TEACHING IDEAS

Approaching Traditional Literature in Non-Traditional Ways

As English teachers we want to get our students excited about the literature they read. We want them to talk about it, write about it, act it out, and see how the issues in the literature can relate to their lives. But we all know that it takes creativity and effort to get students involved in traditional or classic literature. Sometimes we get stuck when we try to create an approach that will excite students, and we fall back into old patterns that seem to push students farther away from the literature. Sometimes we just need to hear about new ideas that show us another way of doing things.

This column is intended to provide such ideas. As I initially read each of these pieces I was struck by the variety of ways described to involve students that I had never thought of before! I could also see possibilities for using these activities and assignments with other pieces of literature, and I could envision students getting excited about participating in the classes described. The assignments created by these three authors, I believe, give us some new models for using very traditional literature in non-traditional, imaginative ways.—*DM*

A Wilder Approach to Teaching Wilder

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Our Town, America's most produced play, is often described as "sentimental." And, surely, Emily's post-mortem flight back to Grovers Corners oozes with passionate innocence. She says, while re-watching her parents relive her twelfth birthday, "I can't bear it! They're so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old?" Despite the melodramatic moments crowding this artistic play, I still find it an effective piece of literature to share with high school readers because I feel that the play's themes and questions offer intriguing writing opportunities for students.

ACT I: PREWRITE

Before reading Act I, "Daily Life," I discuss with my students "the ordinary." Atop a blank sheet of notebook paper they write, "Never Underestimate the Importance of the Mundane," and then I explain that in the first act of *Our Town* we'll basically be looking into the lives of ordinary people from breakfast to bedtime on a typical day in a typical turn-of-the-century small town. Then I have them list or write in paragraph/journal form all that they have experienced from the moment they woke up that morning—occurrences both typical and atypical. After writing their list, I lie by telling them, "I have six hours worth of video tape that focus on your life from the moment you woke up. Would you like to watch it? Would you want a remote control? Would you like to watch it with someone or alone? Why?" Many students admitted they would love to view their tapes (if indeed, such tapes existed), using the remote control undoubtedly to replay favorite scenes *ad infinitum.* However, several insisted they would have no interest in viewing their own tapes—with or without a remote. One student reasoned, "I've already lived it—why would I want to waste the present watching what I already did?"

I also ask students to skim their lists for an example of a break from the mundane that was positive and a break from the mundane that was negative. I ask them to list examples of the mundane for which they're grateful. For example, I say, "What if you went home every night from school and there was a different family there: sometimes six people, sometimes two, sometimes no one, always strangers—wouldn't that variation be overwhelming?" Finally, I asked them to address the question, "What is life—the mundane or the variations?" Such "deep" questions often lead to student introspection as well as to lively classroom interactions.

ACT II: THE FROZEN SCENE ASSIGNMENT

When reading Act II, "Love and Marriage," I direct students to focus closely on how Wilder creates a stream-of-consciousness atmosphere during the act's climactic wedding scene. Wilder's characters one by one break the nuptial tableau and

share their inner thoughts. The Stage Manager/minister tells us, "even at a good wedding there's a lot of confusion way down deep in people's minds, and we thought that ought to be in our play, too." My writing assignment then asks the students to create such a scene which displays the multiple perspectives and "confusion way deep down" of several participants.

For the Frozen Scene Assignment I request students to first create a setting and to describe where, when, and what's happening at the moment of the freeze. Their next step is to briefly describe four characters and each character's position at the frozen moment. With this information, students are now ready to write a one-page scene in which at least four different characters break the group freeze one at a time, addressing the audience with their inner thoughts.

Students are encouraged to recreate actual scenes from their lives or to imagine fictional scenes. One of the students had recently injured her knee in a basketball game. Her tableau involved a gym and a group of sweaty, uniformed girls surrounding one girl clutching her knee in the middle of the floor. Characters breaking the freeze included the injured girl, a coach, a referee, and the girl's mother in the bleachers. Other students' scenes displayed moments such as cheerleaders fighting, a family reacting to a TV program, an older sister's wedding, a game on an elementary school playground, a car accident, a 400-meter race at a high school girls' track meet, getting caught shoplifting, and dealing with a drunk friend at a party. The students share their scenes at a reading table and later volunteers may act out the scenes. Successfully completing and sharing this assignment encourages students to consider how most incidents prompt multiple perspectives as to the situation's "importance" or "truth."

