes, and we are trapped. Some of you may panic. Some of you may eventually begin to consider fellow classmates in terms of caloric value rather than friendship. Eventually, once creature comforts are satisfied, we will need entertainment. Let's do as Chaucer's pilgrims did and tell one another some stories." We agree on some simple rules:

1. The stories cannot be about an actual event.
2. The stories can be from any source.
3. The stories should not be familiar to most of the class.
4. The stories must be mostly memorized (one sheet of paper, cannot be read).
5. The stories must be at least four minutes long.
6. The stories must have a prologue and an epilogue.
7. The stories must be believable; for instance, a talking rooster has to be plausible in the context of the story.
8. The stories should instruct, surprise, scare, entertain, uplift, or be novel.
9. The stories should be told with enthusiasm, voices, and gestures.
10. Anything goes, except your story must not get Mr. Baughn fired.

We draw lots, write down the speaking order, and begin in three days. I fill the two days in between

with charades. This gets everyone up in front of the class in a fun, low-pressure situation before they actually have to tell a story to all of us.

It can take about a week for the students to finish telling their stories, and the variety is incredible—everything from shaggy-dog stories to Aesop's fables to stories from *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul.* Some students make up their stories and fail miserably; others reveal hidden talents of mimicry. Some make us get into a circle, some stand stiffly, and others become each character, including animals. They may have criticized Chaucer for using stories from other sources, but now they realize that talent and responsibility go into the selection process. The prologue requirement makes them provide some sort of introductory material, sometimes as basic as "Have you ever thought about . . . ?" or "I'm sure we've all been embarrassed at one time or another . . ." or "Have you ever wished that . . . ?" In the epilogue students find they are faced with the challenge of telling the audience just why their story was worth our time.

By the end of this unit students have attempted many of the same tasks Chaucer faced in writing *The Canterbury Tales*.

Many of the students discover tremendous power, joy, and responsibility in being the storyteller. I tell them: "You have an obligation to the audience, the material, and yourself. You have to put your stamp on this moment. We will listen to whatever you want us to listen to. We are on your side. Take us someplace." Most of them do. Good-natured heckling from the audience is allowed, since it reminds the storytellers that they have an audience to please and an obligation to be flexible.

I usually let students rewrite their writing assignments, so they ask how they can improve a grade on an oral assignment. My answer is that they can tell another story to raise the grade of the first one. The audience is reminded each day to think about exactly what is good about each story, and as the tales continue we come to some conclusions about the magical difference between a series of events and a story.

The Waukesha Tales

After a day or two of in-class storytelling, I hand out the written assignment for this unit. Students have several choices (see fig. 1).

If students do not feel like writing, they can always tell the class another story to fulfill this requirement. Typically, students who choose to tell another story think they are getting away with something when they really are just reinforcing the lessons

FIGURE 1. The Waukesha Tales Assignment

1. Create an "our school" version of *The Canterbury Tales* done completely in iambic pentameter, including at least:
   a) a prologue that has eight or more lines, sets the mood, and gives an excuse for these people to be together and tell stories
   b) three character sketches with twelve or more lines each of people who would be found at our school, with no real names, and that may identify the characters by type but must also suggest something beyond or beneath the type (as Chaucer did, you must cause us to sense their individuality and humanity)
2. Do the same as #1, but invent some other group of people (in a doctor's waiting room, at the mall, in a minivan on a family vacation, at the SAT test site, whatever).
3. Provide us with an omniscient speculation about the people in this class, based on the miraculous fact that the story a person chooses to tell is very revealing of motive, character, and so on. It can be written in prose or poetry.
4. Fill in one of the gaping holes in Chaucer's masterpiece. Write a story that one of the characters might have told, tell us why the character might have told it, and show the reaction of the listeners. It can be written in prose or poetry.
5. Have another idea? Talk to me.

of oral storytelling. The students who choose to write are usually those who are most fascinated by the structure Chaucer has created or those who found out from the "Shovvet" assignment they have a facility and joy in writing verse. I am blessed with either hearing or reading an interesting variety of student choices.

By the end of this unit students have attempted many of the same tasks Chaucer faced in writing *The Canterbury Tales.* Any respect they now have for this Chaucerian Edifice comes from having actually mortared a few bricks and welded a few seams themselves. More importantly, they have used language in several different ways. They have learned the primacy of poetry in an oral culture, and they can appreciate the difficulty of writing poetry as well as the joy (some give me rhyming couplets for every assignment after this). They have looked at someone else's world through a sharp, yet caring, eye and perhaps found a useful way to view their own world. They have learned how people entertained one another before other distractions were so plentiful. Finally, they have learned how awesome it is to be the storyteller. They have leapt the tall building of *The Canterbury Tales.*

The Epilogue

In the next unit I ask students to apply all the lessons that they have learned about what makes a good story to an anecdote from their lives. This "Epiphany" assignment allows them to be the authors of their own story. I encourage them to invent the perfect detail and create the perfect dialogue. John Irving's excellent essay, "Trying to Save Piggy Sneed," provides the model for how an artist shapes an experience into a story (*Trying to Save Piggy Sneed* [New York: Ballantine, 1997]). *The Canterbury Tales* shows students how many different kinds of stories exist, and this unit helps them to find their own voices.

There are many historical and literary reasons to teach *The Canterbury Tales,* but none is more important than showing students the power they can have over their own lives if they learn to use the mighty gift of language, just like Chaucer and all the other dead, white guys that I make them read.

Gary Baughn teaches English at Waukesha South High School, Waukesha, Wisconsin. *email:* gbaughn@execpc.com.

EJ **15** Years Ago

Literature and Meaning

If we accept the idea that literature ought to be significant, that readers have to assimilate it and work with it, that transforming it into knowledge is more significant than memorizing the definitions of technical terms, then we need to find some ways of bringing readers and text together, and of forcing upon readers the responsibility for making meaning of text. First efforts are very likely doomed to fail for obvious reasons: the students aren't used to it and don't trust it; we aren't used to it and haven't figured out all of its complications; it places tremendous responsibility on everyone involved, not the teacher alone; it requires that we deal with thirty evolving poems at a time rather than just one stable text; it requires that students accept a new and frightening notion of what knowledge is; and it demands a tolerance for ambiguity and digression. But if meaning is a human act rather than a footlocker full of dusty facts, then we must focus attention on the act of making meaning rather than simply on the accumulation of data.

Robert E. Probst. "Dialogue with a Text." *EJ* 77.1 (1988): 32–38.