

NOTES ON AMERICAN LETTERS



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“Literature ranges from simple songs and sayings to elaborate and extended tales of human deeds. The most compelling literature concerns persons whose feelings, thoughts, and actions engage us in the lived time of mortality. Ideas and abstractions, which systematically separate themselves from persons and from time, do not form the essence of literature and do not surpass it.”

-Roger Shattuck, *Candor and Perversion*

Our Winter Issue will again center on *Sudden Fiction*, offering an extended statement about its one to two page stories' effectiveness in promoting students' thoughtful reading and presenting teachers with ways to explore two more stories in this collection.

In addition to this exploration of literature, we present a helpful analysis of a film version of Gaines' "The Sky Is Gray," and an approach to story literacy that is effective with students at and beyond the elementary grades. Posts on Bob Dylan as Nobel Laureate and positive and negative research on legalizing marijuana bring controversy and insight to this issue.

To extend the diversity of content in *Notes on American Letters* we will add five special interest features. Like Posts, they introduce fresh ideas and encourage critical thinking in the classroom. The new sections are:

Artful Literature: This feature speaks about how a piece of literature and a work of art resonate with one another and suggests how the pair work to vivify what each means to us.

Teacher Reflections: Interviews of superb teachers that explore their basic pedagogical stance, how they teach a favorite text, a favorite text they teach, the role of media and technology in their teaching, their special approach to culture and gender matters, and other defining features of their teaching.

Poet's Corner: This feature presents a diverse range of poetic voices including freshly created poems, particularly strong but not widely known poems, and other poetic matters that might enrich our teaching.

Live Connections: Emerging ways of entering the conversation about teaching by tapping into scholarly and other cultural resources that help enliven us as teachers and enrich our students' experiences as 21st century learners.

Writers' Words: Powerful language about the richness of life from poets, fictionists, dramatists, biographers, and other writers who have some thing powerful to say to us and our students.

We invite you to contribute to any of the NAL additions by writing the Author/Curator after its first appearance in one of our issues. Finally, we call readers' attention to PBS's Masterpiece Theater series that will feature clips from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* in the coming season.

Joe Milner
Editor

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**INTERPRETIVE FLIGHT
AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING IN SUDDEN FICTION
Sheridan Blau**

HIGH ON MY LIST of objectives for any course I teach for prospective teachers of literature (or for almost any introductory literature course I might teach) is to provide my students with the opportunity to learn that literary texts are frequently subject to multiple interpretations and that ordinary readers (like themselves or their secondary school or college students) have the capacity (by virtue of their native linguistic competence and their lived experience) to offer warranted and persuasive interpretations of stories that can contribute to the way their classmates understand a story by adding a new and useful perspective. This capacity in every student also means that, by listening to the interpretive perspectives of their classmates, all students can enrich their own understanding of almost any work of literature that is likely to be assigned to them in an English class. English teachers and their prize students assume that they can enrich their understanding of a story through conversations (through reading) with the interpretations of published literary critics and possibly with the most respected teachers and most gifted students. But it may take a workshop like the one I will outline below to convince most students and many teachers that non-expert readers, including students, can usually do as well or better without consulting experts and that there may be good reasons for finding their own interpretative perspective more valuable than that of the published academic interpreters.

Interpretive Possibilities in David Ordan's Story

My all-time favorite story for demonstrating a range of interpretive possibilities to pre-service and inservice teachers (with a story that is perfect for them and for my purposes, but, in my view, not appropriate for secondary students or even undergraduates) is the short-short story (reprinted in *Sudden Fiction*) by David Ordan, "Any Minute Mom Should Come Blasting Through the Door." I have devoted an entire chapter of my book on the teaching of literature (*The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts & Their Readers*) to the Ordan story, and will not try to reproduce here what I dramatize in detail in that chapter. But I do want to discuss here the heart of my approach and some of the pedagogical principles that inform my practice in teaching short-short stories in general, as I demonstrate how the Ordan story is such an ideal story for helping students learn how to engage in one of the essential transactions for making meaning of a literary text and how every student can function as an active, contributing member of an interpretive community in an academic context.