ACT III: WRITTEN RESPONSES TO EMILY'S "FAREWELL, EARTH!" MONOLOGUE

Addressing the play's last act, "Death," the students respond to Emily's final farewell to Grovers Corners. Before returning to her grave on the hill, Emily emotes, "Good-bye Grovers Corners. . . . Good-bye to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you!" Emily's impassioned speech is a response to her realization that she had not been aware of the wonder of life as she lived it. "I didn't realize . . . all that was going on and we never noticed?"

After reading and discussing Act III, my students write two brief monologues reacting to Emily's "take me back to my grave" speech. In the first I encourage irony. I tell them to follow Wilder's style and Emily's pattern but to list several things that humans would not miss about the earth. In the second version I ask them to write an updated soliloquy praising what, like Emily, they would miss about life. Following are snippets of student lists.

> **Jo, seventeen:** "Good-bye, Des Moines . . . Mom and Dad. Good-bye tickling breezes and soft lips. New blue jeans and flickering candles and energy and exhaustion. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you."
>
> **Sarah, sixteen:** "Good-bye, soft pouring rain, good-bye, my sweet, sweet piano, my music scores, friends, assorted family. Good-bye love and shelter, the sun and moon and life. Oh, how short it was!"
>
> **Scott, sixteen:** "Good-bye, my car . . . CD player and CDs. Good-bye, bright blue interior and bucket seats. And the turbo engines. And the starting up every morning and the shutting off at night. Oh, car!"
>
> **Joel, sixteen:** "Good-bye, backyard football games, barbeeee-ques . . . sledding down hills, and sleeping in Saturdays, dumb cartoons, wrestling around, vacations, my grandmother's hugs, and a great country."

Students then write about what they wouldn't miss, and these are put together into a class list such as this one:

> Good-bye, world hunger, violence, hate, racism. Good-bye, war, nuclear arms, police brutality. Good-bye to killers and robbers. Good-bye to fires and crime and war and poverty and hatred and bigotry and loss and pain. Good-bye, world. Good-bye pollution, ignorance, disease, drugs, guns, mass murderers. Good-bye, sickness, love, sorrow, and lack of forgiveness. The earth is full of hate and tears. Oh, Earth!

On a less serious note, is this assorted list to which students would also gladly bid, "See ya!":

> Good-bye long lines at the crowded supermarket. Good-bye soggy cheerios, and people who don't flush the john. Good-bye to detention and in-school suspension. And getting dressed up and going to dances and worrying about girls. Good-bye accidents caused by icy roads. Good-bye, world! Good-bye to numb feet in the winter. Good-bye to paper cuts and broken bones. It's all gone now! See ya, responsibility and pressure! Ha, Ha! What a world! Good-bye spiders, snakes, cold showers, and rebellious siblings. Good-bye mosquito bites, bad weather, and all of the lectures my parents give me. Goodbye all of the stomach aches and the nervousness! Good-bye zits, headaches, and being short. Good-bye cold hands and feet during hunting season. Good-bye to political commercials and geometry,

> 13 inches of snow and sub-zero temperatures. Good-bye, bad hair days and lawn mowers. Good-bye speed limits and broken hearts—I wish I could take you with me.

FINAL JOURNAL ENTRY

In their final journal entry I ask students to respond to Wilder's themes about life's importance. Is Emily right that we don't value life nearly enough, or is the alcoholic choir director Simon Stimson right in saying that to be alive was "to move about in a cloud of ignorance . . . to always be at the mercy of one self-centered passion or another?" Preceding our final discussion about Wilder's themes, I ask the students to consider how we might go about focusing more on what's important—while we're still alive. I ask them if they believe they focus more on the positive or negative aspects of life and on which we *should* focus. Trevor, seventeen, says, "We should focus on both; if you just completely focus on all the good stuff you can get hit hard by the bad. But if you just focus on the bad you can't enjoy life." Brandi, sixteen, agrees with Trevor's idea of preparing for the difficult, writing:

> I personally think I focus more on life's negative. I found out if you dwell on the negative then when things go wrong it doesn't hit you as hard—it's almost like you're ready for the blow, no matter how hard the impact is. I agree with Mrs. Soames (optimist in *Our Town*) that happiness is important—to a certain extent. But no one's life is full of happiness, so it seems impossible to pursue happiness all the time.