Stories that students and teachers find especially puzzling, in the sense that one can't immediately articulate for them anything like a satisfying interpretation, can often yield important lessons, first, about how multiple interpretations are possible without being competitive, and then, about where interpretations come from in themselves and presumably in professional critics as well. Short-short stories offer us an extra advantage in our teaching because they are short enough to be experienced in their totality and re-read several times in one class period. Hence I begin my work with such stories with at least two or three readings, including silent readings, oral readings, partnered readings and so on, asking students to pay particular attention to lines and passages that stand out for them or seem to them especially important or puzzling. I then ask the students to select a line or sentence in the story that seems to them as readers especially important to their sense of the meaning of the story or else quite surprising or puzzling to them in the context of this story. They are then asked to copy out the line and to write a paragraph or more about why they think this line is important or surprising or puzzling. I allow only seven or eight minutes for this exercise and warn students that with so little time to write, they will barely have time enough to get down their thinking about the line, which means they need to write fast and not try to compose a well formed essay, but merely a very rough draft that will roughly capture their thinking as it finds even rough expression in language. As always in my practice, I write too, partly to honor the importance of this exploratory activity, but also to make me a participant in the inquiry we are engaged in and also to give me a stake in the process, including a sense of how much time is needed for the writing. Hence, my own need for

more time often prompts me to let the seven or eight minutes become nine or ten.

After seven to ten minutes of writing, I ask the students to work in groups of three, where they will read aloud what they have written and listen to the different ways of looking at the story that are revealed by these rough draft writings. I insist, by the way, that students actually read what they wrote and not merely tell about it. I want them to become accustomed to hearing their own voices in written work and come to value their own voice as an instrument for thinking about an intellectual and academic problem. That is an important first step toward seeing oneself as an intellectual and a contributor to the discourse of an academic community. I, too, having written with my students, will join a group to read my piece as well.

After the groups have all shared their writing and had a few minutes to talk about the story, I call upon students to share their writing with the entire class by volunteering themselves or "volunteering" some other member of their group to read their quick draft aloud to the entire class, thereby "publishing" it. Standing at the whiteboard as students read, I listen carefully and try to characterize each piece read by giving it a name or label, representing its focus or interpretive perspective or what amounts to a way of reading the story. I write each label I give to each reading on the whiteboard, often checking with the writer to see if the name I have used is accurate in capturing the kind of thinking represented by the student. Over the many years that I have taught the David Ordan story from *Sudden Fiction*, I have employed the method described above and have heard and named perhaps a score of different readings for this shockingly strange tragicomic story, the most common of which are the following:

1. *The guilt-after-a-death reading*, based on all the indications that the boy feels guilty about his failure to save his mother, framed by a more general discussion of the guilt for not having been more loving or appreciative that most people feel after a loved one dies.
2. *The denial of death reading*, based on the numbed and passive reaction of the father and son to the sudden death of the mother, which reflects a broader tendency in our culture to not think about death and the universal human tendency to normalize the horrific.
3. *The family dynamic reading*, constructed from details about how the mother functions as the intermediary and stimulator of conversation between father and son, enabling both of them to talk, reflecting the dynamics of many modern families.
4. *The Oedipal triangle or Freudian reading*, based on the strange interaction between the mother and son as well as the father's hostile treatment of the son and the apparent sexual indifference of the father, along with his hostility to the boy and his harkening back to the scene of the boy's attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation of his naked mother with all its incestuous suggestiveness.
5. *The hyperbolic joke reading*, based on the son's question to his mother: "Will it kill you to make me sandwich?" The story's answer is, "Yes!" This is first suggested by the opening of the story with the son's deadpan observation that "it never killed her before to make me a sandwich."
6. *The adolescent psychology reading*, based on how the son reveals the needs and fears and limitations and sense of being judged by others that typify the young people on whom secondary teachers are experts.
7. *The feminist reading*, that is critical of the story and the male characters for reducing the mother to sandwich maker, kitchen cleaner, and sexual object.

I follow my naming of the brief writings read aloud to the class by asking whether my list of possible readings will cover all the readings actually produced in our class or if there are others we haven't yet heard and labeled. Typically, I then hear another one or two, requiring a new name (e.g., the TV as a way of avoiding real life) or find that our established categories can

suffice with some minor revisions in the wording of one or two of the categories already listed. Then I ask which of these seven or eight different readings is the right one. The answer, of course, is none. All contribute to our understanding and perhaps our appreciation of the story we shared.

The Role of Theory in Interpretation

My next step is one I might skip with some classes but seems to me especially important for teachers and college undergraduates and advanced college prep students, and that is to ask the participants what led them to pick the particular line they selected and then how did they know what to say about it. If they wrote a paragraph or only a couple of sentences where did their knowledge of what to say come from? This is for most interpreters a very difficult question, though for younger readers especially it would be a very real one. After a long silence and perhaps some prompting from me, some students will venture the idea that they know from experience. And I ask if many of them have experienced a sudden loss of their mother. No, that hadn't happened, but they know about such things happening in the world. Eventually we come to the realization that while such an event may never have transpired within their own families or families they knew about, parallel events have occurred that they know about personally or through their reading and about which they had in the course of their lives acquired some ideas or generalizations or even clichéd responses, which seemed applicable to the events of this story. And those ideas, generalizations, and clichés, I point out, represent "theories" (no less than the feminist and Freudian theories that were employed by two readers in our exercise), which is to say explanatory hypotheses or beliefs about how the world works and how people feel and think and behave.

The point of my naming the readings I hear (and then asking all the students to name their own, which sometimes requires some discussion) is to dignify every student-constructed reading with a label that identifies it as deserving of the same kind of respect that is usually shown (especially in classrooms where current critical theories are foregrounded) for the readings that represent the well-established theoretical perspectives that academic critics employ to interpret and analyze stories and literary texts, including the feminist and Freudian readings of this story. And the point here is to demonstrate to student readers early in college or at the cusp of their college experience that they already possess, by virtue of their lived experience and the ideas and values they have constructed in the course of their lives, the capacity to understand and evaluate and produce interpretations that illuminate a work of literature for other readers in their classrooms as much as (and possibly more than) any of the authoritative interpretations they will eventually encounter that are named and informed by such academically fashionable critical theories as Feminism, Freudianism, Cultural Materialism, Poststructuralism, and so on.

Just as importantly, the most respected critical lenses that teachers might want to teach their secondary school or undergraduate students to employ in their discussions of literature are based on discourses and seminal texts that students are in no position to learn or to critique and that even their teachers are likely to employ in drastically oversimplified ways, which, if they can be communicated to students at all, are still no more valuable than what students can bring to a literary discussion from the theories they themselves have imbibed from their culture or constructed for themselves. Which is not to say that a student has nothing to learn from a feminist or Freudian perspective. But it is to say that what is learned from those perspectives or any of the officially sanctioned critical lenses will represent more of an intellectual loss than a gain, unless the student already knows or simultaneously learns that the lenses cut and polished by his own cultural knowledge and lived experience are equally valuable intellectual equipment for the discussion and interpretation of literature in the academic and intellectual community that he inhabits and enriches with his own contributions.

Finally, I should note that many college freshman and college preparatory students may offer interpretive perspectives on stories that seem so reductive or immature as to suggest that these students do not possess the native competence I have claimed for all readers in secondary and college classrooms. That appearance can be explained by the degree to which our students carry around in their heads far fewer and much less sophisticated theories than teachers are likely to possess about how the world works and what drives human behavior in it. This does not mean

that we need to teach our students any pre-packaged theory to serve as an interpretive tool, but that we need to exercise patience and a tolerance for immature interpretations while we also give our students rich opportunities for sharing interpretations with each other so they might learn from one another, as they will also learn from us in our role as exemplary members and contributors (rather than the only source of authority) in the interpretive community of our classroom.

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Ordan, David. "Any Minute Mom Should Come Blasting Through the Door." *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas, Gibbs Smith, 1983, pp. 196-197.

**GETTING “TICKITS”: IGNITING AUTHENTIC
DISCUSSION**
Elizabeth Kahn

“WHILE MOST English language arts teachers identify discussion as their preferred mode of instruction, research indicates that authentic discussion involving an open, dialogic exchange of ideas, in which teachers and their students work out understandings, is difficult to achieve. A study of 64 middle and high school English classrooms in five states found that open, authentic discussion occurred an average of only 1.7 minutes per 60 minutes of class time (Applebee et al. 2003).

“Tickits,” by Paul Milenski is a powerful work of sudden fiction that is effective in generating authentic, dialogic classroom discussion. The main character, Toby Heckler, does not talk to anyone. Silently, he walks through his town distributing tickets written with misspelled words on slips of paper from a yellow pad he carries with him. He writes a ticket for two elderly ladies waiting for a bus who are blocking the sidewalk (“TO MUSH IN WAY”), for a man who starts to cross the street before the light says, “walk” (“ALLMOST WALKD”), and for a man who throws a candy wrapper on the ground (“PAPUR ON GARSS”).

Toby seems to feel a sense of affinity with a local police officer, Patrolman McVee, who humors Toby by asking him about his ticket writing, “Lots of business, eh Toby?” Toby responds by nodding, rolling his eyes, and looking tortured. Toby’s tickets indicate what the recipient has done that is wrong (“TYED WORNG”), but they are written for offenses that are generally more minor than a police officer would typically address and do not require payment of any fine or penalty.