Jonathan, sixteen, writes that he dwells mostly on the positive:

> It keeps my spirits up and allows me to do whatever I'm doing better. I also use the negative to help me become better. Maybe I can constructively critique myself and become a better person because of it.

Right before returning to her grave Emily asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?" Every time I reread *Our Town* with high school students, Wilder's question haunts me for a time. Perhaps it's sappy to say so, but the play makes me want to appreciate the simple and wonderful and horrible aspects of life more completely at least for a while. Hopefully, having students read, discuss, and write about *Our Town* helps them also to refocus, to notice, to wonder, maybe even, I sentimentally include, to "realize." Realize what? Julie, sixteen, offers a possible answer in a final written response to the optimistic character Mrs. Soames who declares, "Happiness, that's the great thing! The important thing is to be happy." Julie counters, "Perhaps there's nothing more important than happiness—except appreciation."

Old Dog/New Tricks: Reteaching *Huck Finn* and Pop Culture

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I have taught high school English and college English and even college English in the high school for college credit, but I've never been able to teach writing or literature anywhere without weaving popular culture into the curriculum. Students are inextricably connected to their pop culture. They know more about it than they do their family's history. They write more easily and eagerly about it than they can write about their childhood. So, in generating writing and discussion topics I find myself assigning more and more writing about the music, the movies, the television and the issues of this generation.

All this has meant new tricks for an old dog like me. I once enjoyed the song lyrics we discussed in class. Paul Simon, John Lennon, and Bob Dylan are poets of my generation, and I eagerly embraced their voices and messages. Sting, Michael Stipes, Sheryl Crow, and k.d. lang have much to say that is valuable and noteworthy. On the other hand, while the lyrics of Kurt Cobain and certain rappers make me shudder, I dare not avoid their messages and their impact on these students. They are a significant part of this generation's world and must be confronted, although that part is dark, violent, and ugly.

Confronting such ugliness is never easy, and I search for some positive messages, some inspiring literary models to counter the effects of some artists' messages of confusion and despair in the contemporary pop culture. I look to the literary "classics" for inspiration. Yet, literary characters and themes from other centuries often don't transpose well. They are time travelers whose 21st-century audience finds them ridiculous, irrelevant, and at best, unapproachable. Only recently, I discovered a new cultural hero for these times, a role model whose character might travel successfully through the confusion of the late 20th century and remain intact. And we've known him all along; we met him a long time ago. He's Huck Finn.

USING *HUCK FINN*

Everyone knows the problem with teaching *Huck Finn.* Mr. Twain, himself, would greatly appreciate the irony in the fact that the novel he wrote to condemn racism is one century later condemned as racist trash. The novel is a stick of dynamite that could explode even before being ignited. No teacher in her right mind wants to touch it. But wait a minute . . . the truth is the novel is as timely today as it was in 1875. Who denies the fact we live in a world of gang wars, con artists, parents with drug-abuse problems, neglected youth, and racial conflict? And there is one young character who, in the midst of all the confusion and negative messages in his society, in spite of his lack of parental direction or support, looks deeply

into his soul and uncovers a strong moral conscience and a working understanding of his own convictions. Most importantly, the book is a tale of an interracial friendship that is one of the most enduring bonds of loyalty in all literature. So the problem remains: How to preserve the character and messages in the novel while avoiding the offensive text?

Character and Theme

I suggested to the class that they work with character and theme and see if they might transpose both from Twain's novel into the present world. Examining theories of character, we concluded with Marcel Proust that we can know fictional characters as well as real persons, and if our knowledge of them is definitive and our understanding of their personalities is whole, then they can be "liberated" from their text intact. Can it be possible, I asked the students, for Huck and Jim to transcend their setting, character intact, and visit our violent, scary present world? Transposing Huck and Jim to East L.A., the students demonstrated a very real working knowledge of their pop culture, Twain's themes, and the understanding of literary character. Working in groups of eight to ten students, they wrote, produced, and filmed videos that mirrored Twain's plot. Each student was responsible for writing one scene, then comparing their scene with the novel; one student wrote the narration, which was the linking device. He was Huck's voice and also played his role in the film. Here are the results of one group's efforts:

Huck and Jim in East L.A.