In addition to writing tickets, Toby is concerned about clean shoes. He is proud of his “spanking white sneakers” that he polishes with “Baby’s Liquid Shoe Polish,” and he makes sure to rub off a smudge he sees on Patrolman McVee’s shiny black shoes.

The narrator of the story describes Toby’s actions and body language but reveals very little of what Toby is thinking and does not directly explain why he does not talk. We as readers are left to infer reasons for Toby’s unusual behavior. After a rainstorm halts his ticket writing for the day and Toby returns home, we learn some things about his life that provide clues about his behavior: In the pale light, Toby “knew his mother lay on the sofa, smoking, drinking, surrounded by TV magazines.” Safe in his room, after his mother calls him a “goddamn nut,” Toby pulls out a shoebox of “MOTHERS TICKITS” and writes three new ones: “TO MUSH SOMKING,” “TO MUSH DIRNKING,” and “TOO MUSH YELING.” Then he adds one more ticket: “ERVYTHING WORNG!” After putting the box back under his bed, Toby retrieves his Baby’s Liquid Shoe Polish and works on making his dirty, rain splashed sneakers “spanking white” again.

The puzzlement and many unanswered questions that are generated by “Tickits” make it a good story for promoting authentic discussion. It is a story that lends itself to asking students to identify what questions come to their minds while or after reading the story. Questions that frequently arise are: Why doesn’t Toby talk? Is he unable to talk, or does he choose not to talk? Why does he write tickets? Why does he focus on shoes? What is his age? Is Toby mentally disabled? What does it mean that his last name is “heckler”? Is he a heckler? Is he a “nut”?

There are no simple, clear, or “right” answers to these questions. Students will need to provide textual evidence and reasoning as they explore, examine, and “test” different possible interpretations in small group and/or whole class discussions.

Another way to engage students in authentic discussion as a means for constructing meaning is to ask students to determine what Toby values most by providing a list of possibilities such the following:

- love
- respect
- law and order
- tidiness
- goodness/uprightness
- kindness
- control
- authority
- normality
- justice
- other (add a value not listed that you think is most important)

In small groups, followed by whole class discussion, students compare and evaluate their rankings, providing evidence for their choices. Asking students to rank these values from most important to least important involves them in thinking critically—defining values and concepts, making and supporting inferences, and addressing alternative viewpoints. Some students, for example, may argue that Toby values law and order because he is so invested in writing tickets to make sure everyone follows the rules and obeys the laws. Others will say that his writing of tickets is an attempt to gain control in an existence that he sees as out of control, all “wrong.” Still others will say that he values goodness; he sees too much bad in the world and wants to correct the behavior of those around him in order to make everything right. He wants everyone to do the right thing, as he tries to do, symbolized by his “spanking white” shoes.

Although this activity could seem a bit nitpicking, its format actually has the effect of promoting a high level of engagement and more extensive interaction than simply asking students in an open-ended way “What does Toby value most?” (Of course, an alternative is to have the class brainstorm a list of values that students then rank.) By pushing students to rank and distinguish among these values that may all be important to Toby to some degree, the activity generates multiple diverse responses, elaborated arguments, and re-examination of details in the story, leading to thoughtful and nuanced interpretations of the character and the story’s meaning (or meanings).

“Tickits” could be used to initiate extended inquiry and discussion in a unit exploring characters whom society marginalizes because they are viewed as atypical, disabled, and/or outside of the norm. Students could expand their thinking through examining characters in works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee), *Of Mice and Men* (John Steinbeck), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Mark Haddon), “The Scarlet Ibis” (James Hurst), and/or “Raymond’s Run” (Toni Cade Bambara).

Studies have found that students who frequently participate in extensive authentic, dialogic discussion (as opposed to question-answer recitation) internalize the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in challenging literacy tasks on their own (Applebee *et al.* 2003). “Tickits” is a surefire story for accomplishing this goal.

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Applebee, A.N., Langer, J.A., Nystrand, M, and Gamoran, A. “Discussion-Based Approaches to Developing Understanding: Classroom Instruction and Student Performance in Middle and High School English.” *American Educational Research Journal*, 40.3 (Autumn 2003): 685-730.

THE ISSUE WAS DECIDED: CHARACTER CONFLICT IN “POPULAR MECHANICS”

Chris Sabolcik and Emily Satterfield

AT JUST SHY OF 500 WORDS, Raymond Carver’s work of sudden fiction, “Popular Mechanics” deftly portrays an ostensibly simple, yet profoundly relatable, narrative of family drama and conflict. The densely-written story opens with a seemingly banal establishing shot of thawing snow and encroaching twilight. Readers quickly discover, upon a shift into the house, “it was getting dark on the inside, too” (68).

Without minimal description of character, setting, and mood, we are immediately thrust into a generic, unnamed heterosexual couple’s heated argument *in media res*. We never learn the cause or duration of this fight, but Carver doesn’t seem to be interested in such reasons. Throughout the hostile dialogue, jostling over their baby’s photograph and eventually the baby himself, we become uncomfortable spectators of our co-protagonists (or better yet, co-antagonists). Nor can we rely on the stability of a compassionate or empathetic narrative point-of-view. The narrator’s distance and objectivity invites readers to judge actions and speech.

By the end of the conflict, the ambiguity reaches a boiling point. The emotional and verbal tug-of-war transforms into a physical one, with the baby as rope. With little concern for his safety or health, both adults pull on the child, trying to salvage a victory against the other. The custody battle has shifted focus from winning the custody to winning the battle.

Just as the reader is left ignorant of the roots of the disagreement, Carver “resolves” the fight with the blunt declaration that “the issue was decided” (69). Students no doubt will contest the outcome—does the wife or the husband emerge victorious? Does the child survive? Perhaps Carver supposes these questions of consequence distract from what should be our primary concern—the hows, whys, and whos of our disputes. Destructive spousal conflicts involving children neglect the young lives such relationships seek to protect. In today’s culture, where divorce and domestic disputes are common, students will most likely find some point of reference for similar conflicts in their worlds.

Bearing in mind these crucial details about the story, teachers can implement a variety of strategies to help students gain insight into both the literature and themselves. While the fierce conflict of the story may be relatable to all ages and levels of high school students, the teacher should use discretion with regards to some of the language in the story. Central to the story is the mother-father conflict, and teachers may bridge the reader-text gap with an entering activity that asks students to journal about a time where they witnessed parents or guardians argue. Students may privately reflect on their memories of the argument, but keep discussion focused on general conflicts between people in relationships and reflections on witnessing other people fight.

As class progresses towards an exploration of the text, it may be worthwhile to remind students to make claims not from personal experience, but from the story. As the limited narration provides mostly inferential characterization, this story offers an opportunity for students to analyze how an author may indirectly characterize. One effective tool is where readers consider Speech, Thoughts, Effects on others, Actions, and Looks (S.T.E.A.L.). While the point-of-view offers little insight into the intimate thoughts of characters, students must make inferences based on outward displays of emotion. The short text offers two round characters with subtle differences, making it difficult for students to choose a culprit. Students must piece together inferences based on limited information, but without the burden of flipping through several pages.

As a concluding activity, offer a way for students to personalize the idea of conflict explored throughout the story. Discuss as a group other options for the couple throughout various points in their dispute. After discussing options, invite students to write from a character’s perspective and choose an alternative course of action from a point in the story. Students can creatively explore not only alternative actions for the characters but also the array of possible consequences that may result as they continue the narration of the story and create a different ending.

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Carver, Raymond. "Popular Mechanics." *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas, Gibbs Smith, 1983, p. 68.

AT THE RIVER

Shelley Hale Lee

FROM 2000 TO 2003, I taught intermediate ESL students at Pasadena High School. More than half of my students were prepared and showed progress. Some had very weak reading skills, but I didn't know how to help them. I remember thinking about Arturo, "It's too bad. He's just not a strong reader." As a licensed secondary English teacher, I wasn't trained or equipped to teach him to read, and I thought he would have to get a job doing manual labor where literacy was not necessary. Because I simply didn't know what he needed, I assumed that it was too late for him to gain strong literacy skills.

I wish I knew then what I know now – the importance of all five key components of reading in English: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Students in pre-K through grade 3 receive explicit instruction in all five components. Young children learn handwriting, phonics, print concepts such as directionality and page numbers, and begin capitalization and punctuation. What happens to students older than ten who have not mastered these early foundational literacy skills? There is a new resource to help students like Arturo: *At the River and Other Stories for Adult Emergent Readers*. Since 2009, I have been teaching ESL beginners. My students range in age from 5-75. All are learning English as a second language. All have gaps in their formal education and native language literacy skills. All need explicit phonics instruction in English. *At the River* was written especially for nonliterate and semiliterate students, including adult refugees from Africa, southeast Asia and the Middle East, who do not know the Roman alphabet.