Huck is an L.A. street kid, a runaway down on his luck. His Pap is a crack dealer who alternately abuses/neglects him. As a runaway, Huck is on the lam and gets a ride one day from a group of migrant farm workers picking crops in southern California. Here he meets Jim, a Mexican who is also on the run because of his illegal alien status. Both youths are laying low; both are wanted by the authorities. Thus begins their odyssey. They band together and work for less than minimum wages as migrant workers and plot their escape to freedom. Meanwhile, word comes that the authorities are moving in on Jim. The boys take off one night down Highway 1 to freedom—and to sneak Jim back across the Mexican border. But the trip isn't easy; it is strewn with violent obstacles and the pitfalls of a dangerous society. The pair are given a ride by two con artists (named Duke and King) who claim to be promoters for rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg. They sign Huck and Jim to sell concert tickets. Of course, the concert deal is a scam, and the audience arrives to see someone they've never heard of and don't like (spliced MTV video footage). The crowd is getting out of control, and they turn on Huck and Jim. The youths escape, only to find themselves ensconced in a street scene from the film *Boyz 'N The Hood.* In the midst of gang violence, Jim gets shot; Huck doesn't desert him, but has to pretend racial disdain, hatred, and intolerance in order to save Jim's life. The racial epithets sting Jim, yet he is spared. Huck drags him to safety.

The two reach the Mexican border, only to find U.S. Marshals there, waiting to apprehend Jim. But after he is jailed for a few days, a liberal political group surprises Jim with some new immigration papers. His freedom! Huck and Jim live happily in a border town, flipping burgers at a local McDonald's. Huck ends his narrative by saying, "I won't go back to the streets of L.A. 'cuz I been there before, and it's a scary sight."

Combining novels with issues in contemporary culture and film making is a strategy I will use again and again. Students were genuinely pleased with their creative work on this project. All students wrote on a variety of topics the project generated. (Some topics included: The Plight of Migrant Farm Workers Today; Rap Lyrics: Offensive to Women? Promoting Violence?; Gang Culture: Its Influence on Fashion, Music, and Language; Labeling: Does It Matter What We're Called?; and Kids With Guns.)

I feel satisfied that students explored the positive messages from Twain's novel, that they are thinking a lot about their world and this culture. They are aware that as young adults they will face certain responsibilities and choices that will require them to examine their very souls. They may even stop to think, "What would Huck do?" Then they'll remember: he'd do the right thing.

Our Classrooms and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales:* How to Make Them Work Together

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Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is widely studied in high school British literature courses. Creative and motivational exercises to aid in the instruction of Chaucer's work can be hard to find. Fortunately, I was able to find and successfully use an activity that brings the literature to life in the Vocational/Technical English classroom. In Vocational/Technical English the classroom becomes a training ground—training for vocational/technical schooling or the workplace. Writing in such courses focuses on memos, letters seeking information, or resumes with some creative writing also included. These courses, because of curricular demands, must also take on the task of studying literature and making it applicable to the context of the rest of the course. To meet all of these expectations, many teachers find themselves performing a balancing act of activities. Few lessons tie in so many of the vocational/technical objectives as well as the Chaucer lesson described below. Although I use the following activity with vocational/technical classes, it

can easily be used as a post-reading activity in any high school English course studying the prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*.

CHARACTERIZATION IN CHAUCER

After the class has read *The Canterbury Tales*' prologue, I pay special attention to the fact that many of the characters are identified by their occupation or trade, and that none are given names. For example, some of Chaucer's characters are The Friar, The Monk, The Knight, The Nun, and The Pardoner. I have my students try to come up with reasonable explanations for this method of characterization. Was Chaucer attempting to form stereotypes based on occupations? Was using job titles simply easier than creating names for his characters? Was Chaucer identifying people by their occupation because it was customary for the time period? Through these kinds of questions, students usually become interested in hearing more about the historical context of Chaucer's work.

We then turn to the issue of whether or not we also identify people by their form of employment, and if so, why? Doctors and coaches are two obvious examples of occupation titles that we attach to people as identification. How do we perceive doctors? What character traits do we tend to assume in coaches? The students quickly begin to realize that our society expects certain behavior, categorizes people, and sometimes even displays prejudices based simply on a career choice. After this discussion we then return to Chaucer's prologue to see if we can find stereotypes or prejudices in his characterization. After a thorough discussion of our reading, we are ready to move on to our post-reading activity.