As the ESL teacher for grades K-5 from 2011 to 2013, I successfully used many of the same ESL literacy methods with students ages ten and older. These students had been in the US for less than one year. They spoke Korean, Spanish, Arabic, and Portuguese, but many lacked basic literacy skills. *At the River* fostered progress in decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

The purpose of this material is to build a path to literacy in English by teaching foundational literacy skills, starting with letters and sounds. *At the River* provides contextual, meaning-based and explicit reading instruction (Vinogradov, 2009). It teaches vowel and consonant sounds, digraphs, letter formation, print concepts, common sight words, blending sounds into words, and reading. These skills are taught through explicit phonics exercises paired with stories which are engaging and relevant.

The stories are about two families and their children, focusing on everyday situations. Many feature interactions between children and adults, making the stories accessible and appealing to all ages. The teacher's guide outlines an interactive approach to reading that combines the best methods for explicit literacy instruction with the most effective ESL techniques, appropriate for ages 10 and older.

The lessons build in deliberate steps designed for the student to succeed. Unit 1 teaches only the sounds of four consonants and one vowel: m, p, s, t, and short a. Students learn to write the forms and produce the sound of each letter. Then, they can blend the sounds into decodable words. After blending, segmenting, and writing activities, students read this simple story:

Pam has a map. Pam has a mat. Pam sat on the mat.

The focus on a limited group of letters and sounds leads to mastery of these sounds. The next few units add more sounds, gradually building up students' decoding skills while recycling the previous sounds.

By Unit 5 students have learned the alphabetic principle through daily use of flash cards, guided reading activities, dictations and sequencing activities. As students experience success, their confidence grows. Patterned sentences help students read "The Shop":

Bob and Pam have a van. The van can go to the shop. The shop has a lot of hats and shirts. The shop has a lot of caps and pants. Pam can wear a hat and a shirt. Bob can wear a cap and pants. Pam can wear a lot of hats and a lot of shirts. Pam likes the shop a lot. Pam is glad. Bob sits at the shop. Bob is sad. Pam buys 2 hats and a shirt. Bob buys a cap.

Once students can decode and read the story fluently, they can demonstrate comprehension through yes/no questions and begin to answer questions about who, what, where, and why. Connections with real life occur naturally.

With increased decoding skills and more sight words, students are ready for sentences and stories with more complexity. Students of all ages can relate to the Unit 8 story "Dan Gets Hurt", which includes plenty of decodable words but also some common sight words:

Dan can play in the yard. Dan can play with a ball. Dan can run and have fun. Then, Dan hits his leg. Dan hits his leg on a rock. Ouch! Then, he falls on his back. Ow! Dan yells a lot. "Mom! Where are you?" Dan yells, "Dad! I'm hurt! I hit my leg!" Dan is not happy. Dan is sad and mad.

This direct and explicit, yet contextual, approach to phonics instruction increases students' skills in decoding, handwriting, spelling, and pronunciation. Carmen, a 10-year-old from the Dominican Republic, had no literacy in Spanish, even though she had attended three years of school. Her reading level improved from pre-literate to first grade in less than one year. Samuel, an English speaking 12-year-old from Liberia, was reading at a first grade level. His schooling had been interrupted, and he had experienced significant trauma in his move from Liberia to the US. Receiving explicit, systematic phonics instruction moved him from a first grade reading level to a fourth grade level in less than one school year. His teacher was amazed, and his mother was extremely pleased. For Alejandro, an 11-year-old from Mexico, learning sounds and spelling patterns in English directly and positively impacted his ability to decode and spell. Laura, an 11-year-old from Brazil, had strong reading skills in Portuguese. *At the River* helped her with letter sound associations, improving her pronunciation and spelling. In a few months, she was able to participate in her classroom with grade level material.

Activities found in the teacher's guide help teachers provide interactive lessons that keep students' attention and help them learn step by step. *At the River* is effective with older elementary school children, and I believe that it can be an effective method with middle and high schoolers as well. I welcome teachers who are interested in field testing the material at the middle or high school levels.

Building a firm foundation in phonics and phonemic awareness leads to reading fluency, so that students ages 10 and older with gaps in their literacy skills can begin to acquire vocabulary and demonstrate comprehension at their grade level. It isn't too late for our students who don't read well; when teachers learn how to incorporate explicit reading instruction, we give everyone a chance to gain literacy.

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**JOURNEY INTO ADULTHOOD:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILM “THE SKY IS GRAY”
Bob Riesing**

THE SKY IS GRAY appeared in 1980; yet its insights are as penetrating and powerful in the new millennium as they were on the day it premiered. Set in the rural, poverty-crushed Louisiana of World War II, the 46-minute film demands uncommonly patient and resourceful teaching. Lecture is doomed to disappointing results, particularly with unsophisticated students viewing the film just once. Subtlety and nuance are built into every action and scene, and hence ample discussion—launched by basic Reader Response-like strategies—is essential. Only when students are capable of relating their own experiences to those of James, the 12- to 14-year-old African-American yearning to see a dentist, can they be expected to fathom what has unfolded before their eyes.

James takes sizable and significant steps on the path to responsible manhood. He is neither unaided nor unaccompanied, however. The narrative is at least as rewarding for adolescent females as for young males, given the critical role James's mother plays in guiding him. Married to a soldier who does not appear on screen, Octavia models, encourages, and allows behaviors reflecting only pride and civility. An early display of her strength involves a task from which James shies, the killing of a chicken. She takes no delight in administering death, but recognizes that, when necessity dictates, she must be father, not merely mother, to her son. James learns that a creature he had viewed as a pet in childhood must in adulthood be executed if his family is to have food.

Yet even more perplexing dilemmas await him. On the rickety bus that takes them to town, James joins his mother on the back row, a legal necessity as unsettling as the cold, blustery wind that had chilled them in their flimsy outer garments while awaiting the vehicle. With dignity, Octavia accepts indignity, her respectful son sitting at her side.

Race, poverty, and nature, however, continue their combined assault on the pair. In the dentist's office as they await treatment for James's aching tooth, an argument erupts between two African-American men—one a minister, the other an atheist. The former chastises the latter for refusing to express faith in God, concluding with a demeaning “I feel sorry for you.” Yet his well-dressed, educated antagonist is equally insistent when proclaiming that “Words mean nothing. Action is the only thing...thinking with our heads, not our hearts.” The clergyman storms out of the office, Octavia stoically resists reaction, and James listens and watches intently. The adult world has immersed him in its theological quarrels and linguistic mysteries, and he patterns his behavior after his mother's, tacitly acknowledging that self-restraint serves humans best amidst heated interactions treating sophisticated concerns destined to end where they had begun, in angry disagreement.

Subsequently, at a “Colored Café,” as Octavia provides James with a lunch that he had earned by moving garbage cans at a neighboring store, she consents to dance to a juke-box tune with a dapper African-American male who has noticed she is without adult companionship. Suddenly she bolts from his arms, insulted that her stylish partner might believe she has activities other than dancing on her mind. James again witnesses admirable strength in his mother, unwilling—always—to sacrifice principle for pleasure.

The afternoon provides James with the relief he and his mother had sought in traveling to town. A Caucasian female—a store owner—with qualities resembling Octavia's, arranges for the dental care he needs but could not obtain earlier because the dentist in whose office he had spent the morning valued lunch over his treatment. A fascinating dynamic emerges between the two principled women, long-time acquaintances, as Octavia prepares to leave for the trip home. The store owner attempts to give James's mother a slab of salted pork far too large to justify the last remaining monies, twenty-five cents, Octavia possesses. James witnesses his mother's insistence on a smaller cut, and hears her politely state, “We don't take no handouts.” James learns from both of these two strong women, and from the other adults whose baffling behaviors have plunged him into the decision-making self-reliance that manhood mandates. At the film's end,

James has earned the accolade Octavia bestows upon him, the final utterance in the brilliantly crafted production: "You're a man."

In a very real sense, *The Sky is Gray*, is a tribute to an adolescent who both discerns and learns, and, too, a narrative demanding as well as cultivating empathy. Gaines deals with issues that are important to our students, such as whether the film suggests that true citizenship involves not just words, but real freedom; that religion is at times used by others to circumscribe citizens rights; and that language can be imposed on us to control how we think.

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BOB DYLAN, NOBEL LAUREATE

Chris Sabolcik

Why Bob Dylan's Songs Are Literature

Author...Craig Morgan Teicher

Source...*The New Republic*Link... newrepublic.com/article/137811/bob-dylans-songs-literature

Date Published...October 14th, 2016

Basic concept: This article from Craig Teicher outlines some of the most salient arguments in support and opposition to musician Bob Dylan's selection as the 2016 Nobel Prize winner for Literature. Teicher discusses how Dylan has been able to employ classical poetic techniques and devices over the years in such a skillful way that his product can and must be classified as poetry of the highest caliber (though the author resists naming Dylan a poet). Selecting some of the musician's most memorable and literary lyrics, the author provides compelling analysis and criticism to dispel the elitist notion that our greatest literary artificers express meaning only through the written word.