CREATING CHARACTERS

The first step of this activity is to have each student bring in a photograph of someone from a newspaper or a magazine. I always suggest to the class that the photo be of someone they do not recognize because their assignments will involve actually creating original characters. Also, the person in the picture should be of the same sex as the particular student because each student will later take on the identity of the character created. After we have the pictures, we begin to develop our characters from the photographs. Each student then works to make his or her character come to life. Beginning with a detailed physical description, then adding some personality quirks and family matters, the students create their own unique characters. The obvious physical characteristics such as height, weight, age, eye color, etc. are fairly easy for the students to create. Students use their physical descriptions to aid in their characters' personality development. Students must also decide on the form of employment their character has—since this is the key to tying the activity to Chaucer.

CREATING STORIES

The next step involves the students in creating stories that their characters might have to tell. This is the most difficult stage for many students because they usually want more guidance. The only prompts I give them are that the story can be a personal experience of the characters or simply a tale the character may have heard before and wants to pass on to others for entertainment. I do set a minimum length of one page, but no real maximum. The stories need to be long enough so that all of the students play an active role in the process of story sharing. I encourage students to try to base their stories on their characters' personalities or jobs. One student, The Mother, shared a tale of her child's near-death illness. Our Bull Rider told of a time when he was thrown and severely injured. The students must really examine the occupations, personalities, and lifestyles they have created for their characters. It is important not to offer too many suggestions so that students will feel the pride of creative ownership.

TRAVELING

Now comes the fun part. On a previously chosen day, all of the class comes prepared to become their characters. They are expected to dress accordingly and bring props with them. They will share their stories with the class while we "travel."

I really play up the "traveling" day. I don't actually tell the class exactly what we will be doing that day, only to be prepared to become their characters and share their stories while we take a short trip. Of course there are questions. Do we need money? Only if you want souvenirs. How far are we going? Not too far. No, you won't miss the whole day of school, only this class period.

I like to put in a few extras to add to the excitement. One year, I decided that we would "travel" to Memphis, Tennessee. I even printed tickets for the trip and made copies of postcards. I created our own prologue entitled "Memphis Memoirs" in which I introduced each character, by profession, in the order they would tell their tales as we journeyed. The tales were to be our traveling entertainment.

The trip was taken by a Rock Star, a College Student, A Race Car Driver, a Bull Rider, and such others to counter Chaucer's characters. We also added to the excitement by listening to some road music before heading out. I created a tape with snippets of songs about roads or traveling—everything from "Sesame Street" to "On the Road Again." After listening to the music, we set out for our destination. We did a walking tour of the school grounds, carrying our imaginations with us. Although we actually ventured only as far as the parking lot, tennis courts, and auditorium, in our minds we were strolling alongside the Mississippi, visiting Graceland, and cruising Beale Street. I brought along pictures and stories of my

own trip to Memphis to help carry us to these destinations.

Even though many of these extras also mean extra work for the teacher, adopting a theme and/or destination increases motivation and participation. Teachers may want to journey to Washington, DC, or Paris or "travel" to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. The only limits to the choice of a destination may be students' interests. We even had competitions as did Chaucer's characters. We awarded, through class vote, Best Story and Best Costume.

TYING THE PIECES TOGETHER

After all of this discussion and analysis of various jobs, I had the perfect opportunity to open my classroom to guest speakers. I took the time to set up presentations by local employers based on my students' interest. Students can also be given the chance to contact speakers. I have found my community is responsive, and some employers are even willing to allow classes to visit the workplace. These visits help prepare students for tomorrow by giving them opportunities to see the world of work up close.

RESULTS

Through these discussions, writings, and role playing, my students seemed to learn to value their own creativity and that of others. Because no real limitations were placed on the students' creativity in writing, they gained confidence in their own writing abilities. They were also able to practice verbal skills by sharing their stories with the class. Most importantly, through discussion and analysis of their own characters, students realized that our world revolves around people of all walks of life and that they are soon to become a big and necessary part of that world.

After completing all aspects of the activity, Geoffrey Chaucer's world didn't seem as far removed from the world of today because students could see some commonalities between the times. I could tell from the 100% participation in all aspects of this project—from the physical descriptions to sharing their tales while in costume—that my classes thoroughly enjoyed it. I firmly believe the students were open to becoming involved in this project because they could see a circular relationship between literature, school life, and daily life.