Comment: When we consider the age-old debate of the literary canon and the limited scope of survey English courses, it can be difficult to find relevant contemporary counterarguments to studying the likes of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, etc. Teicher's accessible literary criticism blends adept analysis, evaluation, and synthesis to claim Dylan's aesthetic merit. As teachers move towards a new, more inclusive literary curricula, the debates of "What is poetry?" and "What is good poetry?" become all the more important for young scholars to consider and discuss. Comparing "Highway 61 Revisited" with *Hamlet* encourages students to forge new connections that transcend boundaries of space and time. While Teicher doesn't offer any kind of definition of poetry or formal evaluative criteria, this article should certainly foster dialogue as to what the next generation of art will hold, both for artists and critics. As scholars debate certain writers' inclusion into the literary canon, we're presented with the possibility that the 20th Century's popular culture icon, Dylan, may not be terribly different than the 16th/17th Century's entertainer, Shakespeare.

Quotations:

"After all, Dylan doesn't need the Nobel to prove his lasting cultural importance. What's interesting about this Nobel pick is the question it raises: Can music be literature?"

"There is a common sense that poetry exists in a world of pure language, but a poem is, in fact, both the music and the words. Poetry's sonic aspects—such as syllable sounds, rhyme, rhythm, assonance, dissonance, and meter—are meant to "accompany" the content, to set the mood, to refer to and elicit a sensory experience related to the emotions and images of the poem. They also refer back to the long history of language, echoing sounds and rhythms of the past, placing the poem in history, linking it to a timeless tradition. Dylan's lyrics alone don't compare to a poem, but a complete song—words, music, arrangement, instrumentation, all of it taken together—does."

"Dylan saw a new use for that old form, soldering it to folk- and blues-based music. Homer catalogued the heroes and villains of ancient battles; Dylan does the same with the tropes and myths of his changing times."

Allied texts: Selected poetry of T.S. Eliot, Modernist poets, classical narrative epics, Tolstoy's "What is Art?", Duchamp's Fountain, Magritte's surrealist paintings

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF LEGALIZING MARIJUANA

Sam O'Connor

War on Drugs, A Trillion-Dollar Failure

Author...Richard Branson

Source...*CNN Opinion*

Link... cnn.com/2012/12/06/opinion/branson-end-war-on-drugs

Date Published...December 7th, 2012

Basic concept: The recent controversy over the legalization of marijuana, brings to light the drug problem present both in the United States and abroad. Likening the current drug laws to Prohibition during the 1920s, Branson calls attention to the huge cost of illegal drugs, \$320 billion revenue of the global drug trade, the 1150% increase of incarcerations due to drug infractions since 1980, and the societal cost of treating drug use as a legal rather than health issue.

Comment: Drug use and the legalization of marijuana are obviously sensitive topics in today's society, particularly in areas such as politics, health care, and education. As controversial as the legalization of marijuana has been, we must consider the societal costs of the war on drugs, including the inflation of incarceration rates, especially in the U.S., of minor drug offenses as well as the actual cost of enforcing drug laws, which is approximated at \$41 billion per year. Rather than incarcerating perpetrators of minor drug infractions, would it not be preferable to invest that money into education, treatment, rehabilitation, and prevention? On the other hand, as drugs such as marijuana become legalized, and therefore legitimized, are they becoming more accessible as a "gateway drug" for young people and new users to more life damaging and life threatening drug use?

Quotations:

"Rather than continuing on the disastrous path of the war on drugs, we need to look at what works and what doesn't in terms of real evidence and data."

"Have U.S. drug laws reduced drug use? No. The U.S. is the No. 1 nation in the world in illegal drug use. As with Prohibition, banning alcohol didn't stop people drinking — it just stopped people obeying the law."

Allied texts: *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous, *Requiem for a Dream* by Hubert Selby, Jr.

Sheridan Blau

Sheridan Blau, Ph.D. is Professor of Practice in the Teaching of English at Teachers College, Columbia University and Professor (emeritus) of English and Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he directed the South Coast Writing Project and Literature Institute for Teachers. A former President of the National Council of Teachers of English, he has published widely on literary, pedagogical, and professional topics, and won the 2004 Richard Meade Award for outstanding research in English education.

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Dr. Bob Reising is a Professor Emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where he held a joint appointment in American Indian Studies, English, and English Education for 34 years, from 1971 through 2005. At UNCP he introduced and taught the institution's first courses in African-American literature. With the great grandson of Jim Thorpe, the famous American Indian athlete, he is currently writing *Jim Thorpe: The Rest of the Story*.

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